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THE SHERMAN COURTHOUSE RIOT OF 1930

by *Edward Hake Phillips*

Three times since its founding as the seat of Grayson County in 1846 Sherman, Texas, has attracted nationwide attention. On "Black Friday," May 15, 1896, one of the worst tornadoes in Texas history struck Sherman, killing at least sixty-six persons but sparing the courthouse. In April 1905, a human "cyclone" visited courthouse square. This was Teddy Roosevelt, who drew the largest crowd in Sherman's history. In May 1930, the square again experienced great excitement, but the drawing card was only an obscure black man, George Hughes.¹

On Saturday, May 3, in a farm house five miles southeast of Sherman, Hughes, forty-one years of age, a farm worker, allegedly assaulted his white employer's wife. Tracked down by a deputy sheriff, Hughes apparently fired twice at the officer's car, then surrendered, and was hustled to the county jail, an imposing structure, located two blocks west of the courthouse.²

The wheels of justice turned rapidly. A confession was obtained from Hughes, he was indicted on Monday, and his trial was set for Friday, May 9, the earliest date possible under state law. It appeared to be "an open and shut" case which should have little effect on history. Sherman was a college town, known as "the Athens of Texas," and the county, perched at the extreme edge of the cotton kingdom, was scarcely "Redneck" country. True, in 1901 a West Grayson posse had lynched a black man accused of murder, but in those days lynching was rampant throughout the South.³ By 1930 lynchings were rare even in the Black Belt. The previous year, 1929, had seen the fewest lynchings since Reconstruction, and, though the ten lynchings were ten too many, they represented a great decline from the eighty-three in 1919. Ominously, however, in the two weeks preceding Hughes' assault, three separate lynchings had occurred in the South.⁴

Other violence filled the papers as the week began. Heavy rains and tornadoes pounded Texas, shattering the town of Frost.⁵ Grayson people were edgy, and on Sunday the sheriff, Arthur Vaughan, said he was "using every precaution against [the] possibility of mob violence."⁶

Tuesday night, came the first hint of serious trouble. A gang, described as "a small group of boys in their late teens . . . with a bare sprinkling of men," appeared before the jail to demand the prisoner.⁷ When the county attorney sought to assure the youths that the Negro was not in the jail, they drenched the attorney with water from a hose. Some stones were thrown at the windows, and a telephone pole was brought up to force an entrance. The sheriff offered to let five representatives of the mob see for themselves that Hughes was not there, and a deputy escorted them through the building. This took much of the steam out of the mob, and

the sheriff's wife soon put an end to the foolishness, phoning her husband that she heard the mob was trampling her flowers around the jail. "I feel like kicking some of those little rascals," she said. "They are ruining all my flowers."⁸ And that was that.

Wednesday afternoon a smaller crowd appeared at the jail, again demanding Hughes, and again a delegation was given a tour of the "Bastille." The authorities were worried and requested Governor Dan Moody to send four Texas Rangers to guard against mob violence at the trial. Early Thursday morning four Rangers arrived, led by Captain Frank Hamer, from Headquarters Company in Austin. Their presence seemed to have a quieting effect, and that morning Hughes was arraigned in court without incident. Elsewhere, however, agitators were fanning out into the county urging farmers to be at the courthouse the next day.⁹

Friday, the crowds gathered early, filling the stairs and hallways of the fifty-four-year old courthouse, while hundreds stood outside. The prisoner had arrived earlier and at 9:30 Judge R.M. Carter opened the trial; by 11:45 a jury was impaneled. Then an incident occurred that seemed to trigger the tragic riot. The victim of the assault arrived by ambulance and was carried on a stretcher through the crowd to the courtroom, where, according to one report, upon seeing Hughes, she let out a shriek.¹⁰ The people made a rush for the courtroom, gaining partial entrance. One fellow got dangerously close to Hughes before the Rangers, drawing their guns, forced the crowd back into the hallway. A semblance of order was restored, and the trial proceeded, with Hughes pleading guilty. The first witness had begun his testimony when a new surge by the crowd caused Judge Carter to suspend the trial. Tear gas was used to dislodge the mob, but its acrid fumes forced clerks in the county offices to the windows for fresh air, and the poor victim of Hughes' alleged assault now became a victim of tear gas. The fire department was summoned to evacuate jurors, witnesses, and clerks by ladders from the second floor. For his protection Hughes was taken into the district clerk's office, which was a huge two-story vault of steel and concrete.¹¹

