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History 299

### Racial Cleansings Against African Americans in the Early 1900s: Forsyth County, Georgia

This paper focuses on the rising racial tensions in Georgia that led to a racial cleansing against African Americans in Forsyth County in 1912. Other racial cleansings occurred throughout the South in towns where “too many” black people lived. White people were threatened by African Americans especially after claims of sexual assaults against white women “came to light”. The lynching of multiple black men in Georgia including Sam Hose and Rob Edwards helped raise tensions between white people and African Americans, which ultimately led to the racial cleansing. The Atlanta Race “Riot” of 1906 also made black and white people further distrust each other. The racial cleansing of Forsyth County was celebrated by white people all over the South, because racial cleansings were deemed as a way to rid criminals from your community. White people were scared of having black people become successful because they were concerned about their own status. White people were able to massacre African Americans and destroy black communities because ultimately American society still did not view them as people, even decades after slavery was abolished.

Racial tensions between African Americans and white Americans rose substantially during the early 1900s, partially because African Americans were no longer controlled by slavery. African Americans were seen as imminent threats to the life and society that white people loved and expected. Lynchings were extremely common during the 1900s, which showcased that African Americans were greatly oppressed. The extreme racial violence that occurred towards African Americans in Georgia in the late 1800s and early 1900s is often

overlooked by historians and American society. Racial cleansings and race riots were often started by white people however the common practice was to blame the African Americans, and white people could do so because they were the majority and had more power. Racial cleansings during the Jim Crow Era of the South caused whole communities of African Americans to vacate lands and never return. In modern day society many of the towns and counties that were “cleansed” are still predominantly white today. Throughout America, racial cleansings and lynching violence occurred wherever large amounts of African Americans resided.

The racial violence that occurred in Forsyth County, Georgia was not atypical. Wilmington, North Carolina had a large and influential black population and some of the black elite were able to serve in the city’s government, which made white people believe that their status was being threatened. On November 10, 1898 a white mob burned down the headquarters of the only daily African American newspaper, killed at least nine African Americans, drove African Americans from their homes, and overthrew the biracial city government.<sup>1</sup> In Pierce City in 1901, a racial cleansing began when two black men were lynched for the murder accusation of Gisele Wild, a white woman, even though there was no evidence to prove that they committed such an act.<sup>2</sup> In Harrison, Arkansas on October 2, 1905 a racial cleansing started when two black men, Dan and Rabbit, were taken from jail by a white mob were whipped and were told to leave. The mob whipped many black people and warned the black people to leave that night, and most of them did. The black people who did remain were subjected to extreme violence until they

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<sup>1</sup> Melton McLaurin, “Commemorating Wilmington’s Racial Violence of 1898: From Individual to Collective Memory,” *Southern Cultures* 6:4 (2000): 35.

<sup>2</sup> Kimberly, Harper, *White Man’s Heaven: The Lynching and Expulsion of Blacks in the Southern Ozarks, 1894-1909* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2010), 22-25.

left.<sup>3</sup> Racial cleansings occurred throughout the South and stopped successful black communities from growing and gaining power.

Between 1901 and 1923 racial cleansings occurred in counties in Missouri, Kentucky, Arkansas, Georgia, Tennessee, Indiana, and North Carolina.<sup>4</sup> Many of these counties had a large influx of African Americans searching for work. The rising black population in predominantly white counties made the clear racial lines begin to blur, but white people sought to redefine those lines.<sup>5</sup> Wherever a large amount of African Americans moved, racial violence and racial cleansings occurred as a result. After the racial cleansing and violence in Pierce City in 1901, many black residents moved to Joplin and Springfield. However, racial cleansings occurred in Joplin in 1903 and in Springfield in 1906.<sup>6</sup> It was not safe for a large population of African Americans to try to find work, make a home for their families, or try to make a community in any Southern town. Black people were seen as a threat to white society by solely existing as people instead of property. In Georgia, white people were used to a society where black people could be controlled. So, when black people began to make steady lives for themselves and make communities white people retaliated with violence. Two events in Georgia significantly rose racial tensions and helped make the racial cleansing of Forsyth County a reality: the lynching of Sam Hose and the Atlanta Race “Riot” of 1906.

