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Otherwise, You Will Have to Suffer the Consequences:
The Racial Cleansing of Catcher, Arkansas

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in History

by

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This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

Following the brutal murder of a young white woman in late 1923, the rural town of Catcher, Arkansas divided along racial lines. Rumors that the woman had been raped and murdered by three Black men angered a portion of the white community who formed a 500-person mob to punish the accused. After an unsuccessful attempt at lynching the men, a small portion of this mob turned its attention to the remaining Black citizens still residing around Catcher. Anonymous notices were posted at several locations throughout the community threatening Black citizens to leave or suffer the consequences. Eleven men armed themselves inside a building, refusing to give in to these warnings. Only after the National Guard was called in did the men finally throw down their guns. When the dust finally settled in Catcher, one Black man was dead, fifteen Black men were in jail, and around three hundred Black citizens had fled the region with nothing but the clothes on their back.

This work reviews exactly what occurred in Catcher, Arkansas in late 1923. Going beyond that, though, it examines how this small town reflects much larger trends occurring inside Arkansas and the rest of the Jim Crow South in the early twentieth century. This racial cleansing provides an excellent case study to understand how southern communities could drive out undesired Black citizens through a combination of anonymous threats, extrajudicial violence, and legal means. All of this helped accomplish the overall goal of ‘cleansing’ the community of Black members while also allowing white members to seize lucrative land and mineral rights from Black citizens who had legally held claim to the area for decades. Examining this history helps cast a fleeting light on an otherwise hidden history and looks to understand why that history has been intentionally forgotten in these areas to this day.

Acknowledgements

Writing a work like this is not possible without the help of others. Wanda Gray sent me the entirety of her research on Catcher and provided a sounding board as I continued to unearth new sources. Guy Lancaster, Moira Bryant, and Tonia Holleman – as authorities on Catcher – were likewise always available for consultation. Linda Griffith, a relative of Effie Latimer, provided most of the details about her life as well as many of the pictures in the work. M.C. Richardson, a descendant of the Black community of Catcher, invited me onto his radio show to discuss the incident with other living descendants. Many of the relationships I gained for this work were only possible through him. The descendants interviewed for this work candidly discussed their families' experiences only asking in return that I tell the whole story. I hope I have fulfilled my end of the agreement.

Dr. Jeannie Whayne worked with me closely on this entire work, providing constant feedback and always inviting me to her office when I was stuck or needed encouragement. Her patience, kindness, and direction through my entire stay in the doctorate program provided more to this work than can be stated in a mere sentence. My other committee members, Dr. Michael Pierce and Dr. Patrick Williams, challenged me to think about this topic in different ways and I was fortunate to have their guidance (and detailed edits) while completing the work.

Most of all, I am indebted to my family. My beautiful wife, Shelby, helped read the early drafts of this work even while she herself was finishing law school, passing the bar, and having our first child. Her tolerance of living all these years with a grad student is truly remarkable. My mother, brother, and sister, also sacrificed in various ways. My mom, in particular, helped watch our newborn and always provided reassurance - or a snack - when either was needed. I am extremely fortunate to have such a selfless family – this work is dedicated to them.

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Introduction

Around 2:30 p.m. on December 28, 1923, a neighbor found Effie Latimer barely breathing in a pool of her own blood. A nearby doctor rushed to the scene to administer medical aid but found there was little he could do to save the twenty-five-year-old white woman who had been wounded at close range from a shotgun blast. As Latimer took her dying breaths, she allegedly regained consciousness for just long enough to name her killer stating, "Son Bettis shot me."¹ William Son Bettis, a local Black farmer, denied the accusation claiming he was picking cotton at the time, but was nevertheless taken into custody alongside Spurgeon Rucks and fourteen-year-old John Henry Clay. A mob of around 500 white citizens living in and around Catcher, Arkansas (in southcentral Crawford County) attempted to lynch Bettis and Rucks in retribution for the murder.² Irritated at their inability to do so, a small group of men from this larger mob resorted to violence against the rest of the Black population still living in Catcher. Public notices were put up the next day threatening all Black citizens to leave the region or "suffer the consequences."³

Over the next forty-eight hours, violence was used by this small segment of the white community in an attempt to forcefully expel the entirety of the Black citizens living in and around Catcher – a group that comprised nearly thirty percent of the town's population.⁴ Eleven

¹ "Brutal Black Murderers on Trial for Most Inhuman Act: Mob Violence No Longer Feared" *Van Buren Press Argus*, January 04, 1924, p. 1.