About one o'clock the Rangers stood off another rush from the mob, but a report spread that the governor had sent Captain Hamer a message to save the prisoner if possible but not to shoot anybody. The report was later proved false, but the crowd believed it and acted accordingly.¹² Belatedly Judge Carter agreed to a change of venue and sent an urgent request to the governor for state troops. At 2:20 p.m. troops at Dallas received orders to proceed to Sherman, where now a young woman with black eyes and clenched fist egged on the crowd. "'Break the windows, fellows,'" she shouted," and she promptly hurled a rock through a courthouse window. Scores of men and boys followed her example." A reporter asked this hellion, "Do you think they'll ever get him?" "Get him?" she repeated scornfully "H____I yes, we'll get him.'" ¹³

Two youths were then seen moving to the southeast corner with a

gasoline can. In a moment a roar was heard from the tax-collector's office, and the building was ablaze. The fire department attempted to get its men and hoses into action, but the hoses were cut almost as fast as they were laid. One big man with a huge knife went around methodically cutting each hose.¹⁴ One old boy "shook in his tracks with excitement and screamed: 'Let 'er wilt like a cucumber in the sun! Let 'er burn till the last hobnail in the nigger's boots is melted.'" ¹⁵ In fifteen minutes the flames shot through the roof, and the building's fate was sealed.

The Rangers were the last to leave the building — except for Hughes, who remained in the vault, some said from choice, others because the vault could not be opened. Firefighting was not one of the Rangers' assignments, so after hanging around a few minutes, they headed for Dallas, stopping at Howe and McKinney to phone for instructions.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Dallas guardsmen were heading in the opposite direction, and Governor Moody tried frantically to get more Rangers to the scene. Unable to contact Tom Hickman, captain of B Company, he managed to phone Sergeant Manuel "Lone Wolf" Gonzauillas in Dallas. "Get up to Sherman just as fast as you can . . . and get in touch with Randolph Bryant, the U.S. District Attorney . . . I understand they are going to storm the county jail and burn all the niggers in there. I don't want any of those prisoners molested or mistreated or hurt. I don't care what it costs you, you understand?" ¹⁷

Gonzaullas understood. He wasted no time in getting to Sherman. After phoning Bryant, he hid his white hat and mingled with the crowd to see what he was up against. He found bedlam. At the jail Bryant pulled no punches. He said he expected Gonzaullas to hold that jail, which contained Federal prisoners, and the one-man Ranger force went into action. Putting on his white hat, strapping on two pistols, leaning a Thompson sub-machine gun beside him, and cradling an automatic sawed-off shotgun, the "Lone Ranger" took a position at the front entrance of the jail, ready for all comers. And they soon came, taunting him, hurling everything imaginable at him, even dynamite, but they kept a good distance from the formidable Ranger, especially after he reinforced his warnings with buckshot.¹⁸

Meanwhile the National Guard had begun to arrive. A few guardsmen from Denison were the first to reach the frightening scene. As they marched to the square, young boys followed them, kicking and tripping them and making their march miserable.¹⁹ At 6:20 a sizable force of guardsmen under Colonel Laurence McGee arrived by Interurban from Dallas. After contacting local officials, McGee marched his troops to the square. Fearing the troops had come to rescue the prisoner, the mob became infuriated and assaulted the guardsmen. They tossed bricks, stones, two-by-fours, and especially pop bottles, which a young lady at a refreshment stand eagerly supplied. Several guardsmen were injured, at least one lost his rifle, and Captain Albert Sidney Johnson, going to a soldier's aid, was struck in the face by a missile and was hurt badly. McGee ordered

the troops to fall back to the jail, and their retreat was a tortuous one, missiles arching at their heads and the mob howling at their heels.²⁰

The figure of "Lone Wolf" Gonzauillas guarding the jail was welcome to the guardsmen, who now took a stand. Attention shifted back to the courthouse, where the mob tried to break into the vault to find Hughes. Tools and dynamite proved ineffective, but someone produced an acetylene torch and soon the outer shell and concrete lining were breached. Next a charge of dynamite was exploded against a plate of the inner shell, and with a roar the plate was driven into the vault. When the smoke subsided, a man crawled into the hole and shouted, "Here he is." Hughes' body, showing no signs of life, was lifted out of the vault and was dropped down the ladder, striking the ground with a thud, as the crowd shrieked in glee or horror. The young black-eyed woman showed particular satisfaction.²¹

