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## TENNESSEE RACE RELATIONS AND THE KNOXVILLE RIOT OF 1919

By LESTER C. LAMON

A war "to make the world safe for democracy" had been concluded at the expense of 53,402 American lives. The United States was the fountain-head for this democracy and was the example upon which much of the world was to be rebuilt. The summer of 1919, however, revealed that a toxic contamination resided deep within this exemplary world power.

### I

Six major racial conflicts and numerous smaller flare-ups betrayed a critical unrest between white and Negro communities in the United States.<sup>1</sup> No longer could the Negro problem be regarded as an anachronistic and peculiarly southern concern. Some of the worst outbreaks occurred in the urban areas of the North, cities to which southern Negroes had fled during the war, seeking higher wages, better living conditions, and protection within the law. These were cities hard hit by postwar unemployment, especially of the black veterans of the Great War who, after having experienced social acceptance in France, expected improved status for themselves because of their meritorious service to their country.

As explosions occurred in Chicago and Washington, many southerners took an "I told you so" delight in reprimanding the North and extolling the virtues of segregation of the races. An editor in a leading and progressive southern newspaper expressed the opinion: "It has served the purposes of our northern and western friends to discuss this matter academically while the issue was confined to the South, but when it gets up among them they argue it with pistols, guns and rope." The editor attacked northern hypocrisy for criticizing "Jim Crow" laws since the Chicago riot was started when Negroes supposedly encroached upon the white portion of a divided beach. Apparently, the writer pointed out, Chicago, like the South, had "recognized segregation as

<sup>1</sup> Longview, Texas, July 10; Washington, D. C., July 19; Chicago, Illinois, July 27; Knoxville, Tennessee, August 30; Omaha, Nebraska, September 28; and, Elaine, Arkansas, October 1.

essential not only to the peace of the country, but to the integrity of the two races."<sup>2</sup>

Despite the graphic and often inflammatory press coverage given to the Longview, Washington, and Chicago violence, Tennessee was one state which felt confident that race relations within her boundaries were being ably handled. On August 1, Chicago officials, seeking to alleviate Negro unemployment in their strife-torn city, telegraphed southern governors, asking about employment conditions if the Negroes migrated back to the South. While Governor Robert A. Cooper of South Carolina refused to answer the question and the state of Georgia responded negatively, Governor Albert H. Roberts of Tennessee confidently assured Chicago that "industrious negroes could find all the employment they wished" in his state.<sup>3</sup> As Negro families began to arrive in Tennessee, Governor Roberts issued a declaration welcoming them to a state whose "perfect understanding and efforts to maintain friendly relationships for the past century" stood it in "good stead in the present period of unrest." The Governor went on to say that "We need the Negro here, and I do not fear that Tennessee will ever be the scene of such troubles as are now existing in Chicago."<sup>4</sup> Thus, although Tennesseans were cognizant of the worsening of race relations in the nation, they rather naively felt that their situation was most progressive and realistic and in no danger of disruption from resident Negroes. Actually, when the disruption did occur in Knoxville, it was the result of actions by white people instead of Negroes.

While certain of their ability to maintain racial harmony, Tennessee leaders were well aware of two potential dangers to internal tranquility. The first of these traced its origins back to ante-bellum days and in 1919 manifested itself in "the pestiferous agitators who seem to be abroad in the land to stir up trouble between the races. . . ."<sup>5</sup> The second threat was the contagion of lynching and mob violence which had been common throughout the South since the Civil War.

In the twenty years prior to 1919, the states of the "Old South" had experienced 2,691 reported lynchings. The vast majority (2,335) of these were Negroes and 196 of them had lost their lives in Ten-

<sup>2</sup> *Chattanooga Daily Times*, July 30, 1919.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, July 31, 1919.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, August 3, 1919.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, August 3, 1919.

nessee.<sup>6</sup> To conscientious Tennesseans in 1919, the important fact was that their state had experienced only eleven of these atrocities in the past five years—far below average for a southern state. As early as February 24, 1918, white citizens had begun to organize in order to continue this downward trend of extra-legal activity.<sup>7</sup> At this time some three hundred white residents of Nashville formed the Law and Order League whose platform stated its desire

To create and arouse a more active public sentiment in the young and old in favor of enforcement of law and to combat the evils of lawlessness. To hold public meetings, prepare and distribute literature, provide lectures, and to urge the pulpit, press and schools to stress the necessity for the suppression of crime and the maintenance of law and order, to the end that mob violence and at least the more serious crimes shall be condemned by public sentiment and certainly punished by the established processes of the law.<sup>8</sup>

This group met with similarly interested Negroes, who had been petitioning the office of the governor to act for their protection and interest. The eventual aim of this organization was to establish branches throughout Tennessee with efforts coordinated by a central board.

