The Forgotten Race Massacre in Arkansas

While the violent acts against African Americans during the Red Summer of 1919 and racial cleansings, such as the **Tulsa Race Massacre** that later happened in 1921, are well documented, perhaps what is not as widely known is the **Elaine Race Massacre**, which occurred in Phillips County, Arkansas, on September 30, 1919, and lasted four days. Even many who grew up in Arkansas do not know of the event, which is incredulous because it was the WORST racial confrontation in the history of the state (Encyclopedia of Arkansas, n.d.). Nevertheless, before examining the occurrence, it is important to understand the climate of Elaine and the socio-economic dynamics that Blacks experienced at the turn of the century. It was a town that was 78.6% Black at the time of the massacre, having a population of 26,354 African Americans and 7,176 Whites (U.S. Bureau Census, 1913).

To understand the racial and cultural vibe of Phillips County, one only has to view it through the experiences of a young Richard Wright, the renowned Harlem Renaissance novelist who would go on to eventually write *"Black Boy" (1945)* and *"Native Son" (1940)*. His uncle Silas Hoskins, who owned a highly successful tavern, and his aunt lived there. In the fall of 1916, Wright would spend time in Elaine. However, he soon learned that being Black and successful in the South could lead to jealous retribution by Whites.

"During the winter of 1916, white businessmen in Elaine murdered Silas Hoskins after he refused to sell them his tavern. When Wright's mother learned the men planned to kill the Wright family as well, she and her sister fled with the young boys to West Helena" (Taylor, pg. 268, 1999). Reflecting on the incident 21 years after it had happened, Wright later stated, *"Why had we not fought back, I asked my mother, and the fear that was in her made her slap me into silence"* (Wright, pg. 48, 1945). Regardless, Hoskins might not have been the only African American of whom the White population in Elaine was jealous. Other successful Blacks in Elaine might have made them envious, too.

Regionally, the price of cotton had risen from $.23 a pound in 1916 to $.40 a pound by 1919 (Taylor, 1999). *"With more money in their pockets, African-Americans began purchasing farms. Black farm ownership increased by forty percent in Phillips County between 1910 and 1920, offering tenants an alternative to plantation exploitation or northern emigration. The existence of this group of new farmers, freed from planter control, facilitated the emergence of autonomous black organization"* (Taylor, pg. 269, 1999). Still, there were many African Americans who were not as successful and were relegated to a life of poverty because they were sharecroppers.

By the beginning of the 20th century, approximately 90% of African Americans resided in the South, which makes sense; decades prior, Southern states had operated a culture of slavocracy, which used enslaved Africans primarily as its labor base. Yet, of that 90% who lived in the South, the majority—75%—worked as tenants or sharecroppers (Digital History, n.d.). And as many African Americans discovered after the Civil War, tenant farming and sharecropping were just replacements of the old slavery plantation system (Venkataramani, 1965).

Post-Civil War, the enslavers and the enslaved people were in a quandary. The enslavers had all of the land and housing, and the formerly enslaved people had all of the labor and might. Both parties came to an uneasy understanding. Ex-slaves would be given a plot of

land, food, and whatever they needed to farm and grow crops, but everything came with a cost. After harvesting and selling the crops at the market, the proceeds were placed against whatever had been fronted to the formerly enslaved people during the year. Included in their tab was the housing and the land on which it sat.

Ironically, no matter how hard they worked, the formerly enslaved people always seemed to come up short and be in debt. The proceeds from the harvest were never enough to keep them out of the red. Notwithstanding this, they were always told to try harder to maximize future profits and encouraged to work with collective efficacy. Who knows, next year's crops might finally be enough to place them in the black? Except, this was NEVER the case. While there were always more White tenants and sharecroppers, most White landowners preferred doing business with Blacks because it was easier to use subterfuge to cheat them.

Two things aided White landowners in doing this. Most Black tenants and sharecroppers were illiterate. Even by 1931, only 5.8% of eligible Black students in the South attended high school; by 1950, those figures had only increased to 14.1% (Margo, 1990). So, suppose a White landowner disputed the earnings calculations made by their Black sharecroppers. In such cases, if the Black sharecroppers could even read and write, how were they to argue or give evidence on the contrary? It is not like the White land owners ever offered a profit and loss statement.

"Between the time of planting and selling the croppers 'took up' food, clothing, and necessities at excessive prices from the plantation store owned by the planter. It was not a practice of the landowner and sharecropper to go together to a market to dispose of the cotton when it was ready. Rather, the landowner sold the crop when and however he saw fit. At the time of settlement neither an itemized statement of accounts owed nor an accounting of the money received for cotton and seed was, in most cases, given or shown the Negroes" (Rogers, pg. 143, 1960).

