

An infamous month in a lovely city

SHERMAN RIOT OF 1930

*As recorded in The Handbook Of Texas
with recollections of an eight-year old boy who was there*

The Sherman riot of 1930 was one of the major incidents of racial violence that occurred in the United States at the onset of the Great Depression, when lynching and other lawless acts increased with economic problems. The incident initiated a flurry of racial violence in Texas. White tenant farmers had exhibited hostility to blacks throughout the county. As county seat, Sherman was the county's banking, industrial, and educational center. The Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching reported in 1931 that Sherman had felt the onset of the depression more keenly than representative communities of similar size in Texas. The prevalent abhorrence of miscegenation, together with the sensation surrounding the rape of a white woman by a black man, provided the context of the violence.

A black farm hand named George Hughes, described by acquaintances as "crazy," was accused of raping a young woman, who was never publicly identified. Hughes admitted that he had come to the farm five miles southeast of Sherman on May 3, 1930, in search of the woman's husband, who owed him wages. Hughes left when the woman said that her husband was in Sherman but soon returned with

a shotgun, demanded his wages, and raped the woman. He shot at unarmed pursuers and at the patrol car of the deputy sheriff who later arrived to investigate the disturbance.

He then surrendered. On Monday, May 5, Hughes was indicted for criminal assault by a special meeting of the grand jury in the Fifteenth District Court. County Attorney Joe P. Cox set the trial date for Friday, May 9, and promised a speedy trial.

In the days preceding the trial, rumors spread about the case, among them that Hughes had mutilated the woman's throat and breasts and that she was not expected to live. Medical examination of the woman and of Hughes showed the rumors to be false.

Officers removed Hughes from the jail to an undisclosed location as a precaution against mob violence, but rumors persisted that he was still there. A few people were taken through the jail to show that he was not there, but an unconvinced mob gathered outside nightly.

In the early morning of Friday, May 9, Capt. Francis A. (Frank) Hamer of the Texas Rangers, assisted by two other rangers and one police sergeant, escorted Hughes to the county courthouse. County Sheriff

Arthur Vaughan and deputies stood on duty in the courtroom and corridors. Only those connected to the case were allowed to attend the proceedings. Nevertheless, a crowd from all over the region gathered outside the building and filled the corridors from the main entrance to the courtroom doors. During the jury selection and beginning of the trial, the noise led officers to clear the stairway and corridor leading to the courtroom.

In the late morning the crowd began to stone the courthouse. An American flag was carried around the grounds to incite the men to action.

The jury was sworn in at noon. Then Cox read the indictment, to which Hughes pleaded guilty. The first witness had begun testimony when the crowd forced the doors to the courtroom corridor, whereupon the rangers fired three warning shots. The jury was sent from the room, and Hughes was taken to the district court vault as the Rangers used tear gas to disperse the mob. Firemen provided ladders for others in the trial room.

A few minutes before one o'clock the mob started toward the courtroom again, and again the rangers resorted to tear gas. Firemen again helped women and children escape the building

with the use of ladders. District Judge R. M. Carter went into conference at about one o'clock and declared that he would likely order a change of venue, but at two o'clock he had not decided where to send the case. Captain Hamer told him that he did not believe that the trial could be held in Sherman without bloodshed.

About 2:30 P.M., two youths threw an open can of gasoline into the county tax collector's office through a broken window. A fire started and quickly spread through the building. The officials escaped on ladders. It was said that when the deputies guarding Hughes offered to escort him out, he chose to remain locked in the vault. Rangers attempted to rescue him but were cut off by flames.

More than 5,000 people filled the courthouse yard and lined an adjacent street.

The militia had left.

Hughes's body was thrown from the vault, then dragged behind a car to the front of a drugstore in the black business section, where it was hanged from a tree. The store furnishings were used to fuel a fire under the hanging corpse. The mob also burned down the drugstore and other businesses in the area and prevented firemen from saving the burning buildings.

(NOTE: Otto M. (Buddy) Vehle was 8 years old at the time. Comments by him, based upon his personal observations, will appear in this typeface.)

