

Synopsis

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Title:

Summary Justice: A Lynching in College Town

By:

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Log Line:

In 1923, Columbia was the seat of higher education in Missouri. But after a white girl was raped, the town lost its mind AND its innocence when thousands of people lynched an innocent black man before trial. Could the town regain its reputation by convicting the ringleaders?

SYNOPSIS:

It's 1923 in the college town of Columbia, Missouri. On a warm Saturday afternoon on April 21, a white 14-year-old girl is raped by a black man under Stewart Bridge. Her only description of her assailant is that he is black, medium height and wore a Charlie Chaplin type of mustache.

Police round up suspects including James T. Scott, a janitor at the University of Missouri. Scott is married, with children, a veteran of WW I and a well-liked and respected man within the black community.

The girl identifies Scott from a distance of sixty feet away, and later also identifies him by voice and the smell of the clothes he was wearing. On Saturday, April 28, Scott is indicted for rape. At that point the local newspaper, The Columbia Daily Tribune, threw gasoline on the fire.

That same day the Tribune ran a front page story calling for "summary justice" for Scott who they explained was all-but-guilty according to "men of sound judgement." The article, and an accompanying editorial in the same edition inflamed white members of the community who were already following the story during the week.

One of those citizens, a former City Councilman, George Barkwell, engaged the help of several friends and formed a mob that sought immediate retribution. That very night, Barkwell and hundreds of others staged an assault on the Boone County Jail. They spent hours using an axe, a sledgehammer and later, a blowtorch to cut through three steel doors that led to Scott's jail cell. Six armed lawmen put up little resistance.

Scott was taken from the jail, marched twelve blocks through the streets of Columbia, and lynched from the Stewart Bridge. Only the rape victim's father, a university professor, made an impassioned plea to save Scott's life – but to no avail.

A grand jury was immediately formed, and the key ringleaders – including Barkwell – were indicted. Barkwell was tried for first degree murder in mid-July. After a trial that lasted two days, the jury took just eleven minutes to find him not guilty. Charges against the other defendants were dropped.

Just before Barkwell went to trial, the county prosecutor, Ruby Hulen – the same man who indicted Scott – discovered new information that indicated that the mob likely hanged an innocent man. The rape victim verified his revelations when she identified Ollie Watson as her attacker. Watson was in custody at that time for raping another young black girl just the week before the white girl was raped. He was known to have worn a Charlie Chaplin mustache as well, but shaved it off after the white girl's rape.

This is a true story of a fumbled investigation, a green prosecutor, a totally unethical newspaper and a case of mistaken identity by a young, traumatized girl. James Scott was innocent and the people who took the law into their own hands were guilty. Yet, Scott ends up dead, and no one was held accountable. It's an incredible story that needs to be told.

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