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"A DARK NIGHT": THE KNOXVILLE RACE RIOT OF 1919

Matthew Lakin*

"The year of our Lord 1919," observed the *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, "will mark the downward course to the valley of dissension, dissimulation, and ruin."¹ These sentiments were echoed across the United States that year as Americans, weary from the horrors of the First World War, sought to return to the elusive "normalcy" of pre-war life. Instead, the nation found itself torn asunder by violence and suspicion as cities, North and South, erupted in racial conflict. In the midst of the turmoil, civic leaders in Knoxville, Tennessee, remained calm. For over half a century, the city had prided itself on its peaceful race relations, said by some to be the best in the South. The summer months of 1919, however, would find that myth shattered by a bloody race riot.

The war's sudden end in November 1918 had taken the nation by surprise, both economically and socially. Postwar inflation, coupled with the cancellation of government contracts and a job market flooded by returning soldiers, had thrown the national economy into disarray, resulting in strikes, unemployment, and a ninety-nine percent increase in the average cost of living.² In the absence of a common foe, the nation's wartime unity disintegrated, particularly along racial lines. Black veterans who had fought to "make the world safe for democracy" returned to find themselves still denied the rights of first-class citizens; they also found a revived Ku Klux Klan determined to keep the United States "a white man's country." White veterans returned to find their old jobs either gone or taken by blacks, many of whom were no longer willing to accord a white man the deference once thought proper. As prices, rents, and unemployment soared, men who had courageously battled the same enemy in Europe now turned on one another. "Make 'em die slow," was the cry heard across the South in 1919 as seventy-eight blacks, including soldiers still in uniform, were lynched by white mobs; eleven of these victims were burned alive. Blacks who had migrated to Northern industrial centers fared little better as they clashed with whites over jobs and housing.³

* The author is a resident of Knoxville and will be expanding this article in the near future. He welcomes any additional information about the events leading up to and concerning the Knoxville race riot of 1919. All such information may be directed to his attention in care of the editor.

¹Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, September 18, 1919.

²Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919 - 1920* (Minneapolis, 1955), 3-9.

³John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (New York, 1994), 347-350; Stephen Graham, *The Soul of John Brown* (New York, 1970 [1920]), 217.

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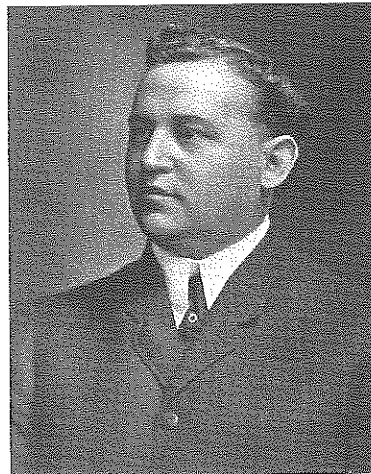
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cipal of Knoxville Colored High School and personal friend of Booker T. Washington; attorney William F. Yardley, veteran of the Civil War and independent gubernatorial candidate in 1876; businessman Cal Johnson, owner of a race-track and several saloons, who had risen from slavery to become one of the wealthiest black men in the South; and physician Henry M. Green, president of the National Medical Association. Since antebellum times, racial problems had been solved via discreet negotiations between white and black leaders.⁶ Cansler himself had boasted in 1918, "In no place in the world can there be found better relations existing between the races than here in our own county of Knox. No race riots have ever disgraced our city and no mob has ever vented its fury here upon any Negro victim."⁷

Beneath the surface, however, seeds of bitterness and resentment were germinating. Since the Civil War, both whites and blacks from the rural hinterland had poured into Knoxville in search of employment. Here, they found themselves pitted against one another by unscrupulous employers, landlords, and politicians. This situation had already shown its potential for violence in June 1913, when a white mob had unsuccessfully sought to lynch a black man accused of killing a white policeman. The wartime industrial boom heightened these tensions, bringing further migrants, white and black, and filling the city's slums to overflowing. With the end of war and the onset of recession, mills and factories began to close, and competition for jobs became furious. Clashes between whites and blacks grew frequent, and Knoxville entered the summer of 1919 seething with racial animosity. The Ku Klux Klan was reported to be organizing a chapter in the city, and a number of black citizens displayed their own disgust with matters by organizing a chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in early August.⁸



John E. McMillan, mayor of Knoxville in 1919. The exact nature of his relationship to Mays was the subject of some speculation. From *Men of Affairs in Knoxville*, 1917. Courtesy of the McClung Historical Collection.

⁶Lester C. Lamon, *Black Tennesseans, 1900 - 1930* (Knoxville, 1977), 2, 33, 39, 220, 230, 243-244; James B. Jones, Jr., "If We Are Citizens by the Law, Let Us Enjoy the Fruits of This Privilege": African - American Political Struggles in a Tennessee Mountain City, 1869 - 1912," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 49 (1995): 88-92.

⁷Lester C. Lamon, ed., "Document—Charles W. Cansler to the Honorable Tom C. Rye, Governor of Tennessee, February 1918," *Journal of Negro History* 57 (October 1972): 414.

⁸Michael J. McDonald and William Bruce Wheeler, *Knoxville, Tennessee: Continuity and Change in an Appalachian City* (Knoxville, 1983), 22-24, 36-38; Lamon, *Black Tennesseans*, 134-136, 141-157, 243-244; Knoxville *Sentinel*, June 4, 1913.

As temperatures rose and tempers flared, an unprecedented crime wave gripped the city as "Pants," a mysterious prowler, began burglarizing homes in the working class districts and attacking white women, most of whom described their assailant as a light-skinned Negro. Police appeared baffled as the attacks continued, and many whites soon began to suspect that authorities were content to let Pants run wild, so long as he confined his assaults to working people. Many blacks, on the other hand, conscious of growing white hostility, began steeling themselves for the worst, determined that trouble would not find them unprepared. In the meantime, Knoxville's leaders relaxed, unaware of the smoldering embers that would soon burst into flame.⁹

Friday, August 29, 1919, dawned like any other day in Knoxville. The summer heat had begun to give way to the cool of fall, promising pleasant weather and an ideal Labor Day weekend. This year would witness the celebration of Victory Labor Day, at which both workers and returning soldiers would be honored. A parade was planned for Monday, to be followed by festivities at Chilhowee Park, including a picnic, baseball games, political speeches, free movies, and "the greatest display of fireworks ever seen in Knoxville." A similar celebration was to be held at Chestnut View Park by the city's black community. Mayor John E. McMillan had already issued the traditional Labor Day proclamation, urging that "public and private business in the City of Knoxville be suspended . . . in order that all may join in the celebration of labor's great achievements in both peace and war."¹⁰

The weather was also ideal for the visit of Governor Albert H. Roberts, who had come to inspect the Fourth Infantry of the Tennessee National Guard. The regiment, consisting of troops from every region of the state, had been conducting its annual two-week encampment at the John Sevier Rifle Range in nearby Fountain City, under the supervision of Adjutant General Edward Baxter Sweeney. Apart from a few recently returned veterans, its companies consisted for the most part of inexperienced recruits, many of them teenagers who had been rejected for military service in World War I—some as young as fifteen years old.¹¹ Nevertheless, after observing the men at target practice and in regimental review that afternoon, Roberts commented that "I was surprised to see the excellent condition of the men and to note the thorough military training they have acquired in such a short length of time . . . The state guard is the only weapon Tennessee has to put down uprisings and disorders, and it must be made a very efficient organization." The *Knoxville Journal and Tribune* concurred, terming the review "a practical demonstration of just what kind of soldiers can be made

⁹Danette Welch, "Maurice Mays and the Midnight Marauder" (unpublished manuscript, in author's possession), 4-6; *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, June 12, 14, August 31, 1919.

¹⁰*Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, August 27, 31, September 1, 1919; *Knoxville Sentinel*, September 1, 1919.

¹¹*Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, August 21, 1919; A. H. Roberts to J. M. Griggs, October 1, 1919, A. H. Roberts Papers, Manuscripts Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Box 1, Folder 4. Most of the Guardsmen at the encampment came from Johnson City, Knoxville, Harriman, Athens, Cleveland, Chattanooga, Nashville, Jackson, Union City, and Memphis.

of men in the short space of Chilhowee Park, at which with John Shell of Leslie, reported whether Shell, v nor if he was accompanie

About the time the way, twenty-seven-year-her cousin, twenty-one were preparing for bed at North Knoxville. They house since July 10, w from her parents' farm c with her cousin. Lindsey have the company; her had left Knoxville in May ing work. The warm steamy after a shower of open the door to the back soon drifted into peacefu

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¹²*Knoxville Journal and Tribune*

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¹⁴*State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. Tennessee State Library and Record, Box 872, Manuscript *Journal and Tribune*, August

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er Albert H. Roberts, who was sent to the National Guard. The state, had been conducting a rifle range in nearby General Edward Baxter. Its companies consisted of teenagers who had been as young as fifteen years old. Practice and in regimental training they were surprised to see the excellent military training they have. The guard is the only weapon. It must be made a very fine one. The concurred, terming the best of soldiers can be made

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Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 1919.

M. Griggs, October 1, 1919, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Box 872, Manuscripts Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives, 54-55; Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919.

of men in the short space of ten days." That evening, a military "hop" was held at Chilhowee Park, at which the governor and local war heroes were honored, along with John Shell of Leslie, Kentucky, the oldest man in the United States. It was not reported whether Shell, who claimed to be 131 years old, took part in the dance, nor if he was accompanied by his thirtyish wife and their four-year-old son.¹²

About the time the dance was well under way, twenty-seven-year-old Bertie Lindsey and her cousin, twenty-one-year-old Ora Smyth, were preparing for bed at 1216 Eighth Avenue in North Knoxville. They had been alone in the house since July 10, when Smyth had arrived from her parents' farm on Clinton Pike to stay with her cousin. Lindsey was no doubt glad to have the company; her husband, Dan Lindsey, had left Knoxville in May for Akron, Ohio, seeking work. The warm night air had become steamy after a shower of rain, but, after propping open the door to the back porch, the two women soon drifted into peaceful slumber.¹³

Around 2:30 a.m., they were awakened by a most unwelcome guest. Ora Smyth later testified:

My cousin had me by the arm and she was sitting up in the bed calling my name . . . She was badly frightened, so badly that the bed was shaking from her trembling . . . As I became fully awake . . . I saw a negro standing by the bed with a pistol in one hand and a flash light in the other.