My father had a bakery on the West side of the Square, facing the Court House. We had been in

contact with our father by phone,

Smoke began to drift across the city, and I walked toward downtown as a curious 8-year-old would do. It was frightening. Not only was the fire creating a pall of smoke over the city, but there was a sinister pall which cannot really be described.

The mob was cutting the fire hoses as fast as the firemen could lay them. Mob members were offering my Dad \$25 for butcher knives with which to cut hoses. He, being a former Chief of the Fire Department in Winnsboro, Texas, refused. And you need to realize that in 1930 depression dollars, \$25 was a huge sum of money.

I got there in time to see a car dragging George Hughes as it moved north on Crockett Street in front of the bakery.

Along with hundreds of other "rubbernecks," we followed the mob into the northeast part of town near the railroad depot where nearly all of the black businesses were located. The mob used furniture from the depot, a restaurant and other nearby businesses to fuel the fire under Hughes' body hanging from a tree. One of the businesses was a theater. I don't know whether he was dead or alive when they hung him there, but when I saw him he was lifeless.

By daybreak of May 10, most of the town's black businesses, as well as a residences, lay in ashes. Among the businesses burned were the offices of a dentist, a doctor, and a civil rights lawyer, William J. Durham. After the mob subsided, a detach-

ment of militia went to the area and cut down Hughes's charred body. The owners of two black undertaking establishments that had been destroyed were offered Hughes's remains, but because they no longer had operable places of business, the remains were turned over to a white undertaker. Hughes's remains were buried on the morning of May 10 near the Grayson County Farm.

To walk between our bakery and our home, I usually went west on Houston Street, which would take me past the county jail. Just across the street from the jail was the residence of Pete Hudgins whose kids were my schoolmates. On their front porch were National Guard soldiers manning a tripod-mounted machine gun. They remained there for several days. In days to come I regularly saw soldiers walking two-by-two downtown.

At 4:30 A.M. on May 10, Governor Moody announced that he would not declare martial law in Sherman unless the Texas National Guard and local officers were unable to quell the disturbances. The same morning 225 additional guardsmen from Dallas and Fort Worth, under the direction of Col. Lawrence E. McGee, arrived.

Two additional rangers also came to supplement the four already present. Officials arrested eleven men and released six by evening.

At the unanimous request of a group of fifty community leaders, however, Governor Moody declared martial law at 10:30 P.M. on May 10.

Suspects were rounded up.

Martial law officials formed a military court of inquiry with the power to present information to a grand jury in cases considered worthy of further investigation.

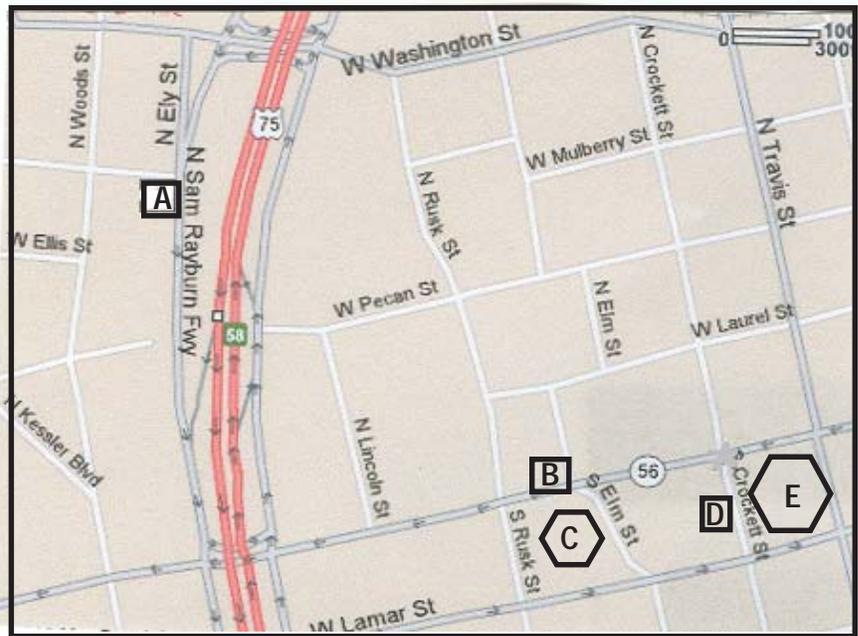
Under martial law, soldiers were ordered to shoot anyone attempting to set fires or otherwise damage property owned by blacks in Sherman.

