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Bruce Glasrud

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ANTI-BLACK VIOLENCE IN 20TH CENTURY EAST TEXAS

Bruce A. Glasrud

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Billie Holiday, 1939

In August, 1919, John R. Shillady, the white executive secretary of the militant (to Texas whites anyway) National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) arrived in Austin to meet with Texas state political leaders about the state's harassment of NAACP locals, especially the Austin local. He had a short, unproductive meeting with the interim Attorney General, and subsequently was subpoenaed to appear before a special court of inquiry where he was verbally abused with irrelevant and racist questions. The next day while walking he was attacked and brutally beaten by a small mob of white men, some of whom were local politicians such as Dave Pickle and Charles Hamby. Nevertheless, Governor W. P. Hobby blamed Shillady for the attack, and suggested that he and the NAACP leave the state. Shillady's resultant ill-mental and -physical health forced him to resign as NAACP Director.¹

The antipathy exhibited by Texas legal authority in the Shillady attack demonstrated both a fear of organized black citizenry and a continuing determination to maintain the white supremacy that was a part of the Texas social culture. By the late summer of 1919 there were 31 local NAACP branches in the Lone Star state, with a membership of 7,046. Both the Dallas and San Antonio chapters boasted over 1000 members each. This formidable black organization frightened those Texans bent on preserving "white supremacy." Shillady, too, as a white man from the north was anathema to white Texans—he represented the "Yankee" north and he also espoused a belief in equality for black Texans. By late 1919 the NAACP had chastised white Texas behavior in reports on violent incidents in Waco, Houston, and Longview, among others. In fact, part of the rapid

Bruce Glasrud was the President of the Association for 2012-2013. This was his presidential address.

increase in NAACP membership in the state likely arose due to the eight-page special “Waco Horror” supplement published by the NAACP’s *The Crisis* magazine.² Furthermore, the Shillady episode was representative of the over-all white supremacist anti-black thoughts—blacks were inferior and must be kept in a subordinate place by any means necessary. To look further at these views and actions, this paper will focus on a few of the hundreds of 20th century Texas anti-black episodes.

Back to the larger question, why white Texas’ anti-black sentiments? Those beliefs were rooted in racism, fear of armed blacks, fear of black male/white female relationships, fear of an educated black citizenry, and fear of economic competition. White supremacy also served as a means to retain blacks in menial labor positions as well as to assure whites that they were indeed superior to blacks. Neil Foley, *The White Scourge*, and William Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture*, emphasize the changes transpiring in modern, twentieth century Texas—changes that frightened white Texans such as an increase in black resistance. As Carrigan noted, the other changes included “changing immigration patterns, demographic shifts, technological changes, formalization of disfranchisement, implementation of rigid residential segregation, and the rise of a new consumer culture.”³ At the turn of the century, in 1900-1901, as noted by Cynthia Skove Nevels, five blacks in Brazos County were lynched in incidents fomented in part by recent European immigrants.⁴ Lynching and mob violence, including riots and pogroms, were the principal means of enforcing white supremacy. In addition to Foley and Carrigan there are a number of other informative studies on this issue; they include three master’s theses, two articles, a general summation in the *Handbook of Texas History*, and one other book, Jacqueline Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*.⁵

Waco Horror

Even though nearly five hundred lynchings took place in Texas from the late 19th century to 1930, and one hundred African Texans solely were lynched in the first decade of the twentieth century, it was the troubling 1916 lynching at Waco that brought specific attention to Texas and led to the growth of the NAACP. The incident became known as “The Waco Horror” due to its heinous nature. Jesse Washington, an illiterate black teenager, was accused and found guilty of murder and rape of a white woman. Although no evidence or proof existed (he was physically forced to plead guilty), he was taken from the court house by a crazed, white

mob, dragged through town, his extremities cut off, chained to a tree, hung, and burned. After all that, and while photos were taken, his body was dragged through town, parts sold for souvenirs. In spite of the photos no one was arrested or tried for this horrendous murder. Even *The Crisis*' dramatic and important supplement had produced photos to no avail.⁶ This cruel incident has been mentioned by many scholars and authors; the most thorough explanation and study is Patricia Bernstein, *The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP*. Two other works should be mentioned, Rogers Melton Smith, "The Waco Lynching of 1916: Perspective and Analysis" and James M. SoRelle, "The 'Waco Horror': The Lynching of Jesse Washington."⁷

Black Soldiers in Houston

The white Texas fear of armed blacks can be noted in a variety of ways, but especially in the distrust of black soldiers of the United States Army. Various incidents in the early twentieth century at El Paso, Del Rio, Waco, and especially Brownsville have been written about and discussed well by Garna Christian and also James Leiker.⁸ But it was the 1917 "Houston Riot or Mutiny" that depicted the attitudes most distinctly.