Bertie Lindsey, whose murder set off the events leading up to the Knoxville race riot. From the Knoxville *Sentinel*, October 2, 1919.

Cursing, the man climbed into the bed, threatening both women with death if they resisted. A sobbing, trembling Bertie Lindsey attempted to rise several times but each time was forced back; eventually, however, she managed to scramble out of the bed. The intruder raised his gun and ordered her "to get back into the bed or he would kill her." Instead, she made a dash for the bedroom door, and the intruder fired. Lindsey fell to the floor, moaning in agony. After threatening Smyth, the intruder then snatched a purse containing fifteen cents from the dresser and fled through the back door by which he had entered.¹⁴

¹²Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 29, 30, 1919; Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, August 31, 1919.

¹³Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919; Knoxville *Sentinel*, October 2, 1919.

¹⁴*State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443 (1919), Transcript of Record, Box 919, Manuscripts Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives, 40-46; *State vs. Mays* 145 Tenn. 118 (1921), Transcript of Record, Box 872, Manuscripts Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives, 54-55; Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919.

Next door, at the home of Patrolman Emmett Dyer, Mrs. Gertrude Dyer had been awakened, first by the slam of the screen door and then by the shot, but, accustomed to the noises of the nearby railroad, had returned to sleep. She was shortly roused, however, by a frantic pounding at the window, where Mrs. Dyer found a hysterical Ora Smyth screaming, "Oh, let me in, Mrs. Dyer. A man has just killed Bertie and is coming back to kill me." Horrified, Mrs. Dyer called to her husband and rushed to the front door, the hinges of which were rusted. As Mrs. Dyer struggled to open the door and Smyth begged to be let in, a man appeared walking down Eighth Avenue with a pistol and flashlight; both women began screaming, and the man disappeared down an alley. By this time Mrs. Dyer had yanked open the door, and Smyth burst inside, nearly knocking Mrs. Dyer down and colliding with Patrolman Dyer in the hallway. Dyer, who thought from the commotion that the house was on fire, listened to the sobbing woman's story of "a negro in the house" and hurried next door, where he found Bertie Lindsey's dead body lying in a pool of blood.¹⁵

Meanwhile, at the city jail downtown, patrolmen Jim Smith and Andy White were returning from Boone Street, only a few blocks from the Lindsey home, where break-ins had been attempted at two houses. No sooner had Smith, the black driver, pulled the patrol wagon into the jail than they were immediately ordered to back out and proceed to Eighth Avenue on the report that a white woman had been killed by a Negro. On the way to the house, Smith would later testify, White turned and "told me . . . that he bet that God damned Maurice Mays killed that woman . . . 'let's go and get him.'"¹⁶

The man cursed by White was one of the most flamboyant and controversial figures in Knoxville. A handsome, debonair black man with skin so light he resembled an Indian, Maurice (better known as "Morris") Mays had long been the center of attention wherever he went. Until recently, he had been the proprietor of the Stroller's Cafe on East Jackson Avenue, located in the heart of Knoxville's Bowery, or red light district. Much of the attention revolved around the goings-on at this establishment, which, despite a reputation for good food, also served as a dance hall where liquor flowed and the races mingled. Here, men and women of every color danced and made merry, earning it the nickname "the Black and Tan."¹⁷

On a typical night, Mays could be found at a table in his cafe, surrounded by

¹⁵*State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443, 77-83, 196-201; *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919.

¹⁶*State vs. Mays* 145 Tenn. 118, 210-211, 386-387, 400, 404. A few days later, Deputy Sheriff J. E. Troutt would overhear White remark, "I knew he [Mays] was the dam[n] rascal before I went there." See J. E. Troutt to Governor A. A. Taylor, November 9, 1921, with accompanying letter of Reuben L. Cates, in Maurice Mays file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles (RG 261), Tennessee State Library and Archives.

¹⁷*Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919; Rev. Claude Smith, interview with author, Knoxville, Tennessee, October 2, 1998; Fred Miller, interview with author, Knoxville, Tennessee, October 1997; Mrs. Ophelia Thomas, interview with author, Knoxville, Tennessee, September 22, 1997; Jeanette Dobbins and Rosalind Stokely, "Precious Memories —How They Linger," in *Tales from Back Then: Reminiscence Writings by Senior Citizens* (Knoxville, 1979), 96.

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¹⁸Gladys Etter Garrison Matthe
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adoring women of both races. Popularly described in the black community as "so white he wouldn't eat a black hen's egg or drink a black cow's milk," the restaurateur was known to have a fondness for white women and more than once had been forced to leap from a window to escape an angry husband. These adventures, together with a brief career as a deputy sheriff and the killings of two men, both black, had made him well known to law enforcement officials over the years. Several times he had been arrested on charges that ranged from carrying a concealed weapon to operating a gambling house but, apart from a manslaughter conviction as a teenager, was rarely prosecuted. Born around 1887, he had been adopted at the tender age of six months by his foster parents, William and Frances Mays. His birth mother was known to be a mulatto maid named Ella Walker, who had left Knoxville shortly after his adoption. The other half of his parentage, "said to have been a white man, well known in the city," was the subject of considerable rumor and speculation.¹⁸

The favorite candidate for paternity was John E. McMillan, the mayor of Knoxville and head cashier of the Third National Bank. McMillan had long watched over Mays, providing him with the capital to go into business and shielding him from harm. The motive for his benevolence was twofold. In addition to being McMillan's illegitimate (and only) son—a relationship both men freely acknowledged in private—Mays was also a vital cog in the mayor's political machine. McMillan, a Democrat elected in 1915, depended for his support upon a loose coalition of established white families and patronage seekers, coupled with the votes of the city's black population. It was Mays' responsibility to deliver these votes, and he and his foster father had spent the entire afternoon and evening of August 29 distributing blank poll tax receipts, courtesy of John E. McMillan. Presentation of these receipts was considered proof of voting eligibility, and it was well understood by all recipients how to cast their ballots.



Maurice Mays. Courtesy of the Beck Cultural Exchange Center.

¹⁸Gladys Etter Garrison Matthews and Mary Etter interview, Knoxville, Tennessee, November 3, 1975, Beck Cultural Exchange Center, Knoxville, Tennessee; *State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443, 268; *East Tennessee News*, March 23, 1922, on file at Beck Cultural Exchange Center.

McMillan would need their votes badly; the summer months found him in a tense struggle for re-election against E. W. Neal, a local businessman.¹⁹

In the meantime, Mays was having problems of his own. For the past several years, he had been engaged in a bitter feud with Patrolman Andy White of the Knoxville Police Department, allegedly stemming from competition for the affections of a white woman. Whatever the cause, White had developed a murderous, all-consuming hatred for Mays and vowed to put him in either the penitentiary or the electric chair. In the course of time, he had managed to persuade several others on the police force to join his vendetta; with their help, he initiated a relentless campaign of harassment against his enemy, arresting Mays on an almost weekly basis, particularly in the wake of the recent midnight assaults. It was knowledge of this feud that caused Jim Smith to ignore White's suggestion and continue to the scene of the crime.²⁰

Within fifteen minutes, Smith and White arrived at the Lindsey home. The house was not difficult to find; it was now surrounded by a crowd of "thirty or forty people, little ones and all . . . in the yard and on the porch and some in the house." The local constable, A. L. Wells, had already arrived and, together with patrolmen Roy Ailor, John Hatcher, and Tom Kirby, as well as a crowd of excited spectators, was inspecting a pair of tracks found in a nearby alley. On the front porch, Mrs. Dyer and several other women of the community sat with Ora Smyth as she tearfully attempted to answer the questions of Police Captain Joe Wilson. After surveying the crime scene and listening to the interrogation, White called Wilson aside with a suggestion. "Captain," he murmured, "this looks like Maurice Mays to me." Wilson nodded. "It looks like Mays to me, too," he replied. With that, White, Kirby, and Hatcher were dispatched with orders to find and arrest Maurice Mays; Jim Smith was sent to drive the patrol wagon.²¹

At about 3:30 a.m., the officers reached Maurice Mays' home at 313 Humes Street, nearly two miles from the murder scene, and, with the permission of Mays and his foster father, proceeded to search the house. Their alleged findings would occasion much dispute. In the top drawer of Mays' dresser, they found a pearl-handled Smith and Wesson .38 revolver. White, Kirby, and Hatcher claimed that the pistol smelled of burnt powder, evidence that it had been recently fired. Both Jim Smith and William Mays, however, each of whom took a whiff of the gun, denied that there was any smell; it was, the father insisted, "just an old, cold pistol." Moreover, according to Smith, a twelve-year veteran of the police force, the arresting officers "smelled it too much . . . I seen them smelling it and looking like they were all dissatisfied about it, kept smelling it over and over . . . it come

¹⁹Miller interview; George McMillan, "Far from the Peaceful Shore" (unpublished autobiography, in possession of Mrs. Cecily McMillan, Cambridge, Massachusetts), 6, 9; *State vs. Mays* 145 Tenn. 118, 290-291.

²⁰Smith interview; *State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443, 330; C. H. Slater to Taylor, December 14, 1921; Maurice Mays to Taylor, December 16, 1921, Maurice Mays file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles; Welch, "Maurice Mays and the Midnight Marauder," 4-6.

²¹*State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443, 72, 93, 97-99; *State vs. Mays* 145 Tenn. 118, 190-191, 183; C. W. Sanders to Taylor, November 28, 1921, Maurice Mays file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles.