Investigators searched for the individuals responsible for posting threatening placards in the black section of Sherman and later arrested a number of high school boys for questioning. Investigators also sought the parties responsible for threats against the property of white contractors who employed black workers.

In 1930, I simply did not understand the "pall" hanging over my hometown. It was years later as I began to devote myself as a Christian to Bible study and the supernatural influences of our world. I now can look back and see that even at that young age, the Holy Spirit was beginning a work in my life which later developed into my Spritual Gift of the Discerning of Evil Spirits. Now it is obvious that the "pall" was none other than a Satanic influence which was guiding those people by evil powers.

By the evening of May 13, thirty-eight men and one woman had been arrested. The next day justice of the peace W. M. Blaylock charged eight men with inciting to riot and one with posting threatening placards. He dismissed three of the charges the same day.

The number of national guards-



A = Vehle residence. B = Hudgins residence. C = Old Jail. D = Vehle Bakery. E = Grayson County Court House Square. The Black area is north and east of this map.

men in Sherman declined, though troops stationed at the school for blacks continued guarding the building. The school, which had been closed for several days, was reopened on May 14.

On May 19 the military court of inquiry gave its evidence to the Fifteenth District grand jury. On May 20 the grand jury returned seventy indictments against fourteen men in connection with the riot. Lynching was not named in the charges. On May 22 Judge Carter changed the venue to Criminal District Court No. 2 in Dallas. Thirteen of the suspects were sent to Dallas on May 23, and one was released on bond.

Of the fourteen men indicted for the violence in Sherman, only two had been convicted by October, 1931, one for rioting and the other for arson. Both received two-year sentences.

On May 24 Governor Moody lifted martial law. Maj. Dupont B. Lyon succeeded Col. McGee as head of the peace patrols. During the first few days of martial law, 430 national guardsmen and nine Texas Rangers had been in Sherman; 50 were there on May 23. The *Sherman Daily Democrat* lamented the lawlessness, property damage, and notoriety that the incident had caused but expressly did not lament Hughes's death. Soon afterward, lynchings followed at Honey Grove, at Benchly in Brazos County, and at Chickasha, Oklahoma. Several more lynching attempts, one at Brownwood against a white man, were thwarted

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Lynchings and What They Mean* (Atlanta, Georgia: Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching, 1931). *Dallas Morning News*, May 10, 1990. *Sherman Daily Democrat*, May 4-24, 1930. Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

Aftermath - Martial Law

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Ranger Captain
Frank Hamer
Sherman
977

TEXAS RANGER FORCE
ADJUTANT GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT
AUSTIN, TEXAS

FAM:ljm

May 13, 1930.

Hon. Dan Moody,
Governor, State of Texas.

In compliance with your request, I am herewith furnishing you with a statement in regards to the trouble at Sherman, as per your orders. On May 7th, Sgt. Wheatley, Rangers J. E. McCoy, J. W. Aldrich and myself left Austin at 4:25 P. M. for Sherman, Texas to report to the District Judge for duty, to be on hand in District Court in which George Hughes, negro, was to be tried for assault on a white woman in Grayson County, a few days before. On the morning of the 9th of May the negro was brought into the court room, the jury was empanelled, the trial proceeded to get under way. It was while the first State witness was on the stand testifying, that the crowd made a rush on the District Court room to get the prisoner and in their attempt to do so, two double doors opening into a hallway near the District Court room were broken down. The District Judge ordered the prisoner locked up in the District Attorney's vault and then we immediately proceeded to disperse the mob which we did by the use of our guns, without firing, and tear gas bombs. The District Judge and other officials then decided that a change of venue should be ordered in the case. The crowd made two other attempts to rush the court room on the second floor and was beaten back each time.