On August 23, 1917 some recently stationed black soldiers of the Twenty-fourth Infantry fought with white police and citizens of Houston. Twenty people, white and black, were killed. Even though Secretary of War Newton D. Baker told President Woodrow Wilson that the basic causes of the trouble were "the so-called Jim Crow laws" of Houston, that view did not prevail in Houston or even in the military. Ultimately 110 black soldiers were sentenced to death or life imprisonment by military courts-martial, even though each claimed innocence. Thirteen were secretly killed even before any other military or civilian review could be accomplished. Scholars who studied the episode in general agreed that black soldiers were involved, but two distinct approaches follow. Robert V. Haynes in *A Night of Violence: The Houston Riot of 1917* puts blame on the soldiers, as did the courts-martial. However Calvin Smith, in two well-constructed articles, argues persuasively that it was the white citizens of Houston who were to blame. From the first entrance of the black soldiers in Houston, the white citizens, and especially the police, had vigorously enforced Jim Crow laws and disdainfully treated the black soldiers not as men of the United States Army, but as interlopers. Smith's general interpretation agreed with that of secretary of war Newton Baker.⁹ Other studies of the riot or mutiny included, as usual an NAACP investigation,

two master's theses, two articles, and a refreshing analysis by Arthur E. Barbeau and Florette Henri in their broader history of World War I, *The Unknown Soldiers: African American Troops in World War I*. For a readable, succinct summation of this event check Garna Christian, "All Hell Broke Loose," in his *Black Soldiers in Jim Crow Texas*.¹⁰

Longview Race Riot

By summer of 1919 the first World War was over and black as well as white soldiers returned to their homes in the Lone Star state. Black soldiers, back from "making the world safe for democracy," determined that they too would benefit from democracy. On June 17, in Longview, Texas, the sheriff turned over to a Longview mob a black man accused of being in love with a white woman, who likely returned the feeling. The black man was lynched. Soon an article appeared in the *Chicago Defender* describing the lynching and its causes. A black teacher, accused of writing the article, was severely beaten by a group of whites, and when even more—a mob—arrived at his house to attack the man, the white mob was greeted by armed resistance from friends and supporters of the black man. Whites set fire to two homes, including that of the teacher as well as a dance hall. Texas Rangers and the state National Guardsmen who were sent to Longview to prevent further violence arrested 17 whites and 21 blacks, but no one was taken to court over the incident.¹¹

Blacks sent notice at Longview that they would and could defend themselves. Among the friends of the teacher was the black medical doctor in Longview. A relative of the doctor has added to our understanding of this violence with two works, one a master's thesis at Morgan State University and the other an interesting book, Sarah Davis Elias, *Recalling Longview: An Account of the Longview, Texas Riot, July 11, 1919*. Any future investigation cannot overlook her studies.¹² On the other hand, the Riot has been well-documented, including W. E. B. Du Bois *Crisis* article. Later efforts of particular help are articles by Kenneth Durham, George Ohler, William Tuttle, and Jared Wheeler. Annette Moyer included Longview in her master's thesis, "Major Race Riots in the Red Summer of 1919;" Arthur Waskow and Harry Krenak both mentioned the Longview Riot in chapters in their respective books. Lawrence Olson's Southwest Texas State University thesis, "Black Texans in the Red Summer' of 1919" covered the topic well.¹³