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to the jail and they still smelt of it . . . I picked it up but I could not smell any
powder."²² In addition, although the tracks found at the murder scene were locat-
ed in a muddy alley filled with knee-high wet weeds, little or no mud could be
found on Mays' shoes or the carpet, and his clothing was clean and dry. Least of
all did the officers find any motive for Mays, who had over sixty-four dollars in
his possession, to have walked nearly two miles in the rain to murder a total
stranger for fifteen cents. Nevertheless, White placed Mays under arrest and
ordered him to get dressed, then hustled him into the patrol wagon.²³

By about 3:45 a.m., less than an hour and a half after the murder, the wagon
had reached the corner of Eighth and Gillespie, two doors from the Lindsey
home. Although the crowd had apparently begun to disperse, the officers decid-
ed to stop here; Hatcher remained with Mays while White and Kirby walked to
the house. Smith did not even bother to descend from the patrol wagon. At Mays'
request to "please carry me where I can be seen good," he was placed under a
nearby streetlight, where he waited to be identified. Visibly concerned, he
demanded to know why he had been arrested, to which Smith replied, "Oh,
Maurice, that fellow [White] thinks you would do anything."²⁴

After some time, Kirby and White reappeared, literally carrying Ora Smyth
between them, with Mrs. Dyer bringing up the rear. By all accounts, the witness
was hardly in a state to identify anyone; according to Mays, she was "hanging
limberly in his arms hardly able to walk, with hair hanging down over her face
and crying . . . she walked right up and pointed her finger and said 'He is the
man' and turned right around all at the same time and started on away."²⁵
Horried, Mays cried out, "Lady, come back and say it was not me. You are mis-
taken, tell the officer better." In response, Smyth, without stopping, cast him a
backward glance and gasped in a barely audible whisper, "That is the man. I
know it is the man. If I had something I could kill him right now."²⁶ Mays' hor-
ror quickly turned to indignation. "Come back here, woman," he demanded, "and
tell them that I am not the man!" As she continued walking, he turned his appeals
to the patrolmen, begging, "Mr. White, please bring her back and let her look at
me better than that . . . Certainly I am not the man." But White roared back,
"Damn you, she's seen you all she wants to!" With that, Smyth receded into the
distance as Mays was returned to the patrol wagon.²⁷ "From that moment," he

²²*State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443, 101-107, 115, 134, 155, 257, 317 - 318; *State vs. Mays* 145 Tenn. 118, 333, 389.

²³*State vs. Mays* 145 Tenn. 118, 307; James A. Fowler to Taylor, February 28, 1922, Maurice Mays
file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles.

²⁴*State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443, 267; *State vs. Mays* 145 Tenn. 118, 202-203, 308.

²⁵Mays to Taylor, November 10, 1921, Maurice Mays file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles.

²⁶*Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919; *State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443, 119; Fowler to
Taylor, February 28, 1922, Maurice Mays file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles.

²⁷*State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443, 258-259; *State vs. Mays* 145 Tenn. 118, 203, 243, 384, 308-309;
Mays to Taylor, November 19, 1921; Mays to L. P. Brewer, February 1, 1922, both in Maurice Mays
file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles.

would later write, "I have never had a fair and impartial chance for my life."

By daybreak Saturday morning, the *Knoxville Journal and Tribune* had hurriedly published an extra edition announcing that Mrs. Bertie Lindsey had been murdered in her home on Eighth Avenue by an unnamed Negro. Word had begun to spread long before, however, as telephones rang and tongues wagged all over Knoxville.²⁸ By morning, the entire city was alive with the news. All day long, hundreds of sightseers made their way to the Lindsey home to view the scene of the murder and hear Ora Smyth relate the details, while countless others filed past Bertie Lindsey's body at the Carl R. Roberts Funeral Parlor on Union Avenue downtown.²⁹

Meanwhile, at the city jail on Commerce Avenue, police officials had begun to notice the large crowds that were already beginning to form. Around 8:00 a.m., Police Chief Ed Haynes decided to take the precaution of transferring Mays to the more secure county jail. Thirty minutes later, Knox County Sheriff William T. Cate received his prisoner, who continued to insist that he had been wrongfully arrested. Cate, an experienced lawman, noted that "feeling was getting very high" but was not worried.³⁰



The old Knox County jail, ransacked by rioters during their search for Mays, was built in 1889. This picture was taken shortly before the building was demolished in 1940. Courtesy of the McClung Historical Collection.

²⁸Unfortunately, this edition of the *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, most likely a one-page extra, has not been preserved. The *Chattanooga Daily Times* reported that "The morning papers in Knoxville printed the bare fact that Mrs. Lindsey had been shot," presumably mentioning Mays' arrest but giving no name. Testimony at Mays' 1919 trial corroborates this suggestion. See the *Chattanooga Daily Times*, August 31, 1919; *State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443, 312.

²⁹*State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443, 363-370; *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, August 31, October 23, 1919.

³⁰*Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919; *State vs. Mays* No. 509 (Supreme Court of Tennessee, Eastern Division, filed June 7, 1920), Transcript of Record, Box 894, Manuscripts Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives, 10. This case, that of Martin Mays, appears to be the only surviving transcript of a riot participant's trial.

Crowds continued to near City Hall, just a sho began to appear at the described as "orderly" a glimpse of the mysterious. Around noon, the afternoon a sensational head murder and Mays' arrest. anxious citizens of both Knox County and all dur cious rumors coursed th dered but raped, she ha Mays' baby. White men black men feared for the

At about this time, Market Square and making sheriff, perhaps remembering General Rufus Mynatt a to remove Mays to Chattanooga. deputies Tom Day and F. disguised as a woman, coming in an automobile to the nearby. aboard the train to Chattanooga of the Southern Railway.

Matters in Knoxville. ture, the crowd at the j throng of about five hundred. Still, the group at the the deputies were coming

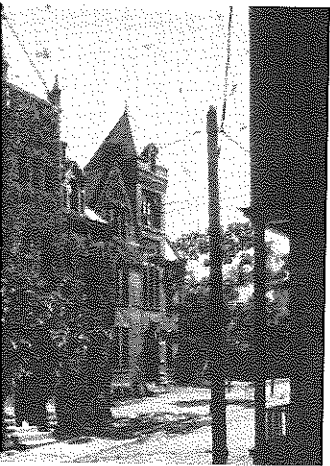
³¹*Knoxville Journal and Tribune*.

³²Sadly, this edition of the *Sentinel* ed that "the afternoon paper the moment the paper reached line and attendant coverage that the *Sentinel* indulged in that the *Sentinel's* coverage h August 31, 1919; *Knoxville 355-356*.

³³Mrs. Edith Wright, teleph author, Knoxville, Tennessee Tennessee, 1980, Beck Culture

³⁴"William T. Cate, Father of Mays No. 509, 18; *Knoxville 1, 1919*; Carson Brewer, "G News - Sentinel, March 11,

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During their search for Mays, was built in 1889.
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 This case, that of Martin Mays, appears to be the

Crowds continued to gather, particularly at the south end of Market Square
 near City Hall, just a short distance from the funeral parlor. Groups of men also
 began to appear at the county jail on Hill Avenue, although these visitors were
 described as “orderly” and appeared to be mere curiosity seekers hoping for a
 glimpse of the mysterious culprit. But the general mood quickly turned ugly.³¹
 Around noon, the afternoon edition of the Knoxville *Sentinel* hit the street, car-
 rying a sensational headline and several front-page articles detailing both the
 murder and Mays’ arrest. Copies of the paper were immediately purchased by
 anxious citizens of both races, and “there was great excitement in Knoxville and
 Knox County and all during the day there was talk of mob violence.”³² Wild, sala-
 cious rumors coursed through the city: Bertie Lindsey had been not only mur-
 dered but raped, she had been pregnant, she had been pregnant with Maurice
 Mays’ baby. White men began making plans for “the necktie party tonight,” while
 black men feared for the lives of themselves and their families.³³

At about this time, Sheriff Cate received word that a mob was forming at
 Market Square and making vague threats to “string up the prisoner.” Alarmed, the
 sheriff, perhaps remembering the events of 1913, appealed to District Attorney
 General Rufus Mynatt and Criminal Court Judge T.A.R. Nelson for permission
 to remove Mays to Chattanooga, which he received. With the assistance of
 deputies Tom Day and Fayette Burnett, Mays was removed from his cell and dis-
 guised as a woman, complete with dress, wig, and a heavy veil, then taken by
 automobile to the nearby town of Concord. Three hours later, Mays was safely
 aboard the train to Chattanooga, accompanied by the sheriff and a special agent
 of the Southern Railway.³⁴

Matters in Knoxville were not working out so well. Since the sheriff’s depar-
 ture, the crowd at the jail had grown from a handful of curious onlookers to a
 throng of about five hundred, while the assembly at Market Square was even larg-
 er. Still, the group at the jail, though large, had not yet become threatening, and
 the deputies were content to assure the doubtful crowd that Mays was in

³¹Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919; Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 1919.

³²Sadly, this edition of the *Sentinel* is likewise missing. The Chattanooga *Daily Times*, however, stat-
 ed that “the afternoon paper came out with a full story of the murder and the mob started to form at
 the moment the paper reached the street.” Given the massive “Killed in Effort to Escape Negro” head-
 line and attendant coverage that appeared in the *Journal and Tribune* the next day, it is almost certain
 that the *Sentinel* indulged in similar sensationalism. Maurice Mays and his attorneys later charged
 that the *Sentinel*’s coverage had been one of the chief causes of the riot. See Chattanooga *Daily Times*,
 August 31, 1919; Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919; *State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443,
 355-356.

³³Mrs. Edith Wright, telephone interview with author, March 23, 1998; Earl Rogers, interview with
 author, Knoxville, Tennessee, April 1998; Liston Dantzler, interview with Joe Crump, Knoxville,
 Tennessee, 1980, Beck Cultural Exchange Center.

³⁴“William T. Cate, Father of Knox Sheriff, Dies,” Knoxville *Journal*, November 29, 1955; *State vs.*
Mays No. 509, 18; Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919; Knoxville *Sentinel*, September
 1, 1919; Carson Brewer, “‘Guest of Honor’ Missed Knoxville’s 1919 Racial Necktie Party,” Knoxville
News - Sentinel, March 11, 1979.