The body was dragged through the crowd and hitched by a chain to a car which soon began a gruesome journey to the main black residential section. By a hotel used by blacks near the Union Station the body was hung to a tree, and kindling was prepared beneath it for the climactic ritual of lynching. Soon the body was roasting over the huge bonfire, while the crowd turned its attention to looting and burning an entire block of stores and dwellings.²² To sensitive observers, it was a startling scene. "Sidewalks were covered with broken glass which, sparkling in the glare from torches, the flaming building, and the moon, cast grotesque shadows on the dangling figure of the Negro," wrote one,²³ and another also noted the "brilliant Texas Moon," which "added its rays to one of the most gruesome sights in the history of the state."²⁴

Once again the weary and nearly hoseless firemen responded and attempted to control the flames. One white man saved a whole block of the black's houses from the mob by falsely asserting that they all belonged to him.²⁵ The mob's enthusiasm cooled somewhat when they found some of the blacks ready to defend their property. A respected black doctor sat on his porch, shotgun in hand, ready to shoot the first looter or arsonist who violated his property.²⁶ Around 2 a.m., reinforcements having arrived, the guardsmen ventured from the jail and set about dispersing the mob in the Negro sector. Small knots of rowdies continued to cause trouble, but the worst was over. By dawn the city was in a state of exhaustion.²⁷

Many blacks had fled the city and hid in brush thickets. Some hid in sewers, and a number were given refuge by sympathetic whites, especially employers.²⁸ In the morning Rangers and militiamen rounded up many exiles, escorted them back to their homes, and assured them their lives and property would be protected.²⁹ As far as the blacks' business property was concerned, the promise came too late. Their hotel, drug store, movie house, restaurant, barber shop, and two undertaking parlors lay in ruins, a total loss, for insurance policies had fine print exempting damage by riots. It marked the end of black business in Sherman.³⁰

Hughes' body, contorted by the heat and flames, still hung from the tree, as many Graysonites had their picture snapped beside it, until a guard-
sman cut the body down.³¹ Since the undertaking establishments for blacks
had been destroyed, a white undertaker had to be persuaded to bury the
body. Without fanfare the body was taken to the county farm. There it
was laid in an unmarked grave, where it rests today.³²

It was a long while before Sherman returned to normal. First it was
inundated by swarms of sightseers. Then rumors of new outbreaks caused
Sherman's leaders to ask the governor for martial law, which was pro-
claimed at 10:30 p.m., May 10.³³ For the next two weeks "the Athens
of Texas" seemed more like Sparta. Machine guns were mounted on the
square and around the jail, while patrols guarded the black districts. The
guardsmen had difficulty handling their weapons. One accidentally shot
himself on the courthouse lawn, and two were shot while in their quarters
in the Grayson Hotel when a pistol accidentally discharged.³⁴

Sherman's blacks, frightened, dismayed, and angry, tried to pick up
the pieces of their lives. Some whites expressed sympathy and offered
help, but some posted notices warning all blacks to leave Sherman or have
their homes destroyed. Several employers received warnings to fire their
black employees.³⁵

Each day the Rangers brought more suspected rioters to the jail which
became nearly filled.³⁶ Governor Moody condemned the rioters, accus-
ing them of murder, arson, and treason, and he assured the nation that
those guilty would be subjected to the full penalty of the law. He deplored
the unfavorable publicity the riot brought Texas. A journalist phoned him
from England and asked, "Well, well, is this a common occurrence in
Texas?"³⁷

On May 20, fourteen suspected leaders of the mob were indicted.³⁸
The wheels of justice which had turned so swiftly for Hughes now slowed
to a crawl. First, a change of venue was made to Dallas, where the trials
were delayed until November. Then the judge ruled that no jury willing
to convict could be found nearer than Austin, so the cases were moved
there.³⁹ Not until June 1931, was the first man tried, but that trial made
history, for the defendant was found guilty of arson and given two years
imprisonment. The judgment was proclaimed as "the first conviction in
Texas in a case growing out of mob violence against a Negro attacker of
a white woman."⁴⁰ Having made this gesture, the authorities apparently
lost interest. The other cases were postponed and then moved back north
to neighboring Cooke county. In October charges against all but three
of the men were dismissed, and, though the county attorney promised ac-
tion on the others, nothing more was done.⁴¹