² The mob never attempted to lynch John Henry Clay. The size of this mob is corroborated in several places, always saying around 500. "Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners: Officers Hurry From Van Buren with Three Accused of Murder," *Arkansas Gazette* special from Van Buren, December 30, 1923, p. 1; "Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest – Machine Gunners Called," *Arkansas Gazette*, December 31, 1923, p. 1; "Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites," *Van Buren Press Argus*, January 18, 1924, p. 1.

³ The wording in these notices was provided by Gus Richardson as evidence his trial needed to be moved out of Crawford County. "Motion for New Trial," *Arkansas v. Richardson, et al.*, Logan County Circuit Court Northern District Case No. 131, April 21, 1924. Copies of this were found at the Logan County Circuit Clerk's Office in Paris, Arkansas. Scanned copies were provided to me by a clerk there.

⁴ There were around 1,100 citizens living in Catcher, Arkansas according to the 1920 census. Roughly 800 were white and 300 were Black. The mob of 500 would be made up of a lot of citizens from Van Buren and even some from Fort Smith, it is unknown exactly how many came from Catcher. "Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners," p.

Black men barricaded themselves inside the log cabin of Charles Shelton, refusing to yield to such demands.⁵ In response, Governor Thomas McRae authorized the National Guard in neighboring Franklin County to mobilize and put down this potential insurrection. Only after the group of white citizens and deputized guardsmen surrounded the cabin and pointed a state-of-the-art machine gun at the front door did the eleven men finally surrender. When the dust finally settled in Catcher on Monday, December 31, one Black man was dead, fifteen Black men were in jail, and many of the buildings and landmarks of the Black community had been destroyed.⁶ The small town of Catcher - which had held a population of around three hundred Black citizens before the murder - held almost none by the 1930 census.⁷ These Black families had little choice but to flee the county with nothing but the clothes on their back – with many leaving behind their mortgaged properties. Of the sixty-three Black landowners living around Catcher, only four – Earnest Richardson, Thomas Richardson, Silas Ricks, and the family of Charles Rucks - retained

1. The small group of white citizens that would lead the violence is also difficult to know accurately but around a dozen men are discussed as interrogating Rucks and Clay. “State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, January 4, 1924, p. 1.

⁵ This log cabin was owned by Charlie Shelton – one of the eleven men charged with nightriding. The building was used for several purposes by the Black community including as a schoolhouse. This is described in *Richardson v. Arkansas*, Supreme Court of Arkansas, (Case No. 139), September 29, 1924, p. 929. M. C. Richardson remembered his father noting that Shelton owned the building as well. Author interview with M. C. Richardson (Grandson of Pleasant Richardson), October 9, 2020. Transcript in author’s possession.

⁶ Charles Rucks was killed Sunday, December 30. The fifteen Black men in jail included the eleven charged with nightriding, the three accused of murder, and one with transporting alcohol. “Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites,” p. 1; St. Paul’s cemetery, the Black burial ground of Catcher, was ransacked by some members of the white community. Some descendants of the Black community I have interviewed with such as M. C. Richardson, also recall their family telling stories of houses being burned as they fled. Author interview with M. C. Richardson; Moira Bryant (descendant of white community member Thell Daugherty) who I have talked with in detail about this believes the stories of fire being used to be ahistorical. Her family owns land surrounding St. Paul’s Cemetery. She does confirm, however, that the graveyard was ransacked. Author email correspondence with Moira Bryant, March 15, 2021.

⁷ A complete list of the Black citizens living in and around Catcher in 1920 can be found in the appendix. U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*. Digital copies of census found on ancestry.com. These numbers were then compared to the list of Black citizens living in and around Catcher in 1930. Only a few black families (often servants to white families) were listed on the census seven years later. U.S. Census Bureau, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930 – Population Schedule*.

their property in Catcher by 1932.⁸ Even then, these families reported Fort Smith as their primary place of residence in the 1930 census.⁹

The racial cleansing of Catcher, despite these disturbing outcomes, has been largely overlooked by historians of race in Arkansas. Wanda Gray established many of the facts about the hours and days after Effie Latimer's murder in a 2009 entry for the *Encyclopedia of Arkansas* but did not attempt to place the incident within the larger racial context of Arkansas and the Jim Crow South of the early twentieth century.¹⁰ Guy Lancaster, an expert on racial violence in the state, helped fill this void with several articles and chapters that used Gray's research to explore racial cleansing in the Arkansas River Valley.¹¹ While skillfully contextualizing Gray's research, his work added little to the existing knowledge of the incident itself. Since Gray's initial investigation over a decade ago, little academic research has been done to better examine and