Chattanooga. For the most part, the crowd remained quiet and orderly at first, its members coming and going; seventeen-year-old Pat Roddy stopped by the jail that afternoon on his way to pick up a date but, seeing only "groups of angry people milling around and shouting . . . without any leadership," lost interest and left.³⁵

By about 6:00 p.m., the crowd was larger, angrier, and a definite cause for concern. Some fierce arguments had erupted between deputies and various members of the crowd, who continued to insist that "the negro was there, and that they would get him sooner or later." Attempts were made by several local businessmen and public officials to address the mob, only to be shouted down as "negro lovers." Jeff Claiborne, a forty-three-year-old candy maker and "professional gambler," had emerged as the leader; making his way to the jail steps, he demanded that a committee of five "good citizens," himself included, be permitted to go through the jail and search for Mays. Jailer Earl Hall and Chief Deputy Carroll Cate, the sheriff's nephew, agreed to this request, and the men were given a grand tour of the facilities. Upon emerging, even Claiborne admitted that Mays was nowhere to be found. The mob was unsatisfied, however, and another committee of five was admitted. Once again they reported that they had been unable to find Mays, and once again the mob was unconvinced. After the process had been repeated for a third and fourth time, it became clear that trouble was imminent.³⁶

In the meantime, the crowd at Market Square had ballooned to a surging mob of roughly five thousand. A visibly drunk Jeff Claiborne, apparently bored with the searches at the jail, had made his way to the square and now stood at the center of the throng, declaring heatedly, "That nigger is down there [in the jail] and I know it . . . I don't believe he's anymore in Chattanooga than I am." Another man agreed but pointed out that "you and I couldn't go down there and get him out by ourselves. We must have someone to help us." Excited cries immediately arose of "We'll help, we're with you. Let's go down there and get him out." Jim Dalton, a seventy-two-year-old ironworker, gave the command to "March, boys," and the mob proceeded down Market Street in military fashion, counting off to Dalton's lead. It did not take long for the marchers to pass their leader, however, and the march to Hill Avenue became a thunderous charge. Although the crowd at the jail was already large enough to surround the building and fill the street, the courthouse lawn, and neighboring yards, the new arrivals pushed them aside and forced their way to the jail door, with Claiborne in the lead.³⁷

It was now about 7:30 p.m. As Hall, Cate, and the other deputies gaped at the sea of angry faces that stretched before them, Claiborne climbed the jail steps, claiming that he had been deceived and asking for a committee of twelve men to help him “find that nigger if he is anywhere on the premises.” He then warned

the deputies to "open up

Twelve men stepped
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At this point, Cate jammed. In response, returned the fire as the beyond their control, C and bolted the heavy “prepared for the siege

Within ten minutes, a window in the jail. The telephone pole, a railroad car, ramming against the window on the ground with trepidation to the one later recalled, "and Hall had already called, but no policemen would

Outside, a carnivorous crowd of onlookers had further gathered. They cheered, fired shots in support of the men before them. Porches and balconies were completely blocked.

Hill Avenue,

³⁵Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, October 21, 1919; Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, October 21, 1919; Pat Roddy, Jr., *75 Years of Refreshment* (Knoxville, 1983), 40.

³⁶Knoxville *Sentinel*, October 22, 1919; Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, October 22, 1919.

³⁷Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, October 21, 1919; Brewer, "Guest of Honor."

³⁸Knoxville *Journal and Times*, 19 Dec. 1961.

³⁹Knoxville *Sentinel*, Sept. 19, 1900.
"Guest of Honor."

⁴⁰Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, 1900.

⁴¹Nashville *Banner*, Aug. 1892; Grace McKelvey McCarty (author's possession); Roge

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; Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, October 21, ville, 1983), 40.

urnal and *Tribune*, August 31, October 22, 1919.

; Brewer, "Guest of Honor."

the deputies to "open up," or the jail would be blown to pieces.³⁸

Twelve men stepped forward, and Hall was about to open the door to admit them when a member of the crowd shouted that he would "follow the committee in;" Hall promptly refused to admit anyone, repeating that Mays had been removed to Chattanooga and declaring that no further searches would be permitted. "Tear down the jail," roared the mob. "He's in there, or they wouldn't mind us searching for him. There's enough of us here to knock every brick out of the building." A furious Claiborne then turned to the crowd and vowed to "shake hands with that damn negro" or tear apart the jail and everyone in it. As the mob cheered, Chief Deputy Cate thrust his pistol through the bars of the jail door and warned, "Every man who is not out of sight inside a few minutes will be shot down." Instead of dispersing, however, the mob only scattered from range, then began throwing rocks and jeering, "He's afraid to shoot . . . Let's go and get him, too."³⁹

At this point, Cate panicked and fired a single shot, after which his pistol jammed. In response, over a dozen members of the mob produced guns and returned the fire as the crowd surged toward the door. Realizing the situation was beyond their control, Cate and Hall withdrew inside the jail, where they slammed and bolted the heavy riot doors, extinguished the lights, and, in Hall's words, "prepared for the siege." It was now about 7:50 p.m.⁴⁰

Within ten minutes, a heavy shower of stones and lead had shattered every window in the jail. The mob then turned its attention to gaining entry, using a telephone pole, a railroad crosstie, and the heavy gunwale from a barge as battering rams against the front and side doors, as well as the bars of a large double window on the ground floor. Inside, the deputies loaded their pistols and listened with trepidation to the mob's angry cries. "I had only one round of cartridges," one later recalled, "and that wouldn't . . . amount to anything in that crowd." Earl Hall had already called the police department with repeated pleas for assistance, but no policemen would arrive for another half-hour.⁴¹

Outside, a carnival atmosphere prevailed. Concerned citizens and curious onlookers had further swelled the ranks of the mob, as men, women, and children cheered, fired shots into the air, and gawked in astonishment at the spectacle before them. Porches and yards were crammed with spectators, and the streets were completely blocked. According to the Knoxville *Sentinel*:

Hill Avenue, on which the jail is situated, was literally packed

³⁸Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919.

³⁹Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 1919; Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, October 21, 1919; Brewer, "Guest of Honor."

⁴⁰Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919; Brewer, "Guest of Honor;" Roddy, *75 Years*, 40.

⁴¹Nashville *Banner*, August 31, 1919; Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, September 1, 1919; Mrs. Grace McKelvey McCarty, interview with Danette Welch, Knoxville, Tennessee, August 15, 1997 (in author's possession); Rogers interview; *State vs. Mays* No. 509, 26, 32.



1. Market Square, initial gathering site of the rioters
2. Knox County jail
3. General path -----> of the rioters after leaving the jail
4. Machine gun positions
5. Central and Vine, scene of the most intense fighting

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The rear court yard was
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one participant, "like a swarm of
elmed by the flood of intruders,
ding in their search for Maurice

Mays. Every inch of the jail, including the roof, chimney, furnace, and coal bins, was thoroughly searched by men with flashlights. On the ground floor, Deputy Frank York stood before the door to the Negro cellblock with a drawn pistol and threatened to shoot the first man who approached. Apparently York's threat was more convincing than the chief deputy's; at any rate, the mob turned its attention to something of greater interest: several bottles and kegs of confiscated liquor found in the basement, along with a captured moonshine still. The men immediately procured cups and began "tapping" the kegs, while others made off with bottles. One man attempted to carry the entire still away on his back. "There was," one witness later recalled, "plenty to drink all around."⁴⁴

Inflamed by alcohol and rage, the mob soon lost interest in finding Mays and found more satisfaction in wholesale looting and destruction. Guns and ammunition were stolen from the armory, the safe was broken open and emptied, and the jailer's quarters raided. Lights were shot out, telephone lines and water pipes ripped from the walls, toilets smashed, furniture wrecked, and pages ripped from the jail records. Three federal prisoners, George Goodyear, Robert McNish, and Lawrence Galyon, attempted to help the deputies restore order, but the jail was quickly reduced to a shambles.⁴⁵

It was the mob's activities on the upper floors that would attract the most attention. After battering down the outer doors to the cellblocks of state prisoners, members of the mob began working on the heavy combination locks of the inner doors, to the cheers of the prisoners. On the third floor, Martin Mays, a twenty-nine-year-old chain maker, together with Charles "Mudcat" McCall, a twenty-two-year-old millworker, took turns at the lock with a hammer and chisel while Charles Cash, a forty-three-year-old carpenter, held a candle to aid them. Earl Hall begged the men not to cut the lock and even offered them the key. "You are too damned late with your key," came the reply.⁴⁶

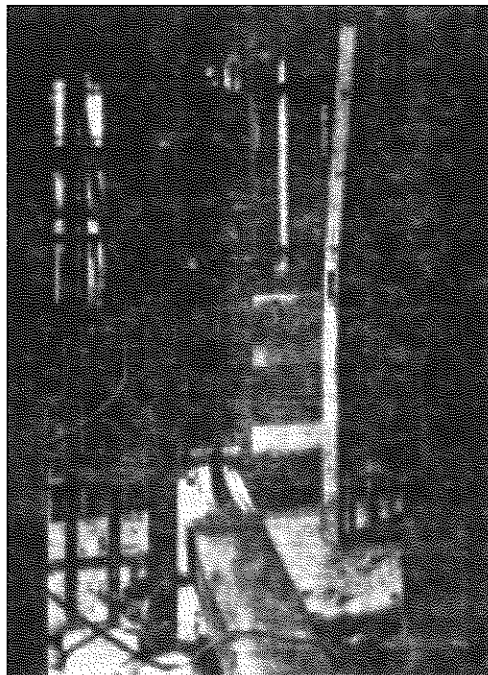
Work was still in progress on the locks at 10:00 p.m., when cries arose that "The soldiers are coming." The Fourth Tennessee Infantry, only one day away from the completion of its encampment, had been summoned shortly after the break-in, when Earl Hall had slipped out of the jail to telephone the rifle range. Unfortunately, most of the Guardsmen had left the camp on weekend passes, and their superiors were forced to round them up from their Saturday night haunts—a slow and difficult task. At first, only two hastily assembled squads, a total of sixteen men and an officer, were sent to the jail to deal with the mob; hopelessly outnumbered, these unfortunates were quickly disarmed, stripped of their uniforms, and severely beaten. Shortly afterward, however, Adjutant General Sweeney himself arrived, leading three companies up Hill Avenue from Gay Street in full battle array. The new arrivals were at first jeered, but, as he approached the jail, the General eventually succeeded in making himself heard

⁴⁴*State vs. Mays* No. 509, 45; *Knoxville Sentinel*, October 21, 1919; Brewer, "Guest of Honor."