On May 24, 1930, martial law ended in Sherman. The effects of the
riot did not pass away so quickly.⁴² Sherman's riot contributed to a mania
for lynching that spread eastward to Honey Grove on May 16 and then

northward to Chickasha, Oklahoma, on May 31. Fourteen more lynchings occurred before the year ended.⁴³ Not for years would Sherman's blacks recover, and though much interracial progress has been made in recent years, scars remain from that "terrifying day and terrifying night" in May 1930, when "King Mob" ran "amuck."⁴⁴

Not all was loss. If the Rangers had lost a prisoner, they never lost another. Manuel Gonzauillas said, "You learn every time you get kicked."⁴⁵ Two months later, at Shamrock in a similar case, he and his Rangers demonstrated well what they had learned in Sherman, and, though their prisoner would die, it would be in Huntsville's electric chair, not in a charred courthouse.⁴⁶ Sherman also learned a lesson. A lynching was a terrible price to pay for gaining national attention. This city never paid that price again.

NOTES

New York Times, May 16, 1896; April 6, 1905; May 10, 1930.

¹The main sources for the Hughes incident and subsequent events culminating in the courthouse riot are the May 1930 articles in the *Sherman Daily Democrat*, *Denison Herald*, *Dallas Times Herald*, *Austin American*, and *New York Times* and the fine study by Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Montclair, N.J., 1969), pp. 319-355. A good, more recent account is Dave Roberts, "The Day Lawlessness Prevailed," *Denison Herald*, September 12, 1976.

²*Sherman Register*, August 20-21, 1901; *Whitesboro News*, August 21, 1901.

³*New York Times*, November 10, 1931.

⁴*Dallas Times Herald*, May 2 and 7, 1930.

⁵*Dallas Times Herald*, May 4, 1930.

⁶*Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 7, 1930.

⁷*Denison Herald*, May 7, 1930.

⁸*Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 7-8, 1930; Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching*, 321.

⁹There is considerable variation in the accounts of the events inside the courthouse as well as the events of the next twenty-four hours. This writer has had to choose which reports seem most reliable. Most reports agree that the arrival of Hughes' alleged victim set off the violence. *Austin American*, May 10, 1930; *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, May 10, 1930.

¹⁰*Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 9, *Denison Herald*, May 9, *Austin American*, May 10, 1930.

¹¹*Dallas Times Herald*, May 11, 1930, and *Austin American*, May 15, 1930, which includes Frank Hamer's personal account. A military court of inquiry found that a *Denison Herald* reporter carelessly gave credence to the rumor and spread it as fact. *Austin American*, May 18, 1930.

¹²*Denison Herald*, May 11, 1930.

¹³*Denison Herald*, May 11, 1930; *Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 9, 1930; *Dallas Semi-Weekly Farm News*, May 13, 1930; "King Mob Runs Amuck in Texas," *Literary Digest*, May 24, 1930; Raper, *Tragedy of Lynching*, pp. 324-325; and interviews of Clyde L. Hall and J. Cecil Taliaferro, January 16, 1973.

¹⁴*Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 11, 1930.

¹⁵Hamer's account is in *Austin American*, May 15, 1930, and H. Gordon Frost and John H. Jenkins, "I'm Frank Hamer," *The Life of a Texas Peace Officer* (Austin, 1968),

p. 164 and p. 167. See also Green Peyton, *For God and Texas: The Life of P.B. Hill* (New York, 1947), pp. 134-136.

¹⁷Captain Manuel Gonzauillas, interview, December 15, 1972.

¹⁸Colonel Robert L. Cox, interview, December 12, 1972.

¹⁹Colonel Cox, interview, and Judge J.N. Dickson, interview, January 12, 1973.