Sam Hose was a black laborer in Georgia who worked for a planter named Alfred Cranford. In early April 1899, Hose and Cranford had an altercation which led to Cranford drawing his pistol and threatening to kill Hose, Hose in response flung an ax in self defense

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 241-243.

<sup>4</sup> Elliot, Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 15-231.

<sup>5</sup> Harper, *White Man's Heaven*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 30.

which killed Cranford instantly. Newspapers claimed that Cranford was eating dinner when Hose put an ax in his head, and then raped Mrs. Cranford in front of her husband's corpse but there is no evidence to prove these accounts.<sup>7</sup> The newspapers sensationalized this story and it became a press phenomenon throughout America. The fact that a black man could "act" in such a brutal way further pushed the ideal that black men could not be trusted around "pure" white women, which would be one of the main ideologies behind the racial cleansing of Forsyth County. African Americans were villainized constantly by white people and by newspapers that claimed that they were thieves, rapists, murderers, and ultimately threats. Hose suffered greatly for his alleged "crimes" and his extremely violent murder was meant to send a message to other African Americans.

Sam Hose's lynching was extraordinarily brutal and showcased how white people in the Jim Crow South did not view African Americans as people. Two thousand men and women came to watch the lynching of Sam Hose on April 23, 1899. He was stripped naked, chained to a tree, had his ears, fingers, and genitals cut off, then he was set on fire. The flames were extinguished so that the mob could tie him up again and reset him on fire. On a tree trunk near the scene of the Sam Hose lynching was a plaque that stated "We Must Protect Our Southern Women".<sup>8</sup> The crowd members were so proud of what they've done that they defouled Hose's corpse. Pieces of his heart and liver were removed and his bones were crushed into small pieces and sold as souvenirs, people were clamoring to buy pieces of a man that they just killed with no remorse or empathy.<sup>9</sup> White southerners became self-enflamed by the accusation that Sam Hose

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<sup>7</sup> Leon, Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999) 280.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

murdered Mr. Cranford and raped Mrs. Cranford, which allowed them to act with inhuman levels of violence and feel no remorse.

The theme of having to protect white southern women from dangerous black men is consistent with instances of racial violence, including the Forsyth County racial cleansing. In 1900, in a town near Forsyth County a black man named Sam Robin was publicly hanged by a white mob. Sam Robin was accused of assaulting a white woman, and because of this unproved accusation he was killed.<sup>10</sup> White people in the South became extremely frightened by their black neighbors, and white people used the “attacks” against white women as a scapegoat to express their hatred. White people tried to use science to prove that African American men couldn’t sexually control themselves around “virginal” white women.

Darwinism and phrenology were used to “explain” why African Americans were “less evolved” and more “perverse” than white people. It was believed that slavery as an institution helped control the wives of African Americans. White southerners believed that the extermination of slavery was to blame for African American men attacking white women, because free African American men could go back to their “savage” ways. White southerners believed that slavery allowed them to take on a “paternal” role towards African Americans which stopped them from going “backwards” in evolution.<sup>11</sup> The accusations that African American men attacked white women was also used as justification for the Atlanta Race “Riot” of 1906 as well as the Forsyth County racial cleansing.

The Atlanta Race “Riot” of 1906 is a perfect example of how white people in Georgia saw growing African American communities as a menace that must be extinguished. The term

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<sup>10</sup> “Crowd Sees Negro Hanged in Georgia,” *New York Times*, 2 September 1900.

<sup>11</sup> John, Howard, *Concentration Camps on the Home Front: Japanese Americans in the House of Jim Crow* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 46.

“race riot” is somewhat antiquated, because it suggests that the violence was equally started and done by two groups of races. In reality such “race riots” were massacres towards African Americans. Before the Atlanta Race “Riot” the black population in Atlanta skyrocketed from approximately 9,000 in 1880 to 35,000 by 1900.<sup>12</sup> In Georgia 1902, racial tensions were seen as fairly calm as long as black people fit into what white people thought they should be. The black elite were in charge of making the “bad negroes”, who rebelled against their status, calm and orderly.<sup>13</sup> Not being able to “control” young African Americans, who weren’t raised in slavery so therefore were less fearful, made white people scared so they “fought back” by abusing African Americans. The narrative that surrounded the Atlanta Race “Riot” was that white people had no choice but to act. “Their” women were being terrorized by people of color, and “their” neighborhoods and communities were no longer safe. The only way that white communities could be safe again was if the growing black community was put back into submission.