⁴⁵*Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, August 31, September 1, 1919; *Knoxville Sentinel*, September 1, 1919.

⁴⁶*Knoxville Sentinel*, October 21, 22, 1919.

by the crowd. His speech was apparently the first to which the mob willingly listened, as he stated:



The interior of the Knox County jail on the day after the riot. From the *Knoxville Sentinel*, Sept. 3, 1919.

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These assurances
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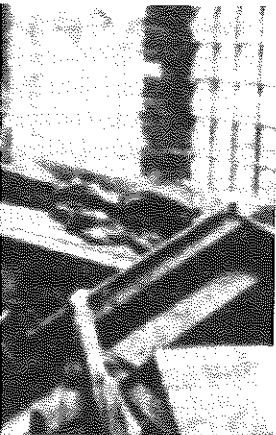
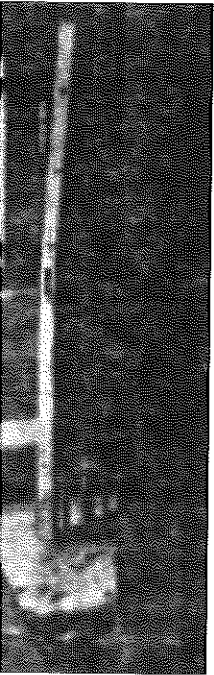
⁴⁷*Knoxville Journal and Tri*

⁴⁸*State vs. Mays*, No. 50
October 12, 1997.

⁴⁹Dantzler interview; Mrs.
"Guest of Honor"

⁵⁰Donnie Johnson, intervi
of the Gillespie Avenue B

e first to which the mob willingly lis-



er the riot. From the *Knoxville Sentinel*,
9.

I have as much respect for a white woman as any man in the south. The negro who committed the murder this morning should be hanged. Hell is too good for him. But the negro is not in this jail . . . I can promise you that when that negro is tried, Governor Roberts will not extend clemency, but will permit the full punishment provided by law.⁴⁷

These assurances brought a few drunken cheers but no cooperation, as the mob returned to destroying the jail. Shortly after Sweeney's arrival, the locks to the cells were finally broken and all white prisoners released, including four convicted murderers and a certified lunatic. The cry then arose that Mays was hiding in the sheriff's residence which adjoined the jail. General Sweeney pleaded, cajoled, threatened, and even allowed three committees of twenty-five to search the house, all in vain as the mob stormed past the Guardsmen into the home, smashing and stealing everything in sight. Fortunately, there was none of the Cate family inside; Deputy Austin Cate, the sheriff's oldest son, had taken Mrs. Cate and the other children to stay with relatives in neighboring Jefferson County earlier in the afternoon.⁴⁸

While the mob howled for Mays, members of the black community were arming and organizing for defense. Throughout the day, rumors had flown that a general reprisal against blacks was being planned; many worried families had already left the city to stay with friends and relatives elsewhere. Those who remained began making battle preparations. Joe Etter, a black storekeeper and veteran of the Spanish-American War, had warned his wife earlier in the day, "If they're gonna have a race riot, I'll be killed in it."⁴⁹

As evening drew nigh, tension mounted further. A steady procession of black customers passed through Sam Bowers' hardware store at the corner of Willow and Central, all buying ammunition. Finally, an alarmed Bowers warned his young clerk, "Whatever you do, do not sell any more ammunition." The next customer to enter the store was Joe Etter, who approached the counter and requested a box of shells. "I'm sorry," the white clerk replied, "but we're all out of ammunition." Etter, a big man known for his fierce temper, leaned menacingly over the counter and repeated his request. The clerk, placing a trembling hand on the shotgun beneath the counter, repeated that the store was out of bullets. "Yes," snarled Etter, "you do have ammunition, and as soon as I find some, you'll be the first to get it." With that, he stormed out as the clerk breathed a sigh of relief.⁵⁰

⁴⁷*Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, August 31, September 1, 1919; *Knoxville Sentinel*, September 1, 1919.

⁴⁸*State vs. Mays*, No. 509, 8; Mrs. Wanda Cate Watts Lawson, telephone interview with author, October 12, 1997.

⁴⁹Dantzler interview; Mrs. Helen Beatty, telephone interview with author, May 5, 1998; Brewer, "Guest of Honor."

⁵⁰Donnie Johnson, interview with author, Knoxville, Tennessee, May 23, 1998. Johnson, proprietor of the Gillespie Avenue Barber Shop, heard the story years later from the clerk, a loyal customer.

With the storming of the jail, nerves frayed to the breaking point; the cries of the mob echoed for blocks, and the explosion of the dynamite was felt all over the city. The corner of Vine and Central avenues, the center of both the black community and the Bowery district, was thickly crowded, even though most businesses had closed early. Groups of armed men stood guard on the street corners while others watched from windows and rooftops, determined to "not let a white face cross Central Avenue." In the tense atmosphere, several light-skinned blacks were mistaken for whites and assaulted before they could identify themselves.⁵¹

The events that followed, one resident later recalled, were "like a dark night" descending on Knoxville. Around 11:30 p.m., Dr. Joseph Carty, the proprietor of the Economy Drug Company on Vine and Central, was preparing to go home and leave his assistant in charge of the store. Though he had noticed a "tense feeling undercurrent . . . growing in bitterness," the white pharmacist, accustomed to the rough sights and sounds of the Bowery, saw no cause for alarm. Suddenly, a series of shots rang out on Central Avenue, and Carty and his helper looked out the window to behold "a few white men" shooting. Though he never saw who fired the first shot, Dr. Carty later stated that the shots "seemed to be the signal . . . negroes . . . poured down to the corner of Vine and Central from every direction. They came out of Central from both directions, out of Vine from the east and from the west. In a few minutes there were more than a hundred of them . . . shooting soon began in earnest."⁵²

Only three blocks away, a mob of one hundred or more whites, still seeking Mays, had gathered at the city jail on Commerce Avenue. Upon hearing the shots, they rushed to Vine and Central, where a vicious street battle soon erupted between blacks and whites armed with guns, knives, and brickbats. "Blood," according to one witness, "was everywhere." At this point, Carty and his assistant decided it was time to leave, jumping into the pharmacist's car and roaring up Vine Avenue to safety.⁵³

At the jail, five truckloads of rioters had just left for Chattanooga with the avowed purpose of finding Maurice Mays. Their departure, however, had scarcely dented the ranks of the mob, which was now spoiling for a new fight. Reinforcements of National Guardsmen had arrived but were still outnumbered by a margin of over five to one. "I have been a good sport with you," pleaded an increasingly desperate General Sweeney, "now be good sports with me! . . . The negro is not here . . . Go find him, wherever he is . . . I am not trying to defend any negro; I would like to see the negro punished as much as you do." He was still arguing with the crowd when several white men came running up with excit-

⁵¹Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, September 1, 1919; Dantzler interview; Dobbins and Stokely, "Precious Memories," 97; Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 1919.

⁵²Mrs. Ella Thrasher, telephone interview with author, August 6, 1999; Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, September 1, 1919. Mrs. Thrasher's husband, Willie Thrasher, often described the riot to her in these terms.

⁵³Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 1919; John Thompson, telephone interview with author, September 11, 1998.

ed reports that gang Central. Alarmed, th had not even left th with the news (later Central by an army time!" was given, a whoops, the mob fo

Soldiers, rioters artery of the city, t with them. Some m to secure weapons, the heels of the Gua been shot out at the turned to serve as b ways, windows, and

Unaware of the farewell to his swee from a dance at C closed beyond Jack his father's Overla Central and thus rea section of Vine and at Central, brandish of that night remain

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⁵⁴Knoxville *Sentinel*, S 1919; Roddy, 75 Years, this false report turned September 3, 1919.

⁵⁵Carson Brewer, "Hill 22, 1979.

⁵⁶Bill Young, interview the *Journal and Tribune* motorist" who initiated the author accepts his a to another motorist, the *Journal and Tribune*, A

ayed to the breaking point; the cries
sion of the dynamite was felt all over
venues, the center of both the black
kly crowded, even though most busi-
men stood guard on the street corners
ftops, determined to "not let a white
osphere, several light-skinned blacks
re they could identify themselves.⁵¹
ter recalled, were "like a dark night"
... Dr. Joseph Carty, the proprietor of
entral, was preparing to go home and
ough he had noticed a "tense feeling
white pharmacist, accustomed to the
w no cause for alarm. Suddenly, a
and Carty and his helper looked out
hooting. Though he never saw who
t the shots "seemed to be the signal
f Vine and Central from every direc-
directions, out of Vine from the east
ere more than a hundred of them . . .

undred or more whites, still seeking
orce Avenue. Upon hearing the shots,
vicious street battle soon erupted
ns, knives, and brickbats. "Blood,"
" At this point, Carty and his assis-
to the pharmacist's car and roaring

d just left for Chattanooga with the
their departure, however, had scarce-
as now spoiling for a new fight.
arrived but were still outnumbered
a good sport with you," pleaded an
w be good sports with me! . . . The
he is . . . I am not trying to defend
ished as much as you do." He was
te men came running up with excit-

Dantzler interview; Dobbins and Stokely,
r 1, 1919.