²⁰"The Sherman Race Riot," *Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Texas, 1929-1930* (Austin, 1930), pp. 54-55; Laurence E. McGee, Colonel to the Adjutant General, State of Texas, "Final Report re. Martial Law Duty, Sherman, Texas," May 27, 1930, Archives, Adjutant General's Department, Camp Mabry, Austin; *Dallas Semi-Weekly Farm News*, May 13, 1930; Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching*, pp. 325-326. Six guardsmen were injured. *Dallas Times Herald*, May 11, 1930.

²¹*Sherman Daily Democrat* and *Denison Herald*, May 11, 1930; William Lazenby (eyewitness) to Edward H. Phillips, November 12, 1972; Judge W. Ralph Elliott, tape (Austin College), March 10, 1971.

²²*Austin American*, May 10, *Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 11, and *Dallas Semi-Weekly Farm News*, May 13, 1930; Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching*, pp. 326-327; "King Mob Runs Amuck in Texas," *Literary Digest*, May 24, 1930, p. 11.

²³*Dallas Times Herald*, May 10, 1930.

²⁴*Denison Herald*, May 11, 1930.

²⁵Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching*, pp. 328 and 332.

²⁶Judge W. Ralph Elliott, tape; Glennie O. Ham, interview by Willie Boddie, January 28, 1972.

²⁷Colonel Robert L. Cox, interview; *Dallas Times Herald*, May 10, 1930.

²⁸Captain Manuel Gonzauillas, interview; Clyde L. Hall, interview.

²⁹Captain Manuel Gonzauillas, interview; *Denison Herald*, May 11, 1930.

³⁰Glennie O. Ham, interview; *Dallas Times Herald*, May 10, and *Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 11, 1930; Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching*, p. 328.

³¹This writer has seen several such photographs of the contorted body and numerous onlookers, and he has been told that one collector has a piece of Hughes' anatomy, cut from the corpse.

³²*Fort Worth Star Telegram*, May 12, 1930; "Record and Bill of Items," Dannel-Scott Funeral Home, Sherman. The undertaker listed as cause of death, "Suffocation in Vault at Court House," certified by the Justice of Peace, W.M. Blalock. Hughes' casket cost \$17.35. See also *Denison Herald*, May 12, 1930.

³³*Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 11-12, *Denison Herald*, May 12, and *Dallas Semi-Weekly Farm News*, May 13, 1930.

³⁴*Fort Worth Star Telegram*, May 11, and *Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 12, 1930; "Shooting of Private John Heard, Troop A, 112th Cavalry, May 12, 1930," and "Report of Accidental Shooting of Sgt. E.J. Boyle and Pvt. Sam Bryant, March 14, 1930," Adjutant General's Department, "Sherman Strike, 1930" File, Camp Mabry.

³⁵*Sherman Daily Democrat* and *Denison Herald*, May 13, and *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, May 14, 1930.

³⁶Captain Manuel Gonzauillas, interview. By Tuesday thirty-nine suspects had been rounded up, one of them a woman. *Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 13, 1930. Sixty-eight persons were jailed during the period of martial law. Jail Record, May 10 to 22, 1930, "Sherman Strike, 1930" File.

³⁷*Sherman Daily Democrat* and *Austin American*, May 11, 1930; "No. 5, Treason," *Time Magazine*, May 19, 1930.

³⁸*Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 23, 1930.

³⁹*Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 23, June 1, and November 17, 1930.

⁴⁰*Sherman Daily Democrat*, April 19, May 27-30, and June 1-6, 1931. Following his conviction on arson, the defendant, J.B. McCasland of Sherman, pleaded guilty to the charge of rioting. He was given two years sentence on each charge, to be served consecutively. Raper, in stating that there were two convictions in the Sherman Riot, gives the impression that two persons were convicted, but McCasland was the only one. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching*, p. 333.

⁴¹*Sherman Daily Democrat*, November 2, 1931. On June 2, 1932, all charges against the remaining three defendants were dismissed and the case was closed. *Sherman Daily Democrat*, June 3, 1932, and *Sixteenth District Court (Gainesville), Criminal Minute Book, VII, 2 (June 2, 1932)*.

⁴²Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching*, pp. 341-342.

⁴³Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching*, pp. 356-383, and *Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 16 and June 1, 1930.

⁴⁴Glennie O. Ham, interview; "King Mob Runs Amuck in Texas," 11; and *Dallas Times Herald*, May 10, 1930.

⁴⁵Captain Manuel Gonzauillas, interview.

⁴⁶Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching*, pp. 450-451.