To add insult to injury, in the South, Jim Crow made it virtually impossible for an African American to call a White man a liar. Doing so would almost invariably bring the Klan to the offender's doorsteps. Still, the African Americans of Elaine were, to quote Fannie Lou Hamer, *"...sick and tired of being sick and tired"* (Hamer, 1964). Having long grown weary of getting usurped out of their earnings, 68 Black sharecroppers had banded together and gotten legal representation via a prominent lawyer from Little Rock, Ulysses S. Bratton, and his son, Ocier. The lawyers were supposed to negotiate a fairer price and receive a portion of the proceeds recovered from the landowners (Rogers, 1960) (Uenuma, 2018). The sharecroppers had also been encouraged by the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America—unions that had axes to grind with the White landowners in Phillips County—to take action (University of Arkansas at Little Rock, n.d.-a). Some had already done so preemptively by refusing to pick cotton unless the prices were renegotiated; others just flat out refused to work (Rogers, 1960).

The Black sharecroppers' organizing was only one source of irritation. The aspect of lawyers being involved did not sit well with more than a few, either. The African Americans and Bratton met at Hoop Spur Church, which was located approximately three miles north of Elaine, on the night of September 30, 1919, to discuss what further actions needed to take place. However, after receiving word of their meeting, three White men—one of whom was Special Agent W.A. Adkins, who worked for the Missouri Pacific Railroad, and Deputy Charles Pratt—came and discharged several bullets into the church. There was also a Black trustee with the men (Rogers, 1960). Allegedly, the group had shown up at the scene by accident.

"On the last night of September 1919, Phillips County deputy sheriff Charles Pratt and two assistants traveled twenty miles south of Helena, Arkansas, in an apparent pursuit of a bootlegger. Shortly after stopping—reportedly to repair a flat tire—in front of a small church at Hoop Spur, just north of the town of Elaine, a shot rang out, followed quickly by a volley of gunfire" (Taylor, 1999, p. 265). The Black version of the event, however, states that, *"…whites had fired into the church at Hoop Spur in order to disrupt a meeting of the union, and that blacks had returned fire only in self-defense"* (White, pp. 725-716, 1919).

Naturally, the sharecroppers had lookouts positioned throughout the church. In the exchange of bullets, Adkins was killed and Pratt was severely injured (Stockley et al., 2020) (Whayne, 1999). Unfortunately for the Black sharecroppers, even though they were only defending themselves, they were branded murderers. They had committed the blasphemous act of killing someone White. Thus, no one should be surprised at what happened next since there was a common theme amongst racial riots back then. African Americans were seemingly always blamed for being the aggressors. Yet in this case, it might be, in part, because the person who reported the shooting was the Black trustee who had accompanied Adkins and Pratt to the Hoop Spur church. *"The Negro trusty escaped unhurt and reported the shooting by telephone to Helena citizens"* (Rogers, pg. 147, 1960).

For the next several days, all hell broke loose; rumors and innuendos surrounding the killing inflamed Whites. When word spread to the local communities, *"White men from another part of Arkansas, as well as from Mississippi and Tennessee, joined the hunt for the alleged 'insurrectionists,' some of whom fought back"* (Whayne, 1999, p. 287). The harrowing experience of racial abhorrence and carnage unleashed by Whites then would soon be duplicated just two years later in the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

"The mobs descended on the nearby Black town of Elaine, Arkansas, destroying homes and businesses and attacking any Black people in their path over the coming days. Terrified Black residents, including women, children, and the elderly, fled their homes and hid for their lives in nearby woods and fields" (Hundreds of Black People Killed in Elaine, Arkansas, Massacre, para.4, n.d.).

On October 2, Arkansas Governor Charles Brough, to quell the violence, sent 500 soldiers from nearby Camp Pike to *"...'round up' the 'heavily armed negroes'."* The soldiers were *"...under order to shoot to kill any negro who refused to surrender immediately"* (University of Arkansas at Little Rock, n.d.-b). Allegedly, the soldiers participated in the killing of innocent Black people. *"Colonel Isaac Jenks, commander of the U.S. troops at Elaine, recorded the number of African Americans killed by U.S. troops as only two. In contrast, the correspondent for the Memphis Press on October 2, 1919, wrote, 'Many Negroes are reported killed by the soldiers….' Other anecdotal information suggests that U.S. troops also engaged in torture of African Americans to make them confess and give information"* (Stockley, para. 9, 2024).

In the end, after much devastation and destruction, at least 200 African Americans were killed, though some estimates list the death toll as low as 25 and as high as 858 (Stockley & Whayne, 2002). Ironically, only five White people were killed. Yet, those five deaths were enough, after *"order"* was restored, for hundreds of Blacks to be rounded up and incarcerated in Elaine and Helena. The trials that followed handed down prison terms on 67 African Americans, and 12 received draconian sentences of death for first-degree murder (Whayne, 1999).