Interest in the concepts of the Law and Order League was stimulated by the activities of the newly revived Ku Klux Klan. Earnest Sevier Cox, a native of Louisville, Tennessee, and a nationally recognized advocate of Negro colonization commented on a meeting of the Klan in Richmond, Virginia, in the fall of 1920: "The applause was almost continuous. Personally I am opposed to any secret organization of this nature but I believe it will force the Negro problem to the immediate attention of many people in the South. . . ."<sup>9</sup> A Klan organizer in Tennessee sent a letter to Mayor John E. McMillan of Knoxville seeking support for a branch of the Klan in that city. In response to this appeal, Mayor McMillan called together a group of leading Negroes in his community, denounced the Klan, and denied that there was a need for such an organization in Knoxville.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Hearings Before the Committee on the Judiciary*, House of Representatives, Sixty-Sixth Congress, second session, on H. J. Res. 75, *House Reports* 259, 4123, and 11873, Serial No. 14, January 15 and 29, 1920 (Washington, 1920), 47.

<sup>7</sup> "Tennessee Mobilizes for Law and Order," *Survey*, XXXIX (March 23, 1918), 690-91.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in *Crisis*, XVII (March, 1919), 231.

<sup>9</sup> Earnest Sevier Cox to Madison Grant, December 6, 1920, in Earnest Sevier Cox Papers (Duke University, Durham, N. C.). Madison Grant was a New York attorney and author of the influential racist book, *The Passing of the Great Race*.

<sup>10</sup> *Crisis*, XVII (April, 1919), 291.

As the summer of 1919 unfolded, violence, both within the South and throughout other sections of the nation, gave further impetus to Tennesseans who sought preventive action for their state. (Though less sensational than the growing Negro unrest, of equal importance to the state's racial harmony was the surfacing of the traditional southern fear of black violence.<sup>11</sup> Press attention given to Negro resistance and aggressiveness could not but have posed a psychological threat to race-conscious whites.) On May 23 and 24, Memphis narrowly averted a serious race riot. Repeated lynchings, some even with advanced publicity, had driven many Negroes in northern Mississippi to arm themselves in self-defense.<sup>12</sup> This fear spread to Memphis when whites threatened retaliation for the alleged killing of a street-car conductor by a Negro. The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* described the situation in this manner: "There was a powder train all over Memphis Saturday. That there was no explosion was due to sheer luck. . . . Somehow we have drifted into a tense racial relation. It is nobody's fault and yet it is everyone's fault."<sup>13</sup> The potential represented in this crisis reflected a situation that leading Tennessee spokesmen abhorred and prided themselves in preventing.

Though confident that satisfactory relations between the races could be maintained in their state, such leading figures as Governor Roberts, F. A. McKenzie, President of Fisk University, and James Hampton Kirkland, President of Vanderbilt University, joined 147 other citizens of the country, including ex-President William Howard Taft, in demanding a congressional investigation into the outburst of mob violence and lynching in the United States.<sup>14</sup> This expression of concern was published in *The Nation* and gained considerable attention.

Racial tension and violence did not seem to pose a serious threat to law and order in Tennessee, but many white Tennesseans were apprehensive enough to shed some of their traditional adherence to

<sup>11</sup> Charles Grier Sellers, Jr., and Wilbur J. Cash are two historians who make extensive use of the "fear thesis." See Charles Grier Sellers, Jr., "Travail of Slavery," in Charles Grier Sellers, Jr. (ed.), *The Southerner As American* (Chapel Hill, 1960), 49, 69-70; Wilbur J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), 326-27.

<sup>12</sup> Supplement to *Crisis*, XIV (July, 1917), 1. Further examples of this blatant lawlessness are found in the June 26, 1919, issues of the *New Orleans States* and the *Jackson, Mississippi, Daily News*, which were part of testimony in *Hearings Before the Committee on the Judiciary*, 36-37.

<sup>13</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 27, 1919.

<sup>14</sup> *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, August 2, 1919 (located in the Charles N. Hunter Papers, Duke University).

state rights and to encourage increased federal responsibility in preventing racial disturbances. They were sure that "their" Negroes were not mistreated, and that as long as outside agitators could be excluded from black communities, the "status quo" could be retained. The editorial attention given to this topic by the editor of the *Chattanooga Daily Times* revealed a deep concern—even fear—of external forces in his city and state. On July 31, 1919, an editorial deplored the existence of fanatics on the race question, and urged that if any such radical movement appeared in Chattanooga, the Negroes should report it to the white leaders immediately. This article censured the Northern Methodist Church for allowing one of its ministers, a Reverend E. H. Bolden, to address even a northern rally, with the prediction that "The colored man is going to get the rights due him if it becomes necessary for a million men to die to obtain them."<sup>15</sup> This statement shocked and angered those Tennesseans who, expecting Negroes to be polite and submissive, were already sensitive to growing race tension in the nation. The Chattanooga editor expressed the opinion that the Methodist Church would do its country a service to curb such "revolutionary blather of some of its preachers and teachers." The next day, the editorial space was again devoted to local race relations. The Negroes of Chattanooga were praised for their loyalty and national spirit during the war, and the white population was charged with dual responsibilities. First, it was the white citizen's duty to protect the Negro from outside agitation. Secondly, it was the white man's responsibility to prevent his own people from starting violence and taking the law into their own hands: "Let's have no manifestation of a mob spirit here to encourage rioting and bloodshed."<sup>16</sup> On August 14, the *Chattanooga Daily Times* blasted its Negro counterpart, the *Chattanooga Defender*, for publishing articles written by Negro agitators in the North. "They are encouraging a state of mind, not alone among the men and women of their own race but among the heedless and violent whites, that will not be good for the peace and order of this city."<sup>17</sup>