⁸ A complete list of the Black landowners living around Catcher can be found in the appendix. Of the other Black landowners in 1923, none retained their land in 1932. In the 1932 records, some of the names of Black citizens are crossed out in pencil and replaced by names of white citizens. Thomas and Robert Richardson, for instance, have their names crossed through in multiple places and replaced by B. E. Snead – around 80 acres each. The land was bought up by a large number of white citizens, but the largest amounts were bought by G. T. Cazort, David Creekmore, and Sue Jean Creekmore. Interestingly, W. A. Bushmiaer (a sheriff) and B. L. Bennett (the doctor from Kibler) saw their land amounts nearly double as well. These statistics were compiled by comparing the land records of Crawford County in 1923 and 1932 for the section, township, and range around Catcher. A detailed explanation of how these numbers were figured is cited with the appendix item. "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1923," Copy found in Crawford County Courthouse, p. 5-15; "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1932," p. 56-65. Copies of these records were scanned for me by Kristen Edwards, a court administrator for the Crawford County Circuit Clerk's Office.

⁹ Charles Rucks would die in the 1923 violence, but his family would hold onto the land until the late 1930s. Rucks family as well as the families of the other three landowners in Catcher lived in Fort Smith in 1930. U.S. Census Bureau, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930 – Population Schedule*. Digital Copy found online using ancestry.com.

¹⁰ Wanda Gray, "The Catcher Race Riot of 1923," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, 2009. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/catcher-race-riot-of-1923-5885/>

¹¹ Guy Lancaster, "Nightriding and Racial Cleansing in the Arkansas River Valley," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 72 (2013): 260–64; Guy Lancaster, *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas, 1883–1924: Politics, Land, Labor, and Criminality* (Washington D.C.: Lexington Books, 2014), 103-110; Guy Lancaster, "...or Suffer the Consequences of Staying": Terror and Racial Cleansing in Arkansas, *Historicizing Fear: Ignorance, Vilification, and Othering*, eds. Travis Boyce and Winsome M. Chunnu (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2019), 95-97; Guy Lancaster, "Night Riding Must Not Be Tolerated," in *Race, Labor, and Violence in the Delta*, edited by Michael Pierce and Calvin White (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2022), 47-48.

understand this critical chapter in Arkansas's racial history.¹² By examining new sources associated with this incident, this work looks to help determine exactly what occurred in Catcher, Arkansas in the last week of December 1923.

Going beyond that, though, this investigation hopes to reveal how this small town reflects much larger trends occurring inside Arkansas and the rest of the Jim Crow South during this same period. Catcher provides an excellent case study to understand how a small portion of a rural white community could drive out undesired Blacks through a combination of anonymous threats, extrajudicial violence, and legal means. In this single incident there was: a threatening notice telling Blacks to leave; outright violence and a murder after some chose not to do so; two 'southern quick trials' resulting in immediate death penalty verdicts; a life sentence for a fourteen-year-old; and ironic nightriding accusations brought against the eleven Black men who armed themselves against the very crime they were ultimately charged with. All of this helped accomplish the overall goal of 'cleansing' the community of Black members while also allowing some white members to seize lucrative land and mineral rights from Black citizens who had legally held claim to the area for years.

¹² Some of the best research done on Catcher has been newspaper and radio journalists studying the incident such as: Matt Quinn, "KKFI-FM 90.1 Airs Special Radio Show 'Civil Rights and the Story of the 1923 Catcher, Arkansas Race Incident,'" KKFI, July 9, 2010. <https://kkfi.org/kkfi-fm-90-1-air-special-radio-show-civil-rights-and-the-story-of-the-1923-catcher-arkansas-race-incident-during-the-101st-naacp-convention/>; Moira Bryant "Healing Catcher: An Oral History of Murder and Racism," unpublished undergraduate paper, University of Arkansas at Fort Smith, 2010; Guy Lancaster, "Remembering Catcher, Ark: 90 Years after the Race Riot." *Arkansas Times*, November 21, 2013. <https://arktimes.com/news/arkansas-reporter/2013/11/21/remembering-catcher-ark-90-years-after-the-race-riot/>; Jacqueline Froelich, "The Ethnic Cleansing of Catcher, Arkansas," *Ozarks at Large*, KUAF 91.3 National Public Radio Broadcast, December 8, 2013. <https://www.kuaf.com/ozarks-at-large-stories/2013-12-08/the-racial-cleansing-of-catcher-arkansas>; M. C. Richardson, "1923 Catcher, Arkansas Cold Case (Encore), *Guess Who's Coming to Kansas City*, January 18, 2014. <https://kkfi.org/program-episodes/1923-catcher-arkansas-cold-case-encore/>; Ty Thompson, "A 1923 Race Riot in the Community of Catcher, Arkansas Led to an Exodus of Black Families," *Southwest Times Record*, June 18, 2021. <https://www.swtimes.com/story/news/2021/06/18/1923-race-riot-catcher-arkansas-led-exodus-black-families/7626544002/>