Once the 12 men received the electric chair, *"…sixty-five others quickly entered plea-bargains and accepted sentences of up to twenty-one years for second-degree murder. Others*

had their charges dismissed or ultimately were not prosecuted" (Encyclopedia of Arkansas, n.d.). Despite the number of Blacks that were killed, though, no White person was ever brought to trial (Desmarais, 1974). The authorities obviously believed that the Black people had killed themselves, for what other reason could there be for not pursuing their killers?

The dozen men sentenced to death, who came to be known as the *Elaine Twelve*, would soon begin to receive sympathy nationally from the African American community. Eventually, the NAACP got involved. The legal fight was led by legendary Black attorney Scipio Africanus Jones, who hailed from Little Rock. Joining him was the renowned White law firm of George Murphy, who had been recommended by Bratton (Encyclopedia of Arkansas, n.d.). This legal pairing was based on both talent AND politics. According to Stephen Anthony (2019), Jones, as a lead attorney, would never be looked upon favorably. *"The NAACP had a preference for Colonel George Murphy serving as lead counsel. For fear of defying a deep rooted tradition that frowned upon black attorneys being in charge. In addition, the organization did not routinely trust black lawyers most often opting to use white attorneys as local counsel"* (pg. 157).

Because the *Elaine Twelve* had been convicted by all-male White juries at sham trials, the attorneys appealed their cases. None of the cases had ever lasted an hour, and the juries had taken less than 10 minutes to come to their decisions. Finally, the appeals reached the Supreme Court, which culminated in Moore v. Dempsey. Though it took five years and a hard-fought, much-publicized court battle, all of the charges were eventually dismissed (Encyclopedia of Arkansas, n.d.).

Throughout the years, the role that the soldiers played in the massacre has been heavily scrutinized. On February 21, 2002, Grif Stockley, an attorney and author from Little Rock, debated Jeannie Whayne, who was chair of the Department of History at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and secretary-treasurer of the Arkansas Historical Association, at the University of Arkansas School of Law in Fayetteville. While both believe that soldiers were probably culpable in the deaths of some African Americans, Whayne believed there is no direct evidence to PROVE such allegations, particularly not at the level of deaths listed by Stockley.

She reaffirmed that she agreed with him on many things. *"However, Mr. Stockley and I disagree on one critical point. Did the military participate in the slaughter of innocent blacks? He thinks so. And it isn't so much that there isn't sufficient evidence to prove it. In other words, I suggest that we don't know whether the military stopped the massacre or participated in it. What evidence we have is minimal, anecdotal, and contradictory"* (Stockley and Whayne, pg. 277, 2002).

Another significant debate after the massacre was, who or what was responsible for it all? Of course, any reader—even if he/she/they/we—have been living under a rock should already KNOW the answer to that question. It was an old Southern trope: the Blacks were ALWAYS responsible! Indeed, the version accepted by most Whites was that *"…blacks intended to murder certain white planters and take their lands. Whites, it was said, had discovered the plot accidentally after two deputies whose car had broken down were fired upon by blacks attending a meeting of a sharecroppers' union at Hoop Spur church outside Elaine"* (Whayne, pg. 286, 1999).

Forty years later, in 1961 the same lie was promulgated by J.W. Butts and Dorothy James when they published *"The Underlying Causes of the Elaine Riot of 1919,"* but they hid their

"proof" behind *"...interviews with white Phillips County residents and references to reports of unidentified 'negro detectives' from Chicago...,"* (Whayne, pg. 288, 1999).

However, recent developments may have entirely changed the popular narrative that some Whites had embraced in the past, while vindicating the 1919 Black populace of Elaine. Evidence from that was discovered by Brian Mitchell, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Little Rock, via an anonymous letter from 1920 that was stuck in an old ledger, suggests that it was Whites, not Blacks, who started the massacre. *"Mitchell said the ledger and other recently found documents suggest that the white employers sparked the violence, fearing lawsuits from their black workers"* (Goldsmith, para. 12, February 21, 2020).

While Elaine's Black residents of 1919 probably didn't think so at the time, it was the sharecroppers who had the last laugh over the White landowners. Did any of the latter think of what would happen to the labor pool if they killed or chased every African American away? After all of the ruckus, death, and hullabaloo, there was hardly anyone around to harvest all of that cotton!

"But the planters may have become alarmed as violence escalated. Certainly, in the weeks after peace was restored, it became appear that the mob had done its work too thoroughly, at least as far as planter interests were concerned. An unknown number of blacks had fled the area, and planters in Phillips County complained about the cotton going unpicked in the fields. They had been so successful in supplanting white with black labor, they had few options open once their black labor force was dispersed" (Whayne, pg. 303, 1999).

Taylor (1999) adds, *"Hundreds of black tenants, though, had already left Phillips County. When Frank Carruth of Elaine visited Greenwood, Mississippi two weeks after the riot, he told friends of the terrible labor shortage called by the violence"* (pp. 282-283).

This brings to mind the old adage, “Be careful what you wish for.”

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