Kirven, Texas-1922-23

As apparent in the afore mentioned confrontations, Texas' urban centers such as Austin, Waco, Houston, and Longview frequently occupied center stage in racial atrocities in the Lone Star state. However, the largest number of such anti-black incidents took place in rural East Texas. In 1910, for example, whites in Anderson County began killing blacks in their communities apparently without any cause or provocation. The episode since is referred to as the "Slocum Massacre." Ultimately, in this racial pogrom eighteen black Texas citizens were killed. An interesting depiction of this killing spree and its background can be found in an unpublished paper written by Norris White, Jr., a Stephen F. Austin State University student: "Racial Anxieties and White Masculinity: Revisiting the 1910 Slocum Massacre."¹⁴ Twelve years later, in rural Freestone County another violent anti-black episode took place as revealed by Monte Akers in *Flames After Midnight: Murder, Vengeance, and the Desolation of a Texas Community*. In the small, thriving community of Kirven a young white woman was brutally murdered. Even though evidence pointed the way toward certain white men as the killer or killers, vigilantes in the community determined blacks guilty. Three innocent black men were burned alive (they were tied to a plow to keep them upright and alive longer), three others were soon lynched, and a month long reign of terror ensued. Once more blacks were killed with impunity; the estimated number of black deaths ranged from eleven to twenty-three. Eventually Kirven and Freestone county whites arrived at Simsboro and killed two more African American citizens. Other Simsboro blacks armed themselves, joined together, and convinced the white marauders that neither side wanted to die. The Kirven-Simsboro episode ended. No whites were convicted. The real murderers went free. Blacks immediately left Kirven, whites soon after, and the town virtually disappeared. Nationally anti-lynching discussions increased as did anti-lynching editorials from Texas newspapers. On the other hand, the actual specifics were not determined until Akers' thorough and convincing research.¹⁵ A few of us mentioned the incident in earlier studies, but that is all. Carrigan clearly summarized the incident: "in Freestone County on the edge of central Texas, a brutal act of racial violence occurred in May 1922. A mob in Kirven burned three black men alive, then went on a month long binge of racial intimidation and terrorism. Meanwhile local authorities concealed the identity of the probable white murderers."¹⁶

Sherman Riot

By 1930, economic problems fostered by the onset of the depression led to tensions between black and white tenant farmers; the city of Sherman also experienced monetary difficulties that fed anti-black attitudes. The Sherman Riot of 1930 stemmed from the arrest of a black man who allegedly assaulted a white woman; Texas Rangers were called to protect the prisoner, and did so for a time. After the black man was placed in a vault for his supposed protection, a white mob set fire to the courthouse and burned the victim alive. (There is a growing body of evidence that indicates that he did not die in the fire, specifics being recorded in the state police reports). Next the mob acquired the black man's body, hooked it to a car and dragged it through the streets, then tied it up and burned it. After the vicious lynching the Rangers surprisingly left; the rioters immediately looted and burned the black section of town and virtually seized control of Sherman. When troops of the Texas National Guard arrived, they were attacked by the mob, and before martial law restored order, more homes and businesses in the African American section of town were destroyed. Prominent western historian Robert M. Utley referred to the Sherman fiasco as "one of the most brutish and shameful episodes in the history of Texas."¹⁷

The black section of town, alive with thriving businesses prior to the riot, never recovered, and numerous black leaders and workers left the area. For information on this aspect of the Riot, see Donna J. Kumler, "'They have gone from Sherman': The Courthouse Riot of 1930 and its Imprint on the Black Professional Class." The Riot in 1930 Sherman has been explored by numerous other historians. Mike Cox and Robert Utley related the Riot to Texas Ranger history, and Harry Krenek to that of the Texas National Guard. The best single article on the Riot is that of Edward Hake Phillips, originally published in the *East Texas Historical Journal*. Other writers included Durward Pruden, whose sociological thesis did not mention names or the city, and a 1931 thesis by Thomas Michael Murphy written almost immediately after its culmination. Additional information can be located in Arthur Franklin Raper, whose 1933 book *The Tragedy of Lynching* is a classic, and Nolan Thompson's piece for *The Handbook of Texas*. For a fictionalized short story account by a prominent black female author read Njoki McElroy, "The Ninth Day of May."¹⁸