The sentiment expressed by the Chattanooga paper was shared by other Tennesseans, Negro as well as white. On August 22, 1919, John R. Shillady, Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement

<sup>15</sup> *Chattanooga Daily Times*, July 31, 1919.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, August 1, 1919.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, August 14, 1919.

of Colored People, was assaulted during a recruiting mission in Austin, Texas. The assailants included Judge David J. Pickle who later was to hear Shillady's legal complaint. In an editorial in the Knoxville *Sentinel* following this attack, the writer stated he was "not without some compunction of sympathy for the sentiment of the pugilistic Judge."<sup>18</sup> The Reverend J. T. Gilmore, a Negro minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Cleveland, Tennessee, voiced his opposition to racial radicals also. He countered the urgings of Negro activists with the statement:

I believe the negro has been badly injured by unwise agitation. The time has come for us to think more and talk less. I am afraid that we complain over our condition too much. . . . We have a great many white friends, both north and south, and they are helping us in many ways, but I know they are tired of hearing us complain about our condition. . . . It is the bad element of both races that make trouble. . . .<sup>19</sup>

The agitation which disturbed white Tennesseans most was that which demanded social equality for the Negro and therefore the destruction of segregation barriers. After returning from Washington, D. C., the Davidson county judge, Lytton Hickman, struck a sensitive chord in southern race relations. He analyzed the Washington riot in July in this manner: "The trouble all started over assaults made on white women by negro men, and these came after repeated and bold statements of returned negro soldiers that they had enjoyed social equality and intimacy with the white women of France."<sup>20</sup> Most educated and forward-looking citizens saw the need to preserve law and order and the Negro's legal position within the "Jim Crow" framework. It was the fear of Negro social mobility and the proximity to "pure southern womanhood"<sup>21</sup> that made Tennessee jealous of its racial equilibrium. E. E. Miller, editor of the *Southern Agriculturist*, published in Nashville, mentioned "Jim Crowism" as a source of friction, but he put the blame for this on the radical Negroes:

Here the Negro is clearly wrong. . . . Justice demands these things [legal protection] for him; but justice does not demand for either race the privilege of crowding itself upon the other race . . . once the Negro is made to feel that the white man means to deal

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Herbert J. Seligmann, "The Press Abets the Mob," *The Nation*, CIX (October 4, 1919), 460-61.

<sup>19</sup> *Chattanooga Daily Times*, August 17, 1919.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, July 24, 1919.

<sup>21</sup> This is one of the major theses of Cash in *The Mind of the South*.

justly with him, he, too, can be made to see that there is in the social separation of the races only good for both.<sup>22</sup>

Few Tennessee white people even considered the idea of social equality for the Negroes, and most of the Negroes, themselves, either opposed the idea or were afraid of it. The "Jim Crow" railroad car had long been in use, and after the war, separate posts for white and black veterans in the American Legion of Tennessee were established.<sup>23</sup> The Tennessee Legion appeared in full agreement with an ultimatum delivered by southern leaders to the national convention stating that they would secede if it were not agreed that "the chartering of posts, including location, formation, personnel and representation in each state should be left to the decision of the state itself. . . ."<sup>24</sup>

Negro leaders who accepted social separation and advocated either self-edification or white paternalistic protection were well received by Tennessee press and civic groups. W. L. Porter, editor of the Knoxville Negro newspaper, the *East Tennessee News*, became a popular and respected spokesman for his race with the philosophy that Negro leadership needed to become more active in affairs as citizens and to work for the welfare of their own communities by driving out "vice, crime, and idleness."<sup>25</sup>

Despite the self-admonishing approaches of Negroes such as Gilmore and Porter, the racial conditions of which most Tennesseans were so confident were discriminatory enough to make many blacks unhappy. Discontent simmered beneath the relatively calm surface. Neither a comparative nor an actual decline in lynching was enough.<sup>26</sup> This act of violence was used almost exclusively against Negroes, and the educated members of the race resented *each* criminal occasion as an insult to the entire black population. When the only lynching of the year in Tennessee took place at Humboldt on October 26, the *Crisis*, the official publication of the NAACP, took full note of the occasion

<sup>22</sup> E. E. Miller, "The War and Race Feeling," *Outlook*, CXXIII (September 10, 1919), 56.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the origin of "Jim Crow" laws in Tennessee, see Stanley J. Folmsbee, "The Origin of the First 'Jim Crow' Law," *Journal of Southern History*, XV (May, 1949), 235-47; *Crisis*, XVIII (August, 1919), 207.