I instructed my men that the next time they rushed the court-house that I would fire on the mob, but for them to hold their fire until I gave orders to shoot. In a few minutes the mob attempted to rush the court room again, coming up the stairway and I fired a shotgun loaded with buckshot, wounding two men, so it was reported to us, this stopped the mob. I had heard a number of them say prior to the time that I fired on them, that you can't shoot us. It never occurred to me what they meant until a newspaper man came up stairs and showed me a message that he said he had received over the A. P. wires reading as from the Governor, "protect the negro if possible, but do not shoot anybody". I informed him that I had received no such message, however, at this time, this report seemed to have been well circulated among the crowd.

I saw the District Judge and told him about the report and informed him that I didn't believe the Governor would issue such orders, because we probably could not hold the prisoner if such order was issued. One of the agitators walked to the feet of the stairway and asked me if I was going to give the prisoner up to them, I told him we were not, he says "well we are coming up and get him", I said "any time you feel lucky, come on, but when you start up the stairway once more, there is going to be many funerals in Sherman". For twenty or thirty minutes, things were quiet.

At left is the statement from Ranger Captain Frank Hamer to Texas Governor Dan Moody.

Governor Moody dispatched more National Guard units and when violence continued, declared Martial Law in Sherman late on May 10.

Sherman remained under Martial Law until May 24.

Photo below by Helen J. Logue



Texas Ranger Frank Hamer

Captain Frank Hamer (pronounced Hay-mer) was born on March 17, 1884 in Fairview, Texas and grew up on a ranch in San Saba County.

In 1905, while working as a cowboy on the Carr Ranch, Hamer helped to capture a horse thief. Afterwards, the sheriff recommended Hamer to the Texas Rangers, which he joined in April 1906.

He patrolled the border from Big Bend to Brownsville, dealing with arms smugglers, bootleggers, and bandits.

In the 1920s Hamer was instrumental in helping to bring order to the oil boom towns such as Mexia and Borger.

In 1934 the retired Capt. Hamer was hired as a Special Investigator for the Texas prison system to track down gangsters Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, notorious outlaws who had killed more than a dozen law enforcement officers and unarmed citizens in a crime spree spanning several states.



Lee Simmons, of Sherman, Texas, was head of the prison system at that time.

After a three-month search, Hamer and Texas and Louisiana Law officers ambushed and killed the criminals near Gibsland, Louisiana.

During the 1930s Hamer worked for various oil companies helping to prevent strikes and breaking up mobs. He was called again to Ranger service in 1948 by Governor Coke Stevenson to help check election returns in the U.S. Senate race.

Hamer patrolled on horses before they got cars.

Frank Hamer retired in 1949 and lived in Austin until his death in 1955. He is buried in Austin's Memorial Park.



Texas Governor Daniel James Moody, Jr.

Dan Moody was the youngest elected to several successive public offices: county attorney, attorney general of Texas, and governor of Texas, elected for two terms, 1927-1931.

While district attorney he prosecuted a group for criminal activities connected with the Ku Klux Klan and sent some of them to prison.



Swearing-in of Gov. Dan Moody, 1927

As governor, Moody pursued a strong reform program and halted the liberal convict-pardon policy initiated by Governor Ma Ferguson.

In 1931, he retired from the governorship, and at the request of President Frankly D. Roosevelt in 1935, he served as special assistant to the United States attorney general in charge of prosecuting income tax evasion cases.

He represented the governor of Texas in cases involving the right of the governor to declare martial law in the mid-1930s. He personally had knowledge of martial law having declared it himself during the Sherman riots in 1930.





*Grayson County, Texas
Courthouse prior to the
Sherman Riot of 1930*

*Ruins of
Grayson County, Texas
Courthouse after the
Sherman Riot of 1930*



Present Courthouse, Sherman, Grayson County, Texas