Beaumont Race Riot

Changes precipitated by World War II set off a violent race riot in

1943 Beaumont, Texas. Employment in the shipyards opened to blacks and as a result competitive tensions between white and black workers increased. Early in June a black man allegedly raped a white Beaumont telephone operator; police eventually shot and killed the man as he likely resisted arrest. Ten days later violence flared when on June 15 and 16, whites and blacks clashed after white Beaumont shipyard workers learned that a white woman had accused a black man of raping her. On the evening of June 15 more than 2,000 angry and alarmed workers started walking downtown. As they were moving toward City Hall the size of the mob grew, ultimately the crowd reached 4,000. Even though the woman could not identify the suspect (a few reports indicate she fabricated the event), the white workers and other mob partisans began breaking into stores in the black section of downtown Beaumont. They proceeded to terrorize black neighborhoods in central and north Beaumont. Many blacks were assaulted, several restaurants and stores were pillaged, a number of buildings were burned, and more than 100 African American homes were ransacked. Eventually more than 200 people were arrested, fifty were injured, and two were killed. The Texas State Guard and Texas Rangers were called in to halt the devastation, though too late for the black structures. No one was convicted. With martial law established, one interesting and ironic twist emerged: black workers were not allowed to go to work, white workers were allowed to work. The Beaumont Race Riot could stand some new study, however, two first rate articles covering this affair have been published, one by James A. Burran and one by James S. Olson and Sharon Phair.¹⁹ As has been noted, race violence, that is, anti-black race violence was a consistent and overwhelming threat and presence to black Texans during the first half of the twentieth century.

It continued, but in less frequent occurrences as the century progressed. As many know, race violence persisted during the civil rights era in the Lone star state, even though pressures existed to both overlook the violence and to try to prevent its occurrence. During the 1960-61 sit-ins to desegregate public accommodations, little violence transpired in cities such as Houston, Marshall, and San Antonio. But violence broke out in Mansfield High School, the Texas governor and attorney general raided the offices of the NAACP in 1956, and in 1967 a riot took place at Texas Southern University. The blame for the latter depended on who you asked, the police blamed black youths, the black community blamed the police. There has been little study of this episode and it is one that needs investigation. However, do consult Bernard Friedberg, "Houston and the

TSU Riot.”²⁰ Other violent occasions also occurred; but for this paper I am going to jump all the way from 1943 to lesser known incidents that transpired in 1980, in 1987-1988, and in 1998.

Conroe, Texas-1980

Early in the twentieth century, as we have noted, white suspicions that a black man assaulted a white woman led to a lynching and occasionally to a riot. Some conditions change, whether due to public pressure, new laws, or more robust police and legal scrutiny. In August 1980, in Conroe, Texas, the nude body of a dead young white female student was discovered. Soon a black man, Clarence Brandley, the school janitor, was arrested (with no apparent reason or evidence other than that he was a black man) for the murder. This whole episode has been examined in a book by Nick Davies entitled *White Lies*. White lies, from the district attorney, a Texas Ranger, other local officials and, in a way, the white people of Conroe led to his conviction by an all-white jury. A legal lynching, as opposed to the early twentieth century version, was in progress. However, after nine years of incarceration, and life on death row, Clarence Brandley won his freedom. He never returned to Conroe, probably wisely.²¹

Loyal Garner Case (Hemphill)-1987

In eight months of 1987 and 1988, black Texans Troy Lee Starling, Loyal Garner, Jr., and Kenneth “Hambone” Simpson died within one hundred miles of each other in a triangular part of the East Texas pine thickets. Each met death at the hands of white lawmen; the last faces they saw were white law officers. Starling was shot through the back of the neck by a 357 magnum issued by the Texas DPS. Simpson’s body was tied down in a small jail cell; eleven officers had been in the room with him. His body was horribly beaten. Only the death of Garner, who was beaten severely with a blackjack, was challenged via the court system. Garner’s beating was not alone, during the course of the ensuing trials considerable evidence indicated that in Hemphill beatings in the jail were common. We know about this case due to the energy and ability of a tireless writer; Texas native Howard Swindle, whose book, *Deliberate Indifference: A Story of Racial Injustice and Murder* compellingly takes us through this episode of Texas racial violence. A song has also been written about the case, “The Ballad of Loyal Garner, Jr.”²²