<sup>24</sup> Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, October 2, 1919.

<sup>25</sup> From a speech to the Blount County Negro Teachers Association on July 27, 1919, and quoted in the Chattanooga *Daily Times*, July 28, 1919.

<sup>26</sup> Georgia, for example, had had 61 reported lynchings in the previous five years as compared with only 11 in Tennessee. *Hearings Before the Committee on the Judiciary*, 47.



and denounced it with a detailed list of all other such actions in the South during the year.<sup>27</sup>

Legally, the Tennessee Negro did have extensive exercise of the ballot. In practice, however, certain very real restrictions existed. In 1890-91 the General Assembly had passed laws to make effective the clause in the state constitution requiring the payment of a poll tax as a prerequisite for voting.<sup>28</sup> This blow landed squarely on the low income Negroes and frequently made them pawns of political bosses who would pay the tax for them.<sup>29</sup> These laws were still on the books in 1919. Also, primary elections for party nominations had been legal in Tennessee since 1901 and required for most state and federal offices since 1917.<sup>30</sup> Since the statutes specified only that the voter had to be a "bona fide" member of the political party in question, and the determination of party membership was left up to the election officials, the practical result was the possibility of a white primary. There is little evidence, however, of any consistent practice of preventing registration of Negroes, and it is also significant that Tennessee did not resort to the practice in use in many other southern states, such as South Carolina and Louisiana, of disfranchising the Negro through "grandfather," "good character," and "literacy" clauses in their constitutions.

Despite the acceptance of this relative freedom with the franchise by most Tennessee Negroes, some spokesmen were not satisfied. The Reverend J. G. Robinson, an elder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and a resident of Chattanooga, wrote an open letter to President Woodrow Wilson, asking him to "help to wipe from the statute books of the south the undemocratic election laws—laws that the most cruel laws which you helped dispel in many of the semicivilized countries of Europe were heavenly as compared with those that operate against patriotic Negroes. . . ." Reverend Robinson fell into the classification of "agitator" and received numerous threatening letters from across the state and from across the South.<sup>31</sup>

White Tennesseans anticipated no trouble from their Negro population, but their traditional southern fear of black uprisings emerged

<sup>27</sup> *Crisis*, XIX (February, 1920), 185.

<sup>28</sup> Frank B. Williams, Jr., "The Poll Tax as a Suffrage Requirement in the South, 1870-1901," *Journal of Southern History*, XVIII (November 1952), 477-82.

<sup>29</sup> William D. Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis* (Baton Rouge, 1964), 256.

<sup>30</sup> *Acts of Tennessee*, 1901, pp. 54-59; *ibid.*, 1917, pp. 338-53.

<sup>31</sup> *Chattanooga Daily Times*, July 28, 1919; *Crisis*, XIX (November, 1919), 350.

coincident with the aggressive stance taken by blacks in Washington and Chicago. Civil rights activists were anathema and needed suppressing. At the same time there was the sudden and somewhat shocking realization that Negro *women*, as well as men, were about to appear at the polls. A Tennessee law of 1919 allowed women to vote in municipal and presidential elections, and newspapers began to report that black women were holding meetings at which instructions were given in voting procedures.<sup>32</sup>

## II

The one major city in Tennessee which seemed to have the best chance of averting race violence and maintaining the "status quo" within the segregation framework was Knoxville. Located in traditionally Republican East Tennessee, this city had the smallest Negro population of the four metropolitan centers in the state,<sup>33</sup> and these Negroes had found a degree of political protection within the Republican party.<sup>34</sup> The major reason for this relatively small Negro community was that middle and upper East Tennessee had never been characterized by the plantation system and cotton culture which had resulted elsewhere in large numbers of slaves before the Civil War and Negro tenants afterwards.

Both the white and Negro leadership of this city could have been classified as moderate. Mayor John E. McMillan, though one of the relatively few Democratic officials of his time in this area, has already been cited for his rejection of the Ku Klux Klan and his close communication with the Negro citizens. Further, appointments of Negroes to the police force had, for many years, given a sense of participation in municipal government.<sup>35</sup> In addition, W. L. Porter, editor of the *East Tennessee News*, had been recognized not as a Negro agitator but

<sup>32</sup> Chattanooga *Daily Times*, August 6, 1919; Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, August 23, 1919.

<sup>33</sup> United States, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920. Population*, 12 volumes (Washington, 1921), III, 970. Knoxville had a Negro population of 11,302 which accounted for 14.5% of the total city population. Memphis census figures revealed a Negro population of 37.7%; Nashville, 30.1%; and Chattanooga, 32.6%.

<sup>34</sup> This situation is revealed in correspondence of November 17, 1919, between a Memphis Republican lawyer, John W. Parley, and Knoxville State Senator John C. Houk, a state Republican leader. John C. Houk Papers (McClung Collection, Lawson McGhee Library, Knoxville, Tennessee).