This same process occurred throughout the state and the rest of the nation as ‘sundown’ and ‘gray’ towns were frequently established from 1890 to 1940.¹³ As communities during this period intentionally drove out undesired minority groups through force, law, or custom, the term sundown arose because of the implicit (and sometimes overt) warning to Blacks from these all-white towns that to be there after the sun went down would be inviting violence.¹⁴ This often meant that Black laborers could not live in areas even if they were working there daily. In his 2005 book, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*, James Loewen helped to expose how pervasive this sundown culture was across the country, especially in the North, stating that “a majority of all incorporated places [outside the traditional south] kept out African Americans” purposefully.¹⁵ The term sundown can be misleading, however, because for the public it might suggest that a town was only attempting to keep Blacks out of historically all-white areas rather than forcefully expelling them. While Loewen himself did not make such a mistake, calling them ‘sundown towns’ evades the violent history that often undergirded the existence of all-white communities. To get to the point of being fully sundown, white communities turned to many measures (violent and otherwise) to expel Black citizens. While terms like sundown do a good job describing the end results that these white towns were ultimately seeking, they do not bring enough attention to how some towns deliberately transitioned to being white-only settlements.

¹³ James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*, (New York: The New Press, 2005), 3-7; Elena Esquibel, *Performing Race, Performing History: Oral Histories of Sundown Towns in Southern Illinois* (Ph.D. Dissertation), Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2011; Brent M.S. Campney, *Hostile Heartland: Racism, Repression, and Resistance in the Midwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019).

¹⁴ James W. Loewen, “Sundown Towns and Counties: Racial Exclusion in the South,” *Southern Cultures* 15: 24-28.

¹⁵ Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 4. Loewen also helped create an online database referencing all known cases of sundown towns. <https://justice.tougaloo.edu/sundown-towns/using-the-sundown-towns-database/state-map/>

In *Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America*, Elliot Jaspin added onto Loewen's work to reiterate how common this racial violence was.¹⁶ Jaspin used a computer program to quickly sort through decades of census records to find precipitous drops in Black population numbers at the county level. Expecting to find only a few, he found hundreds. It was difficult to distinguish, however, if these population drops had been a result of economic conditions associated with the Great Migration or a concerted effort by white citizens to forcefully expel Black communities. In the work, Jaspin uncovered twelve of the most egregious examples of violence being used to rid entire counties of Black citizens – “the worst of the worst.”¹⁷ In each of these cases, white community members had forcefully removed an entire subset of the population, but those living in the area today could provide no more than rumors for how or why the process occurred. Only by going back into local records from the period was Jaspin able to uncover concrete explanations for how Black citizens were forcefully expelled over short periods of time. Nevertheless, all of these counties remain exceedingly white today – while the history was forgotten, the effects were still felt.¹⁸

Jaspin termed this phenomenon ‘racial cleansing’ to help compare it to the ‘ethnic cleansings’ that had been documented during the civil wars of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.¹⁹ Historians throughout the 2000s had begun using ‘ethnic cleansing’ as a term to describe many historic uses of violence to expel select minority groups out of areas based on ethnic, religious, or racial differences. Jaspin equated these ethnic cleansings in Europe to what had occurred in

¹⁶ Elliot Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

¹⁷ Ibid, 6.

¹⁸ Ibid, 7.

