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EAST TEXAS HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

THE KELLYVILLE INCIDENT

by Fred McKenzie

The large, juicy watermelons caught Buck Beal’s eye, causing him to step inside the yard and inquire about buying one. Lillie, a young white girl, about nineteen years of age, came out to see what the Negro, also under twenty years of age, wanted.

The average price of homegrown melons in 1920, in East Texas, ranged from ten to thirty-five cents. The price of the one Buck picked out was a quarter. Beal handed the girl a dollar bill which she stuffed down the front of her dress.

“What about mah change?” He asked.

“You don’t git none. Ah’m keepin’ the whole dollah,” she replied.

This infuriated Beal. Forgetting himself, he grabbed her arm with one hand and reached for the dollar with the other, accidentally ripping her dress. This alarmed the girl and she screamed.

This incident occurred in the Po Hook community on the hot, sultry afternoon of August 8, 1920. Beal, a young resident of Kellyville, now a ghost town but the birthplace of the famous Kelly plow, had gone into the countryside to purchase a hog for a Sunday School barbecue sponsored by the Kellyville Bethlehem Baptist Church (Colored).

Beal first stopped at the home of an old Negro woman, Lucy Smith, and made a deal for a shoat. Beal paid Mrs. Smith for the hog and asked to borrow her wagon and team to transport it to Kellyville. Since her mules had just made the fifteen-mile trip to Jefferson and back, Mrs. Smith said they were too tired to make another one the same day. Beal set out walking the dusty road in search of another team to borrow.

After crossing Johnson Creek, Beal ascended a long hill to where an old Adventist lady lived in the Po Hook community. A tempting pile of fresh ripe watermelons cooled in the shade of a huge chinaberry tree in the old lady’s front yard. She lay napping peacefully in her bedroom nearby, recovering from an extended illness. Lillie, a neighbor girl, had been hired to help out during the illness.

Lillie’s piercing screams brought the woman up off her bed. Grabbing a shotgun, she reached the door in time to see Beal leaving through the front gate. She fired in his direction and the gun’s blast shattered the gate post, missing Beal by inches.

Forgetting the watermelon, his change, and everything else but life itself, Beal made a break for the woods. Splashing back across Johnson Creek, he headed downstream through dense undergrowth, swamps, and across bottom land fields to his home and family, the only place of refuge he knew.

Beal informed family members of what had happened and they began to

Fred McKenzie lives in Avinger.
barricade themselves for the siege ahead. The Beals were a household of expert marksmen who maintained guns and ammunition in their home. Even the women were proficient with firearms. Their weapon collection was for protection as well as hunting, and now that one of their own was in trouble they were ready to put it to good use.

Their house and a scattering of out-buildings sat on the outer rim of the formerly thriving iron-ore smelting village of Kellyville that had been properly platted by lots and blocks with parallel streets running true north, south, east and west. When the Kelly Plow works moved to Longview in 1882, Kellyville shrank to a small rural community consisting of one store, a Masonic lodge, two or three churches, a one-room school, and a dozen or so houses. The Beal home was one of the houses left over from better days.

The alarm spread through the surrounding communities that a Negro had attacked a white girl. The attack, it was assumed, was for the purpose of rape. This stirred the blood of the white males in the area. “Shoot-first-and ask questions later,” was the customary practice in such situations. The Beals anticipated this and prepared for the worst. Word quickly spread throughout the area for all Negroes to go home and stay there. Sunday evening worship services at several of their churches were dismissed early with the members instructed to return to their homes and continue their prayer vigils.

Fannie Chism, Mrs. Smith’s twenty-year-old married daughter, saw a string of approaching cars racing up the dusty road. The lead auto peeled off into their yard and came to a screeching halt in a cloud of dust. In it were six or seven well-armed white men, all local citizens well known to Mrs. Chism. The men had heard about the alleged rapist being at the Smith place earlier and asked if Mrs. Smith knew anything of his whereabouts. When the terrified old black woman swore she didn’t “know nuthin’ about nuthin’ dey wuz askin’,” they wheeled back into the road and disappeared over the hill with the other cars following.

More carloads of white men armed with shotguns, rifles, and pistols of every size, shape, and description started from Avinger, Lassater, and Mims Chapel, picking up recruits along the way. Marion County Sheriff Will Terry left Jefferson about the same time in a Model “T” Ford loaded with six hastily recruited “deputies.” All had one destination in mind: the Beal place at Kellyville.

The Beals were ready. They opened up with steel-jacketed shells from every door and window of their dog-trot house and all of the out-buildings.

During the short time that they had to prepare for battle, they had rigged a scare-crow device that consisted of a blue denim shirt and an old felt hat that could be raised to draw fire. When one of the whites rose to fire at the decoy, he could be picked off by one of the blacks. Such schemes as this, plus their superior marksmanship, gave them the advantage from the beginning. When the number of casualties reached the load limit of Sheriff Terry’s Model “T” Ford, he yelled that he was leaving. He said: “Ya’ll can do what you want to, I’ve had enough and I ain’t comin’ back!” The departure of the sheriff had a
Dampening effect on the mood of the others, causing them to stop shooting to talk things over. When the battle subsided, Buck Beal crawled out of his hiding place and was shot dead by his brother, Manse. Some said afterward that this was an accident; others, including Manse, maintained that he did it deliberately to spare his family a lynching. Whatever his motivation, this resolved the matter for all concerned. Once word circulated among the whites that Beal was dead, a sense of mission accomplished prevailed. None knew for certain who had killed him; it was over and that was what mattered. The county death register for that date, the only existing official record of the incident, lists: "McKinley (Buck) Beal (Colored)" as "...killed by gunshot while resisting arrest."

A prominent white Avinger business man was one of the other casualties. The next name in the death register after Beal is Fred Hall, with the words, "death by accidental strychnine poisoning." This second entry, made by Dr. Jesse Peebles, the coroner who lived across the street from the deceased, was part of a cover-up. Most people never knew the connection between the two events. The neighboring townspeople's reaction at the time was to ignore the incident completely. Whether the white man took poison, as indicated by the coroner, because of the intense pain, or from remorse, or both, remain a mystery. The entire incident was covered up so well that future generations, black and white, who grew up in the vicinity, never heard of it.

Lillie became emotionally disturbed over what happened. She later admitted to doing a foolish thing and then overreacting. But it was too late to undo the tragedy of two deaths and several people maimed for life. After several years of declining health, both mental and physical, Lillie was committed to the state hospital for the insane.

NOTES

1. A turn-of-the-century community populated by blacks and poor whites.
2. County Seat of Marion County.
3. Interview with Robert Beal, nephew of McKinley (Buck) Beal.
4. Marion County Historical Commission files on Kellyville and the Kelly Plow works, located in Marion County Courthouse Annex, Jefferson, Texas.
5. Interview with Hosea (Bud) Bennett, who lived in the area and was sixteen years of age at the time. March 21, 1986.
6. Interview with Fannie Chism, age ninety-three, lifetime resident of Marion County. March 21, 1986.
9. Interview with Mary (Bennett) Sturdivant (Mrs. Frank), area resident who was twenty years old at the time. March 10, 1986.