, August 6, 1999; Knoxville *Journal and*
illie Thrasher, often described the riot to her

mpson, telephone interview with author,

ed reports that gangs of armed blacks were holding up whites near Vine and Central. Alarmed, the general dispatched a platoon of troops to investigate. They had not even left the scene before they were met by two civilians and a soldier with the news (later proven false) that two soldiers had been killed at Vine and Central by an army of blacks on its way to the jail. The command of "Double time!" was given, and the Guardsmen ran toward Gay Street; with drunken war whoops, the mob followed, on foot and in automobiles.⁵⁴

Soldiers, rioters, police, and deputies swept up Gay Street, the main business artery of the city, to Vine Avenue, carrying many bystanders and new recruits with them. Some members of the mob began breaking into stores along the way to secure weapons, while others, fearful of missing the excitement, followed on the heels of the Guardsmen. Their coming had been anticipated. Streetlights had been shot out at the intersection of Vine and Central, gravel trucks had been overturned to serve as barricades, and black snipers had been posted in alleys, doorways, windows, and on rooftops. It was now shortly after midnight.⁵⁵

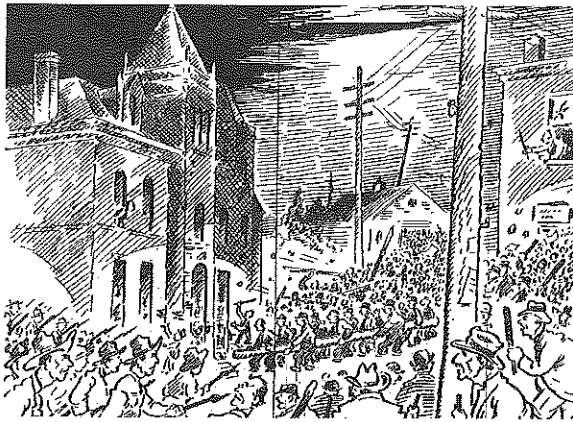
Unaware of the pandemonium, fifteen-year-old Bill Young had just bade farewell to his sweetheart at her home on West Church Avenue, after returning from a dance at Cherokee Country Club. Remembering that Gay Street was closed beyond Jackson Avenue due to construction of a new viaduct, he turned his father's Overland car northward to Vine Avenue, intending to turn onto Central and thus reach his home in North Knoxville. He had just passed the intersection of Vine and Gay when he spotted a large crowd of blacks milling about at Central, brandishing guns and shouting. Almost eighty years later, the events of that night remained vivid in his memory:

I didn't know what in the hell was going on down there, but I didn't want any part of it . . . so I turned my car around and started back up [toward] Gay Street to go to Broadway and here came all these men with rifles and shotguns and pistols and all that stuff, marching toward me on Gay Street and I was scared to death . . . but they didn't bother me, they just walked around me on both sides.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 1919; Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, September 1, 1919; Roddy, *75 Years*, 40; Graham, *The Soul of John Brown*, 100-101. Guardsmen later noted that this false report turned the mob's sympathy completely in their favor. See Memphis *News - Scimitar*, September 3, 1919.

⁵⁵Carson Brewer, "Hill People Also Like Tamales, Hot Peppers," Knoxville *News - Sentinel*, March 22, 1979.

⁵⁶Bill Young, interviews with author, Knoxville, Tennessee, January 21 and February 11, 1999. Both the *Journal and Tribune* and the *Sentinel* would later erroneously describe Young as a "lone, daredevil motorist" who initiated the shooting; Young insists that no shots were fired while he was present and the author accepts his account. It is unclear whether the newspaper accounts may have been referring to another motorist, though Young does not recall seeing any other cars on the street. See Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, September 1, 1919; Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 1919.



Sketches by Ernest Burtt, part of a retrospective of the Knoxville riot. From the *Knoxville Journal*, March 3, 1940.

Instead of staying to see what developed, a terrified Young "high-tailed it" to Broadway and rushed homeward. His decision was a wise one, for shooting erupted within seconds of his departure. Though it was never determined how the firing began, Vine Avenue quickly became a no-man's-land as bullets flew and men scrambled for cover. The resulting storm of lead forced the blacks to retreat toward Central; at least one black man, Jim Henson, was shot down in the process, apparently the first man to be killed.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, those whites who were unarmed busied themselves with obtaining weapons. Stores and pawn shops on Gay Street, Vine Avenue, Wall Avenue, Market Square, and Jackson Avenue were broken into and raided of all pistols,

⁵⁷Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, August 31, 1919.

rifles, shotguns, bullets, meat cleavers, baseball bats might serve as weapons. At least a thousand dollars. Attempts by some police officers were made in vain to get the rioters to the rioters. At the time, blacks in search of firearms.

Armed and ready, they moved on Vine and Gay; splinter groups searched further for Mays. By the time the riot on Vine Avenue had subsided, the rioters were reloaded and threatened from the rifle range, including eager civilians, were positioned two Browning machine guns on the corner of Vine Avenue and Central upon command.⁵⁹

During this interval, a man who had volunteered to act as a lookout for two other officers, appeared on the corner of Vine and Central. He was a sniper. As the fire was a phone pole, then into a crowd heading up Vine toward Central and the shooting redoubled. The man panicked; someone screamed, sweeping the street before him. A sniper's bullet struck Payne where he was virtually "down" on the walk. The gunners, meanwhile, continued firing as the approach of the commander of the machine guns to the men to cease their firing was obeyed. In the meantime, Payne and fired. The man walked below.⁶⁰

Details after this point, the machine guns was heard.

⁵⁸Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, 1919; Herbert J. Seligmann, 1919.

⁵⁹Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, 1919.

⁶⁰Roddy, *75 Years*, 41; John Scimitar, September 3, 1919.



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rifles, shotguns, bullets, knives, razors, axes, hatchets, pitchforks, garden shears, meat cleavers, baseball bats, pokers, brass knuckles, and any other items that might serve as weapons. Damage from the raids would amount to more than fifty thousand dollars. Attempts by authorities to prevent the looting had little effect; some police officers were even reported to have passed out weapons and ammunition to the rioters. At least one store on Central Avenue was also raided by blacks in search of firearms.⁵⁸

Armed and ready, the main portion of the mob hastened to the vicinity of Vine and Gay; splinter groups scattered to other sections of the city, either to search further for Mays or to attack other black communities. Shooting on Vine Avenue had subsided, and an interval of around thirty minutes ensued as guns were reloaded and threats exchanged. Further reinforcements had now arrived from the rifle range, including the local machine gun company. Troops, joined by eager civilians, were positioned along both sides of the street and in alleys, while two Browning machine guns were placed opposite one another near the intersection of Vine Avenue and State Street, the gunners being instructed to fire only upon command.⁵⁹

During this interval, Lieutenant James Payne, an Army artillery instructor who had volunteered to assist the troops, began creeping down Vine Avenue with two other officers, apparently to conduct reconnaissance. The trio had neared the corner of Vine and Central when another volley of gunfire erupted from the black snipers. As the fire was answered by the whites, Payne ducked, first behind a telephone pole, then into a doorway. A huge crowd of blacks suddenly appeared, heading up Vine toward Gay. "Here they come!" shouted a member of the mob, and the shooting redoubled. In the midst of the confusion, the machine gunners panicked; someone screamed, "Let 'em have it," and both guns began blazing, sweeping the street before them in a deadly crossfire. At the same moment, a sniper's bullet struck Payne in the chest. The lieutenant staggered into the street, where he was virtually "cut in two" by the bullets, bleeding to death on the sidewalk. The gunners, meanwhile, blinded by panic and smoke from the guns, continued firing as the approaching blacks scattered and fell. Captain Harry Knox, commander of the machine gun company, screamed and signaled frantically for the men to cease their fire; after several minutes, his signal was finally seen and obeyed. In the meantime, a National Guardsman spotted the sniper who had shot Payne and fired. The man tumbled from an upper window and fell to the sidewalk below.⁶⁰

Details after this point would become extremely murky. The rattle of the machine guns was heard for miles, prompting men of both races to come running

⁵⁸Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, September 1, 1919; Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 1919; Herbert J. Seligmann, *The Negro Faces America* (New York, 1920), 180.

⁵⁹Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, August 31, 1919.

⁶⁰Roddy, *75 Years*, 41; Johnson interview. By some accounts, at least one other white was accidentally killed in the fracas. See Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, August 31, 1919; Memphis *News-Scimitar*, September 3, 1919.

ate. Fighting quickly spread to adjacent
ne a war zone. Hundreds of bystanders,
ulting melee; men out for a night on the
into the fray, as did others on their way
ients poured from the nearby brothels in
burst from the saloons to witness the
igned for the next several hours, with
cessantly." At least one further charge of
ly more, was attempted by the blacks,
of bullets. Among those killed was Joe
t to single-handedly capture a machine
egan to rain, turning Vine Avenue into a
oodstains were visible on the pavement.
arked that "the battlefields of France and
hting at Knoxville."⁶¹

anic were widespread, aided by rumors
black citizens barricaded themselves in
cemeteries or under houses and boxcars,
g more than the clothes on their backs.
e girl living on Front Avenue, just two
of terrified men and women, all black,
ably fleeing the fighting along Central
ots were met by waiting gangs of armed
om other cities; at least two black men,
were shot and robbed in this fashion,
id not instantly throw up their hands at
ated (and persist to this day) that blacks
over the city. Several whites hid black
nesses for the duration of the riot; one
a church.⁶³

ember 1, 1919; Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1,
Knoxville, Tennessee, January 13, 1998; Fred Ford,
28, 1998; Memphis *News - Scimitar*, September
ains difficult to ascertain. Though the worst vio-
d areas in and around downtown, particularly
e northwest, and "the bottoms near the universi-
were also the scenes of fighting, though details

view with Anne Wilson, Knoxville, Tennessee,
Cora Ballard, interview with author, Knoxville,
Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 1919; Leonard
e, January 11, 1998.

author, August 30, 1999; Toby Julian, telephone
ie Kelly, telephone interview with author, April

Similar uproar prevailed among whites. Across the city, white men, particu-
larly those in mixed neighborhoods, locked their doors and windows, loaded their
guns, and herded their wives and children into the cellars amid excited reports of
a plot by blacks to take over the city and slaughter the white population. Bands
of men and boys with shotguns patrolled the streets in some communities, while
others seized the nearest weapons and marched to Vine and Central to confront
the expected onslaught, picking up recruits and drafting bystanders along the
way.⁶⁴

Around 3:15 a.m., the remaining companies of National Guardsmen arrived,
swelling the regiment to full strength, and a charge by the soldiers, aided by white
rioters, succeeded in capturing the square at Vine and Central. The mob then
attempted to muster a further assault on the barricades beyond Central Avenue
but was ultimately forced back by the Guardsmen, who proceeded to establish a
"barred zone" along Central Avenue and seal off the black community, allowing
no whites to enter and no blacks to leave. What became of the barricades beyond
Central Avenue remains unclear.⁶⁵