¹⁹ Ibid, 13; Drazen Petrovic, “Ethnic Cleansing: An Attempt at Methodology,” *European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 5, no. 3, p. 4. Petrovic found that victims of ethnic violence first started using the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ around 1981. The term would be a problematic one except that it was created by victims of the violence. Otherwise, the terminology of ‘cleansing’ a minority group from a population might be misunderstood in a positive light.

the United States throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century thus leading to the terminology ‘racial cleansing’ largely being adopted for those examining the forced expulsion of Black Americans from their local communities. Jaspin found that these histories, while forgotten, have nevertheless seeped into the consciousness of many Black Americans who realize that certain areas of the country are more dangerous than others but do not know why:

the paradox of these counties is that while the fear remains, the histories are missing. Although Blacks will warn one another that a particular town or county is dangerous, they will often have no idea of what happened there. By the same token, people who live in a county where there was a racial cleansing usually think their history is unique. They are unaware of numerous other racial cleansings across the United States. It is as if racial cleansings are a blank space in America’s memory...the result is that for Blacks the country exists as a checkerboard with some squares that are safe and others that are not.²⁰

Local historians often uncover the shocking details of racial cleansings inside newspapers and other historic records but choose to “omit the fact intentionally, knowing that it would reflect badly on their communities if publicized.”²¹ This has been abundantly clear in researching the history of Catcher.²² Clara B. Eno wrote the first book-length history on the area entitled *The History of Crawford County, Arkansas* in 1949 when she was ninety-five years old.²³ Eno was a retired teacher who had lived the entirety of her life in south Van Buren. Hoping to provide a complete history of her hometown, she wrote a nearly 500-page book. The book provides extraordinary detail – providing note of the first paved road, a complete list of coroners, and even the name of every soldier from the county in all major American wars. Despite this, Eno manages to omit the story of Catcher entirely. Black citizens, by and large, are left out of the county’s history after emancipation. Eno details the movement of slaves into the area and even

²⁰ Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 7-9.

²¹ Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 5.

²² “History of Crawford County” In *Goodspeed’s Biographical and Memoirs of Northwest Arkansas* (Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1889). This book was the first to provide details of families living in the area as well as benign facts about the county but does not get into detail directly relevant to the history of Catcher.

²³ Clara B. Eno, *History of Crawford County, Arkansas* (Van Buren: Crawford County Genealogical Society, 1949).

discusses citizens' interactions with Black soldiers during the Civil War but forgets to mention why and when they left the region.²⁴ Eno was sixty-eight when the racial cleansing of Catcher occurred yet overlooks the relevance of the incident to this larger demographic history of the region. Undoubtedly, Eno knew what had occurred there and made a conscious decision to leave the story out of her work.²⁵

Jennifer Gill was one of the first journalists to begin to uncover the full story of Catcher while helping with research for the *Southwest Times Record's* 1999 millennium project to document the biggest stories from the newspaper's history. In her article, "Stereotyping Colored Trials of Two CC Men," she provided the first newspaper article detailing what had occurred in the trials against Bettis, Rucks, and Clay since the initial reporting in 1923 and 1924.²⁶ Gill discusses the murder of Effie Latimer and finds that the ensuing trials against the three men were highly racialized. Gill concluded that the three men were likely innocent but faced an uphill battle against a community who cared little about the actual evidence in the case. Importantly, though, Gill does not mention the violent expulsion of the Black community, the murder of Charles Rucks, or the actions of the eleven Black men who refused to leave and were charged with nightriding. Gill surely read about these incidents in her research – it would be difficult to miss as many of the articles from the period on the trial reference these other parts of the stories only lines later.²⁷ Any follow up research from the newspapers a week later would have provided

²⁴ "Capture of Col. Bowen," in *History of Crawford County, Arkansas*, 278; "Reminisces Told by T. B. Swearingen," in Eno, *History of Crawford County, Arkansas*, 293.

²⁵ Wanda Gray came to this conclusion as well when going through the notes of Eno's. Author interview with Wanda Gray (Historian of Crawford County), September 10, 2020. The transcript of this interview is in the author's possession.

²⁶ Jennifer Gill "Stereotyping Colored Trials of Two CC Men," in *Insight 2000: A Millennium Project of the Southwest Times Record*, edited by Nancy Steel (Fort Smith: *Southwest Times Record*, 1999), p. 140-141.

²⁷ "Negro Trial is Scheduled Next Friday," *Southwest American*, January 3, 1924, p. 1.

evidence of a racial expulsion of all Black citizens.²⁸ While Gill did a commendable job reconsidering the trials of Bettis, Rucks, and Clay, she overlooked the larger story coming out of this period of racial violence being used to expel Black citizens from the region.