<sup>35</sup> Charles W. Cansler, *Three Generations: The Story of a Colored Family of Eastern Tennessee* (Knoxville, 1939), 172. This fact was also revealed during the trial of Maurice F. Mayes. Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, October 4, 1919.

as a Negro leader who sought self-government and cooperation with the whites. In February of 1919, the Knoxville City Commissioners honored one of the Negro civic leaders while, at the same time, initiating a progressive program within the Negro community. A new Carnegie Library, the Colored Free Library, was dedicated by the City Commissioners with the following stone inscription: "This tablet is erected by the City Commissioners of Knoxville in recognition of the faithful efforts of Charles W. Cansler, who first conceived the idea of this library for his race, and who aided materially in securing it."<sup>86</sup>

Against this background of cooperation and toleration, events of Saturday, August 30, 1919, were shocking. Sunday newspaper readers across the nation encountered reports of another racial outburst, this time in Knoxville, Tennessee! The state, whose governor, only a month before, had predicted that no such occurrence was possible, was in the throes of its own racial spasm. As could have been expected, the editor of the Chattanooga *Daily Times* immediately suspected outside agitation. If "staid old Knoxville" could be struck by such violence, "There is not the slightest doubt that the colored people of Knoxville have been stirred by some unusual and apparently sinister influence. . . ."<sup>87</sup> But as the account of the riot began to unravel itself from emotional hysteria and it became evident that the rioters were whites rather than Negroes, charges of outside agitation began to subside in favor of murmurs of shame and self-concern.

The trouble began when Mrs. Bertie Lindsay, a white woman, was shot in her bedroom early Saturday morning. Her cousin, Miss Ora Smith, who had been asleep in the same bed, described the attacker as a Negro. Later, police brought a mulatto, Maurice F. Mayes, for Miss Smith to identify, which she did. (Testimony at Mayes' trial revealed that, as a deputy sheriff, the defendant had incurred the enmity of several city police officers—including those making the arrest. Evidence traced this hostility to Mayes' purported relationship with several white women.) As morning wore on, many people came to view the scene of the murder, and the Knoxville *Journal and Tribune* reported that "From early in the morning until late in the afternoon, little

<sup>86</sup> *Crisis*, XVIII (May, 1919), 36. Cansler was an outstanding Negro educator in Knox County, and his family was long active in the civic and cultural affairs of the community.

<sup>87</sup> Chattanooga *Daily Times*, September 2, 1919.

bunches of congregated men could be seen on practically every corner and near every store in that neighborhood, discussing the crime."<sup>38</sup>

Compounding the normal excitement generated by acts of violence was the nearness (September 6, 1919) of the Knoxville municipal election. The accused murderer had been actively campaigning for the re-election of Mayor McMillan, and rumors were widely circulated that Mayes was the illegitimate son of the mayor.<sup>39</sup> Sex, race mixing, and fear that the mayor might interfere on Mayes' behalf inflamed feelings already conditioned by the racial explosions reported in other parts of the nation.

Fearing trouble, Attorney-General R. A. Mynatt and Criminal Judge Thomas A. R. Nelson instructed Sheriff W. T. Cate to remove Mayes from the county jail and take him by train to Chattanooga early Saturday afternoon. "Shortly after 4 o'clock a crowd began to gather around the county jail. This grew until at 7 o'clock the streets were completely blocked and excitement was at a fever heat."<sup>40</sup> The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* on August 31, estimated the crowd at 1,500. Though delegates from the mob were allowed to search the jail to establish Mayes' absence, the crowd was not convinced. At 7:45 p.m. the first shot was fired; later the battering rams and dynamite succeeded in bursting the jail open to the mob.<sup>41</sup>

Mayes was undoubtedly the avowed target of the attack, but the attempt to seize him served as a shield for further and less "justifiable" mischief. Having determined that the prisoner was indeed absent, the mob turned its attention to the release of twelve white inmates and the consumption of the contents of the whiskey storage room. Such behavior was noted by the *Journal and Tribune* on Monday, September 1, along with the assertion that some of the mob had relatives in the jail and that others were former prisoners themselves. Factors other than race and lynchings obviously were involved. In fact, the sheriff's officials stated that one of the most interesting things about the whole affair was that the Negro section of the jail, where Mayes would have

<sup>38</sup> Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919.

<sup>39</sup> This information came from the comments of Charles G. Mynatt, a nephew of the prosecuting attorney in the Mayes trial, and Mary U. Rothrock, noted Tennessee historian. Their comments were relayed to the writer by Dr. Stanley J. Folmsbee in a letter of December 11, 1968.

<sup>40</sup> Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

been held, was not even touched and that no Negroes in the cells were released or harmed in any way. During the disturbance a deputy sheriff had called Camp Sevier, where detachments of the National Guard were stationed.

The mob soon reduced the jail and the adjoining personal residence of the sheriff to a state of virtual demolition. Destruction and vandalism became the avenue for releasing frustration and emotion inspired by mass mob psychology. Porcelain toilet bowls were broken, water pipes ripped out, phones torn off the walls, and the aroused throng, after entering the home of the sheriff, exited with his children's clothing. Later estimates placed damage to the jail and nearby property at \$50,000.