The next day was Sunday but proved to be no day of rest. Most black church-
es canceled services, urging their congregations to "remain quiet and do nothing
which would excuse an outbreak of any kind." Though attendance was sparse,
regular services were held by white churches, with pastors condemning mob law
and prayers being said "that the Lord will restrain the evil passion of men so that
we may live together in peace." Meanwhile, disorder and panic maintained their
sway, aided by rumors and general lawlessness. Calls from all over Knoxville
engulfed police headquarters, overwhelming the exhausted force with reports of
mobs and shooting, most of which proved false. In an attempt to remedy this sit-
uation, over two hundred white civilians were sworn in Sunday afternoon as spe-
cial deputies and patrolmen, issued badges and guns, and assigned to beats
throughout the city. A 10 p.m. curfew was imposed, and Mayor McMillan issued
a proclamation urging that "all classes of citizens . . . remain at their homes or
about their usual avocations and aid in preventing unlawful gatherings which may
result in new disorders." By midnight, the city's fever had begun to subside,
though scattered incidents would continue for the next two days.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, Guardsmen patrolled the streets of the barred zone, posting a
machine gun at each corner of Vine and Central and searching all blacks seen on

⁶⁴Lamon, *Black Tennesseans*, 247; Mrs. Pauline Griffin, telephone interview with author, July 9,
1998; Charles Lipps, interview with author, Knoxville, Tennessee, September 12, 1999. Rumors of
an imminent "Negro uprising" persisted for the next several days, keeping the white population in a
state of hysteria.

⁶⁵Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, September 1, 1919; Knoxville *Sentinel*,
September 1, 1919.

⁶⁶Mrs. J. S. Dailey interview, Knoxville, Tennessee, no date, Beck Cultural Exchange Center;
Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 1919; Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, September 1, 1919; Lamon,
Black Tennesseans, 248.

the street, as well as black passengers on trains and streetcars. Many of those searched were roughly handled, including women and children, and a number of black men were shot and bayoneted without provocation. In one instance, a deaf man was "shot to pieces" for failing to obey a soldier's command to "Halt;" in others, Guardsmen helped themselves to the cash and cigarettes of those searched and even shot at some for sport. Homes were also searched, leading to several violent confrontations. Such treatment was bitterly protested by black leaders, including Charles Cansler, who observed that "there is very little difference in being mobbed by lawless citizens and being victims of a mob of soldiers."⁶⁷ Not surprisingly, most black workers chose to stay home for the next several days, while others, fearful of returning home, were provided with food and temporary lodging by their employers. Several blacks reportedly left the city in the days that followed, though it remains unclear how many eventually returned. "Many of these negroes," noted one reporter, "will leave only for the period of tension, but many stated that they will never return."⁶⁸

"How many have been killed and wounded," observed the *Journal and Tribune*, "remains a matter of guesswork." Newspaper accounts later claimed that only two people, Payne and Etter, had been killed and only fourteen wounded, but eyewitness accounts told a very different story. Robert Shersky, the white proprietor of the nearby Vine Avenue Grocery, heard the shooting from his living quarters above the store and made his way to the scene to investigate. There, he saw the machine guns being fired indiscriminately, raking buildings and shooting at anything that moved, black or white. Gangs of whites were shooting, stabbing, and beating blacks to death, pulling them from trains and dragging them out from under houses and boxcars while National Guardsmen stood idly by or joined in the attacks. White participants later boasted of "mowing niggers down like grass," and numerous witnesses told of seeing black corpses stacked "like cordwood." Black participants, while admitting heavy losses, insisted that several whites were also killed, shot down by black snipers in the battle at Vine and Central. Charles Cansler, recalling the riot as "one of the most tragic events in the history of Negroes in Knoxville," would later write that the conflict "resulted in several deaths on both sides."⁶⁹

⁶⁷Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, September 1, 2, 1919; Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 2, 1919; Miller interview; Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, September 3, 1919; Pointer interview; Knoxville Colored Men's Business and Civic League to Roberts, September 11, 23, 1919, Maurice Mays file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles.

⁶⁸Ballard interview; J. B. Wheeler, interview with Brian Carden, Knoxville, Tennessee, May 2, 1979, Beck Cultural Exchange Center; Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, September 3, 1919.

⁶⁹Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*; Shersky interview; Hugh Lindsey, interview with author, Knoxville, Tennessee, July 25, 1998; Fletcher Walters, telephone interview with author, March 25, 1998; Rev. Isaac Stafford, interview with Anne Wilson, Knoxville, Tennessee, March 10, 1979, Beck Cultural Exchange Center; Charles Cansler, "Negro Life in Knox County and Knoxville," in Mary U. Rothrock, ed., *The French Broad - Holston Country: A History of Knox County, Tennessee* (Knoxville, 1946), 320. One other death was acknowledged by local authorities, that of Nelson Easley, a decorated black war veteran who reportedly "dropped dead . . . [due to] heart trouble superinduced by excitement over the race trouble."

The most disturbing concerned the disposal of Brady, a white storekeeper in the nearby community of who had journeyed to Knoxville in a one-horse farm wagon for supplies, boarding his horse in a stable on Central Avenue. When the riot broke out, he became caught in the middle of the riot and was afterwards pulled from his wagon through the streets while National Guardsmen fired with bodies. Both wagon and driver were reportedly used as a target to the Gay Street Bridge. Brady's body was dumped into the Tennessee River. Other bodies were said to have been hauled outside the city and buried in mass graves.

The true number of deaths and wounded would remain unknown. Knox County Coroner James Pointer declined to conduct an official investigation, claiming that "no mysterious circumstances" existed to justify an investigation. Despite repeated requests from black citizens, Governor James B. Cox ordered the National Guard's medical records of those treated at the county hospital, making a physician later estimated that two deaths. James Roberts, an officer of the National Guard, estimated that other estimates ranged

⁷⁰James Pointer, telephone interview with author, where such actions were taken in Georgia, in 1906, and Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1906, "Journal and Tribune," September 22, 1906, *Journal and Tribune*, *Promised Land: The Tulsa Race*.

⁷¹Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, September 22, 1906, Roberts Papers, Box 5, Folder 10. "Among the outstanding cases of racial violence, the case started the National Guard was virtually in effect." See

trains and streetcars. Many of those women and children, and a number of it provocation. In one instance, a deaf by a soldier's command to "Halt;" in the cash and cigarettes of those homes were also searched, leading to ment was bitterly protested by black served that "there is very little differ- and being victims of a mob of sol- ders chose to stay home for the next ning home, were provided with food Several blacks reportedly left the city gains unclear how many eventually one reporter, "will leave only for the will never return."⁶⁸

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19; Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 2, 1919; mber 3, 1919; Pointer interview; Knoxville , September 11, 23, 1919, Maurice Mays file,

n Carden, Knoxville, Tennessee, May 2, 1979, il *Appeal*, September 3, 1919.

ew; Hugh Lindsey, interview with author, s, telephone interview with author, March 25, s, Knoxville, Tennessee, March 10, 1979, Beck fe in Knox County and Knoxville," in Mary U. try: *A History of Knox County, Tennessee* wledged by local authorities, that of Nelson y "dropped dead . . . [due to] heart trouble

The most disturbing stories concerned the disposal of the dead. Joe Brady, a white storekeeper from the nearby community of Andersonville, had journeyed to Knoxville that week-end in a one-horse farm wagon to buy supplies, boarding his horse in a livery stable on Central Avenue. While in town, he became caught in the race riot and was afterwards forced to drive his wagon through the barred zone while National Guardsmen loaded it with bodies. Both wagons and trucks were reportedly used to haul corpses to the Gay Street Bridge, where they were dumped into the Tennessee River. Other bodies were said to have been hauled outside the city by rail and buried in mass graves.⁷⁰

The true number of dead and wounded would remain a mystery. Knox County Coroner Arthur Gray declined to conduct an inquest, asserting that "no mysterious circumstances" existed to justify an investigation. Despite repeated protests from black citizens, Governor Roberts similarly refused to authorize an inquiry into the National Guard's conduct. Overwhelmed local hospitals failed to keep records of those treated for injuries, and many casualties were treated by private physicians, making a precise reckoning of the riot's toll impossible. Carroll Cate later estimated that twenty-five to thirty people had been killed; Major Maurice Roberts, an officer of the National Guard, placed the body count at thirty to forty; other estimates ranged into the hundreds.⁷¹



Guardsman conducting a search in the days after the riot. Courtesy of the McClung Historical Collection.

⁷⁰James Pointer, telephone interview with author, October 24, 1997; Brewer, "Hill People." Pointer heard the story from his neighbor, Joe Brady, as a young man in Andersonville. Knoxville was not the only city where such actions were taken in the aftermath of a race riot. Similar measures were employed in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1906, and Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921. See Charles Crowe, "Racial Massacre in Atlanta, September 22, 1906," *Journal of Negro History* 54 (April 1969): 172; Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge, 1982), 66-69.