Wanda Gray and Eula Hopkins fell prey to much of the same historical amnesia in their 2001 work, *History of Crawford County*.²⁹ Funded by the Historical Preservation Association of Crawford County, the work looked to build off Enos's work to bring the history of the county into the twenty-first century. The 600-page work provides an encyclopedic arrangement of facts about the county, but again fails to mention the racial violence that occurred in Catcher. While the town of Catcher is mentioned throughout the work in small paragraphs, it references only benign facts about the town such as its post office, schools, churches, and cemeteries. In researching for this project, Gray began to slowly uncover the troubling racial history of the town but was not sure how to add it into this work which was, by its nature, a laudatory history of the county.³⁰ To her credit, several years later she began fully researching the racial cleansing of the town and wrote the first scholarly article on it for the *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*.³¹ In conversations with her about this decision to leave Catcher out of the larger history of Crawford County, Gray disclosed that she thought the removal of Black citizens through violence was abnormal and would "make the county look quite bad."³² Being several years before the works

²⁸ "Negroes Leave Catcher After Warning issued. Unsigned Notices Telling Blacks to Get Out of County in Five Days Causes General Exodus. Three Families Left. Remainder Preparing to Get Away as Quickly as Possible," *Fort Smith Times Record*, January 14, 1924, p.1; "Negroes Flee in Fear from Catcher Homes. Authorship of Notices to Blacks to Leave Community is Unknown; Few Remain in Colony," *Fort Smith Times Record*, January 15, 1924, p. 1.

²⁹ Wanda Gray and Eula Hopkins, *History of Crawford County, Arkansas* (Van Buren: Historical Preservation Association of Crawford County, 2001).

³⁰ Author interview with Wanda Gray.

³¹ Gray, "Catcher Race Riot of 1923."

³² At this interview, Gray provided me with all of the documents she had concerning Catcher. This included the Crawford County Trial Documents, the prison records for John Henry Clay, and some newspaper clippings. This made the early stage of the research much easier. Author interview with Wanda Gray.

by Loewen and Jaspin, it was hard to fault her for not appreciating the larger context of racial violence throughout this period. These histories of forced expulsions are so hidden that local historians do not realize how ordinary their community's stories of racial violence are – thus reinforcing the cycle of this larger nationwide history being forgotten.

These racial cleansings were unmistakable for those experiencing them. In the 1908 work, *Following the Colour Line*, white journalist Ray Stannard noted how numerous southern towns were “driving out Negroes,” – many without ever needing to resort to traditional forms of physical violence.³³ Stannard found that “one of the most active causes of this movement is downright fear...white people dislike and fear to live in dense coloured neighbourhoods, while Negroes are often terrorized in white neighbourhoods.”³⁴ What is most interesting, however, is that this racial terror that ultimately led many Black Americans to flee their homes in the South was not always marked by extreme cases of violence employed directly against them. Historians of race in the South have spent much time and energy documenting numerous cases of lynchings and race riots. These examples of explicit violence are extremely important to record because they help illustrate why Black Americans living throughout the region would have felt unsafe. While lynchings and race riots have dominated scholarly literature, they were far less common than cases of everyday implied violence in southern societies that encouraged many of these racial cleansings. Jaspin writes in his work:

what is striking about racial cleansings is that they were unlike the all-too-familiar lynchings or race riots. While people were lynched during some racial cleansings, there were expulsions where no one was killed. And, although the threat of violence always hung in the air, there were racial cleansings, unlike race riots, where no one was attacked.³⁵

³³ Ray Stannard Baker, *Following the Color Line: An Account of Negro Citizenship in the American Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 1908), 71.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 71-72.

³⁵ Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 6.

The use of implied (and often anonymous) violence, then, became a crucial tool for white community members in the south who sought to rid their town of Black citizens without needing to resort to lynchings or any explicit violence that might upset government officials.³⁶ Lynchings and other public displays of white authority were only required in cases where whites wanted to reassert to Black citizens the racial hierarchy of the town – to keep Blacks in their place inside a white run society. In cases of racial cleansings, Black citizens no longer had a place. In these instances, outright violence was often avoided in favor of more ‘nonviolent’ avenues to cleansing a town.³⁷ Citizens of the south, Black and white, well remembered cases of lynchings and extrajudicial violence and thus there was little need to engage in outright violence to remove Blacks from a town. Instead, implied threats of violence were normalized. The most documented of these were anonymous public notices threatening Black citizens to leave or face assured violence. In *Catcher*, for instance, the signs posted the day after Effie’s murder stated:

It becomes necessary for the safety of the community to ask you [Black community members] to leave it. You will be given a few days to straighten out your affairs. If you are out of Crawford County in five days, you will not be bothered, otherwise, you will have to suffer the consequences.³⁸

These implied threats of violence have been slowly uncovered by researchers and cast a fleeting light on a history of racial violence that is otherwise very hard for researchers to track.³⁹

³⁶ This nonviolent coercion would have been built upon a foundation of violence that Black community members would have understood. This made the coercion a form of violence, but one that would have been far more tolerable for city and state officials. Examples of this can be found in Lancaster, “Nightriding and Racial Cleansing,” 258-260; Lancaster, “...or Suffer the Consequences of Staying,” 88-95.

³⁷ Guy Lancaster, *American Atrocity: The Types of Violence in Lynching* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2021), 56; Lancaster, “...or Suffer the Consequences of Staying,” 88-92.

³⁸ “Motion for Change of Venue,” *Arkansas v. Richardson, et al.* Circuit Court of Crawford County, Arkansas, March 19, 1924, 16. These trial documents were originally sent to me by Wanda Gray. Making sure nothing had been left out, I contacted the Logan County Circuit Court (where these files were held) and got copies of everything from there.

³⁹ Guy Lancaster has done the most work on uncovering this use of anonymous violence, especially in Arkansas. His recent chapter on nightriding in Arkansas does the best to place this. Lancaster, “Night Riding Must Not Be Tolerated,” 38-40.

Had all Black citizens of Catcher heeded these warnings and left without a fight - as did the Black population of Shibley just north of Catcher in the days after Effie's murder - there would have been little violence, and thus little documentation for historians indicating why these Black citizens had left and whether their departure was truly voluntary. The notices would have been taken down and the stories forgotten. It mattered little whether violence was implicit or explicit in these two towns as the result – an all-white town – was the same. For Blacks in these areas, they would have understood the genuine threat coming from such notices and would have been increasingly less willing to fight back upon hearing news of the violent backlash from whites upon Black citizens who did meet violence with violence. The main difference, for historians, is that it is extremely difficult to document these cases of anonymous implied threats where Blacks did heed the warnings and leave.

In the cleansing of Catcher, the only reason there is a record of what happened is because eleven Black citizens refused to leave. This refusal to bend to white authority caused outrage and ultimately led some white community members to turn to outright forms of violence that are far easier for historians to substantiate. The violent backlash in cases like Elaine in 1919, Tulsa in 1921, and Catcher in 1923 would have deterred later Black citizens from trying to mount an opposition when told to leave (or act a certain way). In later cases, implied threats of violence were often enough to rid entire towns of Black citizens who considered the warnings genuine.⁴⁰

The deliberate driving out of nearly three hundred Black citizens in Catcher, Arkansas had clear effects on the racial demographics of the region.⁴¹ In 1920, the Black population of

⁴⁰ Lancaster, "Nightriding and Racial Cleansing," 256-260; Lancaster, "...or Suffer the Consequences of Staying," 88-92; Lancaster, *American Atrocity*, 56-59.

⁴¹ See Appendix for a complete list of these families living in Catcher.

Crawford County had been around eleven percent.⁴² By 1930, the population of the county was well under five percent.⁴³ The demographic effects on Catcher were even more stark. In 1920, the town had a Black population of around thirty percent.⁴⁴ By the 1930 census, there were only token Black citizens living in the immediate area, many working for white families.⁴⁵ These demographic shifts have endured into the modern age. Of the nearly 60,000 citizens living in Crawford County in 2020, only around one and a half percent of the population were African American.⁴⁶ While outside economic considerations of the Great Migration assuredly played a role in these outcomes, the racialized violence that the community experienced in late 1923 cannot be dismissed.