Reports came to the crowd at the jail that armed Negroes were robbing several persons at the nearby intersection of Vine Avenue and Central Avenue. This was the edge of the Negro "section" of town and a common gathering place for local Negroes on Saturday night. This news came just as a detachment of the machine gun company of the Fourth Tennessee Infantry arrived on the scene.<sup>42</sup> The soldiers "double timed" to the trouble spot and set up two machine guns at the corner of Vine and Central. Running civilians surrounded the guardsmen as the mob began to leave the jail area and move to the Negro section. The *Journal and Tribune* described the subsequent action: "The crowd rushed up Vine Avenue toward Gay Street, where they raided every hardware store in that section, removing every weapon that would fire. Pawn shops were the next to be raided and many pistols, rifles, shotguns and thousands of rounds of ammunition were taken from these places."<sup>43</sup> The armed mob then returned to Vine and Central, where some Negroes were barricaded on the upper floors of several buildings and others were milling around in the streets.

Though barricades were reported "a la Parisian," and charges of blacks were supposed to have been made into the face of machine gun emplacements, most of the shooting was wild and sporadic. Even the eye-witness account of a white druggist, Dr. Joseph E. Carty,<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> The National Guardsmen of the Fourth Tennessee Infantry, under the command of Adjutant General E. Baxter Sweeney, were encamped for training in the nearby suburb of Fountain City, now a part of Knoxville.

<sup>43</sup> *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, August 31, 1919.

<sup>44</sup> Dr. Carty was manager of the Economy Drug Company at the corner of Vine and Central Avenues.

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failed to establish which side fired upon the other first. Negro shooting was mainly by snipers, and Dr. Carty revealed that the presence of machine guns soon put the milling black crowd to flight.<sup>46</sup> Lacking anti-mob training, the guardsmen killed one of their own men in the excitement. Lieutenant James W. Payne was killed when fellow soldiers opened up on Negro snipers and caught him in the crossfire.<sup>46</sup> Only one Negro was killed during the night, and this paucity of casualties appeared to rule out the excited reports of full-scale charges found in the newspapers. With the arrival of several hundred additional soldiers Sunday morning, disorder died out and the situation was under control, despite rumors that out-of-town Negroes were preparing "to clean out the whites."<sup>47</sup>

Negroes were subjected to a considerable amount of buffeting and abuse as quiet was imposed. The mob violence had originated in the white community, among white citizens, but had buried itself in the harassment of the intimidated and helpless Negro. Every member of the black race found outside the machine gun-imposed confines of his community was thoroughly searched and questioned; the possession of any type of weapon brought his immediate arrest. Four Negroes were shot, though not fatally, by guardsmen who claimed that they resisted this investigation.<sup>48</sup> The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* described what it considered a humorous event in one of these searches. One of the guardsmen stopped a young Negro man. He removed a pack of cigarettes from the person of the "suspect," forced the man to light one of the cigarettes for him, and took the twenty cents the Negro had in his pocket, "so he could buy another pack when these were gone."<sup>49</sup> A Negro newspaper, *The Call* of Kansas City, Missouri, did not look with such humor on the searching procedures: "The indignities which colored women suffered at the hands of these soldiers would make the devil blush for shame. Low class white men took advantage of the helplessness of the colored men and began cursing and abusing them on the streets."<sup>50</sup> No search of whites was made,

<sup>46</sup> Chattanooga *Daily Times*, August 31, 1919.

<sup>48</sup> Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, September 1, 1919.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 3, 1919.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted from the October 4 issue of *The Call* of Kansas City, Missouri, by Robert T. Kerlin, *The Voice of the Negro 1919* (New York, 1920), 84.

though efforts to prevent street-corner congregation were initiated by the city police force.

By late Monday evening, September 1, 1919, General Sweeney began the withdrawal of many of the troops stationed in Knoxville, and Sheriff Cate began making arrests of individuals recognized while taking part in the riot.<sup>51</sup> Yet, after this "semblance of order was restored an exodus of the Negroes began to take place. . . . Many of these Negroes would leave only for the period of tension but many stated they would never return."<sup>52</sup>

The NAACP did not fail to take note of the activities in Knoxville. In the postwar years this organization had begun to urge a less compliant role for American blacks. Material concerning the Knoxville riot was gathered and on occasion press releases commenting on the events were made.<sup>53</sup> The NAACP was barely a decade old, but in 1919 it was gaining notoriety by its outspoken support for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill; evidence gleaned from Knoxville and the other trouble centers was important to this endeavor.<sup>54</sup> The Association was fighting violence. It did not publicize such incidents in order to "stir up" Negroes, but was trying to combat the apathy of most Americans and to obtain federal protection for vulnerable blacks like those in Knoxville.