⁷¹Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, September 1, 1919; Roberts to Charles W. Cansler, October 2, 1919, Roberts Papers, Box 5, Folder 5; Brewer, "Guest of Honor." Rufus Mynatt's obituary later stated, "Among the outstanding cases in which Judge Mynatt served was the Maurice Mays trial . . . The sensational case started the Knoxville race riot when hundreds of Negroes were slain here and martial law was virtually in effect." See "Colorful Career Closes," *Knoxville Journal*, March 10, 1939.

ock and disbelief. "I think of all the s this Knoxville riot," remarked one ce a thing like this should have been dge the outbreak as symptomatic of vic leaders instead chose to wrap ne out in the world that it was a race was not that, it was a 'hoodlum riot'. y degenerated into a spasm of plun-criminals." Drunkenness, irrespon- ks and whites," it was asserted, not hat mob would have been equally as il and lynch him," maintained state There is no hostility in Knoxville y place in the country and he knows everend J. H. Henderson, pastor of gtest black congregation, urged his The white people here are kind and itinue to live up to our duty as citi-

ns "would have been easy to accept s against "hoodlumism" could not ntral, the assaults on black citizens, f the mob at having shown blacks e paranoia, black frustration, mutu- ing for years. Had Bertie Lindsey's ed, some other incident might have was to question not only Knoxville's out segregation itself. It was easier tburst of meanness on the part of a

on September 1, and by the next day ptember 6, the municipal election of the riot, several McMillan cam-and replaced with signs threatening e mayor attempted to provide black ut to no avail. When the ballots had triumphed over the incumbent by a

slim margin of 641 votes. McMillan's defeat would mark his retirement from public life.⁷⁴

Maurice Mays returned to Knoxville under heavy guard on September 25, still protesting his innocence. "My imprisonment for the murder of Mrs. Lindsey," he declared in a written statement, "is one of pure persecution and oppression. I am as innocent of the crime as is the judge before whom I am to be tried." Neither a change of venue nor a continuance could be secured by his attorneys, and, on October 1, 1919, one of the most sensational murder trials in Knox County's history began. Several blatant appeals to racism were made during the course of the trial; at one point, former Knoxville mayor Samuel Heiskell, who had been appointed by Governor Roberts to serve as special prosecutor, unsuccessfully sought to introduce as evidence several photographs of white women found in Mays' home. Most controversial of all, however, was Judge T.A.R. Nelson's refusal to allow the defense, headed by former Knox County district attorney general Reuben Cates, to introduce the testimony of three white women who had been assaulted since Mays' arrest, including one whose attacker "told me to lay still or he would shoot me like he did Bertie Lindsey." Finally, on October 4, 1919, Maurice Mays was convicted of murder. The all-white jury had deliberated only eighteen minutes. On October 18, Judge Nelson, giving the verdict his "hearty approval," sentenced Mays to death.⁷⁵

For all his approval, Nelson had neglected an important point of law. In January 1919, the state legislature had revised the sentencing procedure for capital trials, requiring the penalty to be decided by the jury rather than the judge. On November 24, 1920, the Tennessee Supreme Court accordingly reversed the guilty verdict and ordered that Mays receive a new trial. By now the number of assault victims willing to testify had increased to fifteen, but their testimony was again excluded, over the protests of the defense that "This shows a system of crimes . . . the same sort of place, the same hour, the same weapon." On April 23, 1921, Mays was again convicted and again sentenced to death. Following the upholding of the verdict, desperate appeals for clemency were made by Mays and others, white and black, to the newly elected governor, Alfred A. Taylor. Among those pleading on the condemned man's behalf were John E. McMillan, Sheriff Cate, Charles Cansler, three justices of the Tennessee Supreme Court, and Dave Taylor, the governor's own son. Privately, Taylor expressed sympathy for Mays but, fearful of damaging his chances for re-election, ultimately refused to intervene. Thus, on

⁷⁴Nashville *Banner*, September 4, 6, 1919; McMillan, "Far from the Peaceful Shore," 30-31; Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, September 2, 4, 6, 7, 1919; Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 8, 1919.

⁷⁵Knoxville *Sentinel*, undated clipping in National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Series I, Box D-61; Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, September 26, October 3, 4, 5, 19, 1919; Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 25, October 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 18, 1919; *State vs. Mays* 143 Tenn. 443, 120-122, 292-302. For an account of Mays' legal saga, see John Egerton, "A Case of Prejudice: Maurice Mays and the Knoxville Race Riot of 1919," *Southern Exposure* 11 (July/August 1983), 56-65.

ee on After War Program and Representative a, September 17, 1919," Commission on Atlanta University Center, Series II, Folder Knoxville *Sentinel*, September 1, 4, 1919;

rnal and Tribune, November 9, 1919.

March 15, 1922, Maurice Mays died in the electric chair at the state penitentiary in Nashville. His last words were, "I am as innocent as the sun that shines." A few years later, on June 30, 1926, John E. McMillan committed suicide.⁷⁶

Fifty-five men and women, all white, were eventually arrested for participation in the riot. Beginning October 14, 1919, twenty-two of this number were tried together on charges of housebreaking, larceny, and release of prisoners (no prosecutions resulted from the rioting at Vine and Central). When all evidence had been presented, the prosecution, headed by Rufus Mynatt, waived closing arguments, noting confidently that "We have an unusually intelligent jury . . . and it would be a waste of valuable time to argue the case." Unimpressed, the jury of twelve white men returned the next day, October 25, with a verdict of acquittal for fourteen defendants, while deadlocking on the remaining five (charges against three men had already been dismissed). "There was never," declared a disgusted Mynatt, "a more guilty set of men turned loose."⁷⁷

The legacy of the riot would be felt for years to come. In August 1921, a second mob attempted to storm the county jail after a black hobo was arrested on the charge (later proven groundless) of having raped and beaten a white schoolteacher. This time, however, Sheriff Cate and his deputies were ready, and the would-be rioters scattered before a shower of buckshot. Threats of mob violence again arose in 1929, when a mentally retarded black man confessed to the murder of three whites, and in 1933, when a black laborer was arrested and charged with the rape and murder of a white restaurant worker. In each case, fears were widespread that a second major riot might erupt, but violence failed to materialize, prompting sighs of relief from blacks and whites alike. Incidents of this sort would persist until the 1960s.⁷⁸

Nevertheless, civic leaders continued to dismiss the riot as an aberration, a mere hiccup in Knoxville's tradition of progress and tranquility. So complete was this self-deception that by 1941 a prominent white minister could state that

⁷⁶Egerton, "A Case of Prejudice," 62-63; *Mays vs. State* 226 S.W. 233 (1920); *Knoxville Sentinel*, April 21, 22, 23, 1921, March 15, 1922; Lawson interview; *East Tennessee News*, March 23, 1922; *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, July 1, 1926; McMillan, "Far from the Peaceful Shore," 32-33. In regard to the campaign for Mays' reprieve, see the numerous letters and petitions in Maurice Mays file, Tennessee Pardons and Paroles, particularly John E. McMillan to Taylor, November 29, 1921; Cansler to Taylor, November 10, 1921; Grafton Green to Taylor, March 10, 1922; Nathan L. Bachman and Colin P. McKinney to Taylor, March 14, 1922; Dave Taylor to Governor Alf A. Taylor, November 10, 1921.

⁷⁷*Knoxville Sentinel*, September 12, October 24, 25, 27, 1919; *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, October 26, 1919; Lamon, "Tennessee Race Relations," 82-83. Two of those receiving mistrials, Martin Mays and Charles Cash, were retried and convicted in 1920, both receiving prison sentences of one to ten years. Mays was ultimately pardoned in 1921; Cash was paroled later the same year. *Convict Record Book P*, Tennessee State Prison Records (Record Group 25), Manuscripts Division, Tennessee State Library and Archives, 238, 273.

⁷⁸Lamon, *Black Tennesseans*, 253-254; Brewer, "Guest of Honor," *Knoxville News - Sentinel*, December 27, 28, 1929; *Knoxville Journal*, January 1, 1933; Smith interview.

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⁷⁹Station WROL [radio broadcast script], CIC Papers, Series

⁸⁰Bill Murrah, "'To Make
1974), 105; Dobbins and
Turmoil," *Knoxville Journal*
ing portrayal of the riot fr
conceived by Linda Parris
in possession of Carpetbay

electric chair at the state penitentiary
 "as bright as the sun that shines." A few
 men committed suicide.⁷⁶

He eventually arrested for participa-
 twenty-two of this number were
 mercy, and release of prisoners (no
 and Central). When all evidence
 by Rufus Mynatt, waived closing
 an unusually intelligent jury . . . and
 the case." Unimpressed, the jury of
 ber 25, with a verdict of acquittal
 on the remaining five (charges
 d). "There was never," declared a
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"Knoxville fortunately has no recent record of outbursts of race hatred."⁷⁹ To oth-
 ers, the riot's significance was more apparent. Working-class whites saw the inci-
 dent as a major victory, a vindication of their superiority that put blacks "in their
 place" once and for all. For blacks, the riot came to symbolize perseverance and
 survival, a sign, as the child of one participant remarked, of "how far the black
 people have come." It also served as a bitter testimony to the realities of life in a
 segregated world. "Since the Civil War," one survivor later observed, "Negroes
 in east Tennessee had been celebrating freedom. We had a history of thinking we
 lived among the best white people in the South. But when the summer of 1919
 came around, we found out it wasn't true."⁸⁰

For over fifty years, Knoxville, Tennessee, had boasted of its harmonious
 race relations, holding itself up as a model to other American cities. Yet when
 racial violence swept the nation in 1919, Knoxville failed to escape. National
 unrest combined with existing local tensions to produce a violent racial confla-
 gration that claimed several lives, destroyed thousands of dollars' worth of prop-
 erty, left the city bitterly divided, and led to the execution of an innocent man.
 Unwilling to confront the challenges posed by the riot, Knoxville's leadership
 sought to deny the incident's racial overtones, portraying it as the work of a few
 excited rumormongers and drunken hoodlums. No amount of denial, however,
 could erase the mark left on the city. In the decades that followed, men of both
 races would often point to the bullet holes in buildings at Vine and Central,
 telling their children and grandchildren the story of that dark night in Knoxville
 and "the Morris Mays race riot."

⁷⁹Station *WROL* [radio broadcast], Knoxville, Tennessee, February 10, 1941, 9:30-10:00 p.m. (type-
 script), CIC Papers, Series VII, Folder 199.

⁸⁰Bill Murrah, "'To Make People Proud': The Knoxville Race Riot," *Southern Exposure* 1 (winter
 1974), 105; Dobbins and Stokely, 97; Stephanie Piper, "Learning from Knoxville's Summer of
 Turmoil," Knoxville *Journal*, January 21, 1988; Egerton, "A Case of Prejudice," 56. For an interest-
 ing portrayal of the riot from the perspective of the black community, see the play "Red Summer,"
 conceived by Linda Parris - Bailey, written by Mayta Haley, and directed by Steve Kent (unpublished,
 in possession of Carpetbag Theatre, Knoxville, Tennessee).