Jasper-1998

Eleven years after the Loyal Garner murder, in one other small town in East Texas, Jasper, Texas, a forty-nine year old black man, James Byrd, Jr., walked home from a party. Three white men in a pick-up truck offered Byrd a ride home, and he willingly accepted. Soon the men drove away from Byrd's home to a wooded patch. At some point, Byrd was tortured, chained to the back of the pick-up, and dragged to his death. Portions of his body lay in various parts of the road. His unchained body was dropped off near a church. This crime of hate received national attention. Ultimately the three men were convicted, two of them receiving death sentences. Two of the men served time in prison together, and joined white supremacist groups. One had a tattoo of a black man hanging. Three authors have written books about the episode; in a disheartening note for academics and historians, none includes a bibliography. However, each is well written; as the titles suggest, the three authors developed their stories from differing perspectives—Joyce King, *Hate Crime: The Story of a Dragging in Jasper, Texas*, Dina Temple-Raston, *Death in Texas: A Story of Race, Murder, and a Small Town's Struggle for Redemption*, and Ricardo C. Ainslie, *Long Dark Road: Bill King and Murder in Jasper, Texas*.²³

21st Century

Unfortunately, we in the “modern” twenty-first century cannot yet escape the racism in our midst despite the fact that today we even have an African American President of the United States. Two 21st century East Texas incidents bear mention. The first concerns a mentally disabled, forty-plus year old African American, Billy Ray Johnson, who in 2003 at Linden, Texas was beaten severely at a party to which he had been driven. There he had been teased relentlessly by four white males prior to being beaten. His body was later dumped by the side of the road. Ultimately each of the white men was judged not guilty by juries in Linden. In fact, the people of Linden blamed the victim, not the four “good” white youths. Johnson survived; later, in a civil trial sponsored by the Southern Poverty Law Center, Billy Ray Johnson received a nine million dollar settlement from a Cass County jury. He could at least be taken out of a rest home. For information on this case read the *Texas Monthly* article, “The Beating of Billy Ray Johnson,” by Pamela Colloff. It was so good that the SPLC received permission to reprint it and distributed the article to its membership.²⁴

Five years later, in September, 2008, a black man, Brandon McClelland,

nicknamed “Big Boy” for his substantial size, rode with two white fellow workers to locate some beer, he got out of the pickup, was first hit and run over, then dragged between forty and seventy feet underneath the carriage of the truck. This incident took place in Paris, Texas, which for over a century featured other dastardly examples of anti-black brutality. The police took a long time to determine what happened, blacks say too long. At least one report refers to the Paris murder as a “Jasper-style lynching.”²⁵ The legal consequences of this dragging death are yet unclear; the prosecutor cited lack of evidence and dropped the charges against the two white men. It (the dragging death) was judged an accident.²⁶

Conclusion

In the year 2013 we cannot say that racism has been extinguished in East Texas. Conditions for blacks have improved. We do not have a yearly listing of lynchings anymore, and even separate violent race incidents are more likely to have a few years in between before the next one takes place. The pattern of behavior that resulted in 20th century racial violence—and stemmed from a conviction of white superiority—has abated in 21st century Texas but the spirit of that conviction endures as Texas leadership seeks to limit voting rights and freedom of choice for those not favored. There are numerous citizens of Texas who remain comfortable with discrimination as a way of life and it may be, unfortunately, that legal impediments to the exercise of citizenship again offer a means to keep them comfortable. Black Texans and their white and brown friends and neighbors must persevere. We shall see what transpires.

Endnotes

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²¹ Nick Davies, *White Lies: Rape, Murder, and Justice Texas Style* (New York: Avon Books, 1991).

²² Howard Swindle, *Deliberate Indifference: A Story of Racial Injustice and Murder* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1993).

²³ Ricardo C. Ainslie, *Long Dark Road: Bill King and Murder in Jasper, Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Joyce King, *Hate Crime: The Story of a Dragging in Jasper, Texas* (New York: Random House, 2002); Dina Temple-Raston, *Death in Texas: A Story of Race, Murder, and a Small Town's Struggle for Redemption* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002).

²⁴ Pamela Colloff, "The Beating of Billy Ray Johnson," *Texas Monthly* (February 2007); also a special insert reprinted and distributed by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

²⁵ Gretel C. Kovach and Arian Campo-Flores, "Problems in Paris, Texas," *Newsweek* (February 9, 2009), 44-45; Jesse Muhammad, "Jasper-style Lynching in Paris, Texas?" (http://finalcall.com/artman/publish/printer_5348.shtml). On earlier Paris anti-black behavior, see the informative and well-written article by