The rising racial tensions came to a head in 1906 when African American men began “assaulting” white women in great numbers. The Madison Daily Leader claimed that the race riot was a direct effect of the assaults on white women from black men and that white men felt the need to protect their wives and daughters from black men.<sup>14</sup> So thousands of white men formed a mob and began to destroy black owned businesses and assault black people. The mob attacked streetcars and assaulted women, who they ironically claimed needed to be protected, and men. Some black men were instantly attacked by the mob and hanged. The mob dispersed around 2 A.M. because of heavy rain, then the militia gained control. Estimates of how many

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<sup>12</sup> Clifford Kuhn and Gregory Mixon, “Atlanta Race Riot of 1906” <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/atlanta-race-riot-of-1906/>, accessed 14 October 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory Mixon, “Good Negro-Bad Negro: The Dynamics of Race and Class in Atlanta During the Era of the 1906 Riot,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81:3 (1997): 593-594.

<sup>14</sup> “White Women Terrorized,” *The Madison Daily Leader*, 25 September 1906.

African Americans died range from 25 to 50, however the true number will never be known.<sup>15</sup> After the Atlanta Race “Riot” of 1906, businesses fired their black workers and clamored to replace them with white people.<sup>16</sup> Black men, women, and children were abused by the mob, and white people felt justified in their cause. The Atlanta Race “Riot” was a “practice run” of the Forsyth County racial cleansing, because the white citizens of Atlanta tried to make all of the African Americans leave “their” town by not giving them jobs and by physically abusing them.

The idea that African American men were rapists and sexual attackers was rampant during the early 1900s and was one of the “causes” of the Forsyth County racial cleansing. In Forsyth County Georgia, Ellen Grice reported waking up to a black man in her bed.<sup>17</sup> This story caused the white men of Forsyth County to form a mob in search for Grice’s attacker. The white men jailed Toney Howell, Isaiah Pirkle, Joe Rogers, Fate Chester, and Johnny Bates for the attack on Ellen Grice.<sup>18</sup> Stories such as this one are extremely common during the early 1900s. The evidence against the men was weak and later all charges against them were dropped.<sup>19</sup> Accused people of color often did not have trials and were commonly lynched by white mobs. The hatred that white mobs in the South showcased towards African Americans meant that they would be violent towards any African American.

A black preacher named Grant Smith was severely beaten by a white mob in Forsyth County. The beating was considered to be justified because Smith made insulting remarks to white women. The Laclede Blade newspaper article fails to mention that the black minister was beaten because it was believed that he said something unbecoming about Ellen Grice and her

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<sup>15</sup> “Atlanta Race Riot 1906.”

<sup>16</sup> “Troops in Control,” *The Madison Daily Leader*, 25 September 1906.

<sup>17</sup> Patrick, Phillips, *Blood at the Root* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Elliot, Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 126.

alleged assault.<sup>20</sup> According to *The Laclede Blade*, black people threatened to dynamite the whole town if a single black person was lynched.<sup>21</sup> After troops arrived the racial violence became quiet and tensions for a short period of time were seen as “swept under the rug”. Racial tensions and violence continued to simmer during the early 1900s in Georgia because white people remembered the glory days of slavery, whereas African Americans had to constantly fight for their basic freedoms. The “assault” of Ellen Grice and the beating of Grant Smith raised racial tensions substantially, but the catalyst for the racial cleansing in 1912 was the assault and murder of Mae Crow.