In post-riot comments among Tennesseans, the inefficiency of local law enforcement was cited, and other sources of protection from violent outrages were sought. When a serious disturbance occurred in Omaha, Nebraska, on September 28, the editor of the *Knoxville Journal and Tribune* suggested that federal intervention was necessary. "Such things are likely to happen whenever mob violence takes the place of law. If the states are powerless to deal with such disgraces, while we believe in the right of the states to settle their own domestic affairs, the general government will have to do something."<sup>55</sup> Control by force, then, was the immediate response of Tennesseans who had sud-

<sup>51</sup> *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, September 2, 1919.

<sup>52</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 3, 1919.

<sup>53</sup> Arthur I. Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In* (Garden City, N. Y., 1966), Chapter VI, footnotes 1 through 21.

<sup>54</sup> Mary Lu Nuckols, "The NAACP and the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill: A Barometer of Emerging Negro Political Power" (unpublished master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 1963), 30ff.

<sup>55</sup> *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, October 5, 1919.

denly had their racial complacency exploded. In a speech in Nashville on October 7, Governor Roberts stated: "A condition of unrest and potential lawlessness exists in Tennessee at present. The Negro situation is serious. . . ." <sup>56</sup> The confident assurance he had held in July was notably lacking as he explained to the citizens of the state "that he wanted to see no more riots in Tennessee and that the laws of the state should be rigidly enforced." <sup>57</sup>

More basic and less emotional avenues for reform came from two sources which had sought moderation and responsibility even before the riot: the Law and Order League and the conservative Negro leadership. Almost immediately after the outbreak of hostilities, the editor of the Chattanooga *Daily Times* observed that "Conditions have nearly reached a point where an organization of peaceful and law-abiding citizens is called for in support of constituted authorities and the mastery of law." <sup>58</sup> Meeting in Nashville on September 16, the Tennessee Law and Order League issued a statement calling for the "Establishment of law and order leagues in all communities as soon as possible." <sup>59</sup> Governor Roberts seized this idea and turned it into a personal crusade. He "stumped" the entire state, proclaiming the week of November 9-16 to be "Law and Order Week" and urging its support by officials and civic organizations.

On September 27, a group of Negro leaders, representing every section of Tennessee, also assembled in Nashville. The purpose of this meeting was the formation of an organization known as the People's Co-operative League of Tennessee. The announced aim of this group was "the fostering of first, a better understanding and relation between the races. . . ." They also "emphasized the need of interracial conferences with an idea of bringing about a closer co-operation between the races and thereby remedying many irregularities that exist in our section." <sup>60</sup> In Knoxville, W. L. Porter and Charles W. Cansler again provided Negro leadership. In his newspaper, Porter expressed the opinion that "The friendly relationship between the races that has existed in our section can be attributed to the absence of just such

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, October 8, 1919.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, October 10, 1919.

<sup>58</sup> Chattanooga *Daily Times*, September 1, 1919.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, September 17, 1919.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, September 28, 1919.



deeds as has [*sic*] been committed, and the Negro citizenship is certainly desirous of retaining the same cordial feeling between the races as has always existed and that has gone so far in making our city one fit to live in."<sup>61</sup> Porter continued to suggest that an increased fight be made to eliminate the elements in the city that bred crime. He felt these were the causes of the trouble, not racial antipathy.

In a long letter to the editor of the *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, Charles W. Cansler explained how "each race is mutually dependent upon and helpful to the other." Therefore, he pled, "Let us be just to one another and willing and ready to give credit for the many good qualities which both races possess."<sup>62</sup>

As Sheriff Cate and Attorney-General Mynatt prepared cases against thirty-six men (all white) who had been charged with felonies during the riot, the Knoxville press urged strong action on the part of the court. The *Journal and Tribune* observed that "A more sickening act of insane folly was never before seen to disgrace Knoxville than was perpetrated last Saturday night and it is hoped the like of it will not ever again be witnessed." The newspaper went on to point out that "Knoxville and Knox County have the opportunity of giving the rest of the country an example of the wholesome treatment of disturbing, destructive, and savage mobs, let the opportunity be improved, for our own sake, for the sake of the country and the sake of humanity."<sup>63</sup>

On October 4, despite the lack of positive evidence against him, Maurice F. Mayes was convicted of the murder of Mrs. Bertie Lindsay and sentenced to death.<sup>64</sup> On October 14, the trial of the rioters began. The fact that the public was very much involved in this case became evident when it required eight days and 1,200 prospective jurors before the twelve men were chosen for the jury. It is significant to note that none of the civic leadership was found among the twelve; there were nine farmers, two laborers, and one clerk.<sup>65</sup> The trial concluded on

<sup>61</sup> Quoted from the *East Tennessee News* by *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, September 2, 1919. Unfortunately, no file of the *News* could be found.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, October 11, 1919.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, September 2, 1919.

<sup>64</sup> The NAACP had established a Legal Committee for the purpose of defending Negroes who they felt were victims of legal injustice in the United States. Mayes was so considered, but adequate funds were not available for his defense. Instead, "The National office called upon the other Tennessee branches to cooperate with the Knoxville Branch. More than \$600 was raised as a defense fund. In November, 1920, the Tennessee State Supreme Court remanded the case for a new trial. . . ." *Eleventh Annual Report of the National Association For the Advancement of Colored People for 1920* (New York, 1921), 20.