Mae Crow was found in the woods fatally injured in Forsyth County on September 9, 1912.<sup>22</sup> She was carried home and regained consciousness long enough to state that her attacker was Ernest Knox.<sup>23</sup> Her death was blamed on seven black men: Ernest Knox, Rob Edwards, Oscar Daniel, Toney Howell, Isaiah Pirkle, and Edward Collins. Jane Daniel, wife of Rob Edwards, was also arrested in connection to the murder of Mae Crow.<sup>24</sup> Knox, Edwards, Daniel, and Howell were charged with rape and murder. Ed Collins and Isaiah Pirkle were held as witnesses, and Jane Daniel was charged with an accessory crime.<sup>25</sup> Newspapers claimed that Ernest Knox admitted to attacking her, however they failed to mention that his confession came from a moment of duress during a mock lynching.<sup>26</sup> The men accused were already seen as guilty, even though there was no evidence to prove so.

None of the men who were accused were able to have a fair trial. On September 10, 1912 white men formed a mob and took Rob Edwards from the jail. The mob publicly lynched Rob

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> “Troops to Prevent Race Riot,” *The Laclede Blade*, 13 September 1912.

<sup>22</sup> “Cumming GA. Girl, Throat Cut, Found in Woods,” *Atlanta Georgian*, 9 September 1912.

<sup>23</sup> Elliot, Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 127.

<sup>24</sup> Patrick, Phillips, *Blood at the Root*, 103.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 38.

Edwards before he could have a trial conducted by the Blue Ridge Circuit Court. People were clamoring to see the lynching and they wanted to injure Rob Edwards.<sup>27</sup> The racial tensions were extremely high on September 13, 1912, during the trials of Ernest Knox, Oscar Daniel, Ed Collins, Jane Daniel, Isaiah Pirkle, and Toney Howell. Governor Brown declared martial law in Forsyth County to try to keep order.<sup>28</sup> Two companies of state troops were rushed to Forsyth County, in order to decline racial tensions. All of the trials that were conducted had an all white jury. Ernest Knox and Oscar Daniel, were tried and convicted for the assault of Mae Crow, and were sentenced to death by hanging. A great crowd came to watch them die. Jane Daniel, Isaiah Pirkle, and Ed Collins were free to go. Toney Howell remained in prison because of his connection to the Ellen Grice case.<sup>29</sup> The violence that occurred to Rob Edwards was common in the South where mob violence was viewed as justice. White men believed that the violence that they inflicted on African Americans was morally right, and often groups of them formed vigilante groups.

Emboldened white men created a group called the “Night Riders” whose main goal was to make all black people leave Forsyth County. White people sought ways to maintain superiority over African Americans. To keep African Americans under control white people would lynch and persecute black communities. The “Night Riders” terrorized black neighborhoods and burned down black churches. The “Night Riders” claimed that they formed in direct response to the sexual assaults occurring to white women from black men.<sup>30</sup> Their sole purpose was to make all black people leave Forsyth County and never return, and they would turn to violent methods in order to achieve their goal. The bands of mounted men rode through

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 89-93.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 102-107.

<sup>30</sup> “Georgia in Terror of Night Riders,” *New York Times*, 26 December 1912.

the county at night and left notices on the doors of black families telling them to leave. The “Night Riders” never directly stated who they were, but they were a large group that assaulted black families with impunity. They demanded immediate obedience from black people, and many times they stated that black people had to leave immediately with just the items they had with them.<sup>31</sup> If black people did not leave fast enough, the white vigilantes would destroy their houses. The “Night Riders” were desperate to make black people leave their community and they would threaten anyone to do so.

The “Night Riders” were so determined to eliminate black people from their town that they started to threaten white planters who were employing black people.<sup>32</sup> A group of white men sent a petition to Governor Brown to try to control the racial tensions and the “Night Riders”. The “Night Riders” and the people in Forsyth County who supported their cause were successful in their efforts. Due to the violence of the “Night Riders” the black population of Forsyth County vanished.<sup>33</sup> Before the lynching of Rob Edwards, Forsyth County’s black population was about 1,100 people, however by 1920 only 30 black people remained and by 1930 only 17 black residents remained.<sup>34</sup> Forsyth County has remained predominantly white, partially because some of the county’s racist ideology has persisted in the minds of its citizens. Violence towards African Americans was seen as a positive experience by white southerners because it protected them from their “heathen” neighbors.

White Southerners viewed racial cleansings as a necessary precaution against the evils of black people, specifically men, who could no longer be controlled. Black people were seen as

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<sup>31</sup> Elliot, Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 129.