<sup>65</sup> *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, October 22, 1919.

October 25, when the jury freed all but five of those charged in the rioting, and these five were beneficiaries of a mistrial.

The immediate response to this decision was one of disbelief in the Negro community and in the feelings of more concerned whites. Attorney-General Mynatt stated: "There was never a more guilty set of men turned loose."<sup>66</sup> He and Judge Nelson vowed that the jury members involved in the acquittals should never be allowed to sit in judgment in Knox County again.<sup>67</sup> In a letter to the *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, a Negro, Robert W. McHaffey, voiced his opinion that

The jury must have been either prejudiced or intoxicated to render the verdict that it did. . . . The verdict of the jury is a disgrace to Knox County, and the men of which it was composed are not a bit better than the worst men in the mob. . . . I fear the jury will cause further troubles, as it will have a tendency to encourage other unlawful elements.<sup>68</sup>

The chasm between the toleration of the "responsible" white leadership and the values and fears of the common populace was obviously quite wide. No amount of editorializing and common sense reasoning could force the victory of justice; respect for the law, as such, was missing.

A close analysis of the Knoxville "race riot" in conjunction with a study of the post-riot developments cast many doubts on the validity of the assumed nature of the disturbance. The actions of the mob revealed that the initial violence was not as much "race" as it was "riot." Since none of the Negroes in the jail were molested, the motivation of those involved appeared to be derived from Mayes as an individual Negro, and not from Mayes as a representative of the Negro race. This mulatto had violated the most sacred law of a segregated society; he had managed a limited degree of social equality. Such behavior provided the emotional stimulus necessary for the development of a mob spirit in the crowd. The broad issue of "race," however, only emerged from the riot when, after running out of mischief at the jail, the mob frenzy was directed toward the previously uninvolved Negro community. It was at this time that basic sentimental, and traditional, race prejudices and fears (heightened by the activities and rumors of the summer) entered the picture, and remained very much in

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, October 26, 1919.

<sup>67</sup> Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In*, 108-09.

<sup>68</sup> *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, October 28, 1919.

evidence through the trial of the alleged rioters. Despite the clear emergence of racial prejudice, the rioting was terribly one-sided, as Negro resistance was short-lived, and passive submission prevailed.

Statements from several prominent Knoxvilleians showed a desire to dismiss the riot as mere vandalism. State Senator John C. Houk, in an interview with the Chattanooga *Daily Times*, blamed excited newspaper reporting with doing the city a great injustice. "It was merely a mob," said Senator Houk, "It was a white mob engaged during a considerable part of the afternoon and evening in disturbing the peace, destroying public property. . . . That mob would have been equally as determined to take a white man from the jail and lynch him. . . ."<sup>69</sup> At the Law and Order League meeting in Nashville on October 14, Dr. H. V. Carson, pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Knoxville, criticized reports of the riot for being exaggerated. As reported in the press,

He declared there was not a single responsible man in the mob which caused the disturbance, and that those who did take part in the riot went to the jail, not so much for the purpose of lynching the negro, as to get at the booze stored in the jail and to release their friends who were confined there.<sup>70</sup>

It would have been easy to accept these explanations had the riot stopped at the jail. The role of simple "hoodlumism," however, does not explain the indignities and discriminations heaped upon the black community after the lynch fever had abated. Racial prejudice was evident in the attack on the Negro district, the one-sided and disgraceful searching procedures, and the opinions of the juries called to enforce the law. These discriminatory and prejudiced actions came not so much from the common explanation of race hatred as from the innate feeling of superiority bred into the whites of the entire nation by years of racial separation.

Violence and rumors of violence were widespread during "the Red Summer" of 1919.<sup>71</sup> The national press, though stressing tolerance and order in its editorials, was responsible for wide dissemination of inflammatory reports. While Tennesseans boasted of their racial tran-

<sup>69</sup> Chattanooga *Daily Times*, September 2, 1919. He cited a white lynching.

<sup>70</sup> Knoxville *Journal and Tribune*, October 15, 1919.

<sup>71</sup> It is described as "the Red Summer" by James Weldon Johnson in his autobiography, *Along This Way* (New York, 1945), 341. The description referred to the violence and bloodshed of which Knoxville was a part.

quility, minds conditioned by decades of legal discrimination were being aggravated by the tensions of fear. Open racial conflict could have occurred in Memphis, Nashville, or Chattanooga. Ironically, it emerged in the most unexpected city—Knoxville. That this community, with its relatively small Negro population and its active bi-racial leadership, should experience racial violence indicated the seriousness of Tennessee's unrecognized race problems. The neglected factor in the analyses of pre-Knoxville optimists was the inbred awareness and consciousness of race difference. When the spark of violence touched this often latent prejudice, surface race relations suffered. Tennessee had been one of the most successful states in shielding her "sparks of violence," but she had not removed or controlled the combustible forces within her citizenship.