<sup>32</sup> “Georgia in Terror of Night Riders,”.

<sup>33</sup> Elliot, Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 134.

<sup>34</sup> Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, “Racial Violence and Black Migration in the American South, 1910 to 1930,” *American Sociological Review* 57:1 (1992): 106.

non-human by many people during the early 1900s, because just a couple of decades before black people were property. The prominent ideals of a prosperous society are hard to overcome, even if those ideals are extremely racist and harmful. Between 1882 and 1910, 1,893 black people died because of the violence of white mobs.<sup>35</sup> White people could perform inhumane acts to black people and feel no remorse, because they did not view them as people. The need to control black people during the slave system in the 1800s was seen as normal and necessary, so Jim Crow laws and racial cleansings were celebrated by many white Southerners.

Racial cleansings became especially prevalent in the South because the ideals of slavery were still fresh in the minds of white people and were romanticized. White people still remembered the days when they had ultimate control over black people. The younger generation of white southerners grew up on stories of the glory days of the South when slavery existed. Having black people be freed destroyed the ideal society of the South and white people felt the need to retaliate by performing racial cleansings. Many white people believed that black people could no longer be controlled and that they posed an imminent threat to their safety, so they believed that the best way to keep themselves safe was to drive all black people out of town. Due to the prevalent racial violence, African Americans often had to keep moving either on a small scale to other southern towns or they made a drastic move and went north.<sup>36</sup> Many times a white mob would lynch an African American as a warning for other African Americans in town. African Americans would frequently see a lynching occur and then many would leave town in search of better job opportunities or to hopefully find a place where racial violence would be less prevalent.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 106.

White people acted against African Americans with such violence because they were scared and filled with learned hatred. Seeing black people start to form successful communities made southern whites yearn for the days of slavery when they could count on someone being lower than them in status. African Americans hoped, by showing that they can be successful, that white people would see beyond racial lines. However, instead white people sought to redefine African Americans rightful “place”.<sup>38</sup> White people were taught to view African Americans as property not people, and when that is your mindset you can rationalize even the most horrific of behaviors. The racial violence that occurred was because white people were deathly afraid that black people would rise up against them. However, this belief is interesting because many white people also believed that slavery was a good thing for the white and black race. They saw slavery was a way to protect African Americans from their animalistic ways. All of the cases of racial violence that were aforementioned occurred because white men were afraid that “their” women would be assaulted, like they have assaulted black women for decades without consequence.

All of the instances of racial violence that were discussed and the racial cleansings that occurred in the South seem to stem from a worry about white southern women being attacked and sexually abused by black men. The Sam Hose lynching, the Atlanta Race “Riot” of 1906, the Rob Edwards lynching, and the Forsyth County racial cleansing all used black men attacking a white woman as a scapegoat to torture and kill black people. Southern white women were seen as untouchable and truly pure, so having an African American “sully” them was seen as unacceptable and was used as an outlet for people to express their hate.

African Americans still feel the repercussions of the beliefs that were held and the instances of racial violence that occurred in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Many white people

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<sup>38</sup> Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Gilmore: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

believe that black people are more likely to be criminals and that they make neighborhoods and towns unsafe places to live. African Americans have to continually fight against oppression, especially in places where racism is celebrated such as Forsyth County. Some white people are still extremely afraid of black men, which is shown in cases of police brutality. The idea that black men are a threat was prevalent during the Forsyth County racial cleansing and continues to be prevalent today.

The Forsyth County racial cleansing of 1912 occurred because white people started to see African Americans form a community, and saw it as a threat. In Georgia the lynching of Sam Hose, the Atlanta Race “Riot” of 1906, the murder of Mae Crow, and the lynching of Rob Edwards raised the racial tensions substantially which accounted for the Forsyth County racial cleansing. White mobs and white vigilantes could take law into their own hands and perform heinous acts towards African Americans without punishment and without being ostracized. The many counties and towns that were racially cleansed continue to have an extremely small African American population today. The people in the towns that were racially cleansed, including Forsyth County, continue to hold some racist ideals because their ancestors participated in racially targeted acts and taught their children the same hate towards others. The idea of “us versus them” still persists today even though that philosophy historically allowed people to perform inhumane acts towards one another.

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