The precipitous drops in Black population numbers experienced in Catcher was by no means anomalous either. Many local Arkansas communities experienced similar drops in Black population numbers, leaving behind all-white communities that have persisted into the present. It

⁴² U.S. Census Bureau, "Composition and Characteristics of the Population of Arkansas," *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920*, p. 8. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1920/bulletins/demographics/population-ar-composition-and-characteristics.pdf>

⁴³ U.S. Census Bureau, "Composition and Characteristics of the Population of Arkansas," *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, p. 185. <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1930/population-volume-3/10612963v3p1ch02.pdf>

⁴⁴ A detailed look into these statistics can be found in the appendix. The exact number of people living in Catcher is difficult to accurately gauge as Catcher was never its own township. Instead, the families living in Catcher are listed as part of the Van Buren Township in southern Crawford County, district 15. Using the names of people that are known to have been a part of the Catcher community when the violence took place, the author created a spreadsheet with everyone living around these citizens. Doing this gave a rough number of around thirty percent of the population, around 300 out of 1,100 total. Where these Black citizens lived can be cross referenced by land records from the period which provide the exact plots of land in and around Catcher. U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*; Section 1, Township, 8, Range 31; Section 8, Township 8, Range, 30; Section 11, Township 8, Range 30; Section 17, Township 8, Range 30, "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1923," p. 5-15.

⁴⁵ This amounts to roughly five percent of the population of Catcher. The records for the 1930 census show a huge drop in the Black population living near Catcher. Again, the township is not separated, but by using the names of white citizens known to be living in and near Catcher it is possible to see that almost all the Black family names from the 1920 census are gone. A few token black families remain, often working as servants for a white family. U.S. Census Bureau, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930 – Population Schedule*.

⁴⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, "Quick Facts, Crawford County, Arkansas," July 1, 2022. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/crawfordcountyarkansas>; Wanda Gray, "Crawford County," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, January 24, 2023 (Revised by David Sesser), <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/crawford-county-761/>.

can be difficult to ascertain what role racial violence played in these individual instances as correlation does not always mean causation. Harrison, Arkansas is perhaps the most egregious example of racial violence playing an undeniable role in why Blacks fled the region. After two race riots in the city in 1905 and 1909, an immense drop in the Black population living inside Boone County occurred.⁴⁷ Jaqueline Froelich and David Zimmerman concluded in their research that “the evidence demonstrates that the ethnic purity of Harrison was the result of intentional violence directed at what has been an established African American community of long standing.”⁴⁸ Gordon Morgan speculated, even in 1973, that this violence in Harrison may have had larger impacts than on just Boone County:

it is entirely possible that the trouble that was experienced in Boone County affected the Black populations in surrounding counties...the census shows precipitous drops in black numbers in the 1900-1910 decade in Carroll and Madison County, both of which adjoin Boone.⁴⁹

Racial violence that led to racial cleansings have been shown to be particularly common in the Ozark region of the country, which saw precipitous drops in Black population numbers throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century. Guy Lancaster, Kimberly Harper, and Brent Campney have all documented racial violence undergirding the exodus of Black citizens from Ozark towns.⁵⁰ James Loewen speculated in his work that “more than half of all towns

⁴⁷ The town transitioned from a diverse population in 1900 to very few Black citizens by 1910. Froelich and Zimmerman track the causes of this violence. Jacqueline Froelich and David Zimmerman, “Total Eclipse: The Destruction of the African American Community of Harrison, Arkansas, in 1905 and 1909,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 58 (Summer 1999): 131-159; Brooks Blevins, *Hill Folks: A History of Arkansas Ozarkers and Their Image* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 298.

⁴⁸ Froelich and Zimmerman, “Total Eclipse,” 131-132.

⁴⁹ Gordon D. Morgan, *Black Hillbillies of the Arkansas Ozarks* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas monograph, 1973), 64-65.

⁵⁰ Lancaster, “Racial Cleansing in the Arkansas River Valley,” 244-245; Kimberly Harper, *White Man’s Heaven: The Lynching and Expulsion of Blacks in the Southern Ozarks, 1894-1909* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2010), 235-250; Brent M.S. Campney, “The Missouri Ozarks and Beyond, 1894-1930: ‘Whence all negroes have been driven forth,’” chapter in *Hostile Heartland: Racism, Repression, and Resistance in the Midwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 113-121.

in...the Ozarks went all-white on purpose.”⁵¹ While this sentiment is likely a bit overstated (downplaying the importance of economic and other rationales for Black migration away from the Ozarks) it is true that Black population centers in and around the Ozarks began to drop during this period. Interestingly, though, many counties in the nation that have the most troubling racial past – those in the deep south – have never undergone such racial cleansings. They still have thriving Black populations to this day.

A key omission in the work of Loewen and Jaspin, then, is that it they do not adequately explain why some rural communities chose to force out Black populations while others did not. Kimberly Harper in *White Man’s Heaven* helped complicate this, arguing that communities dependent on cheap Black labor could hardly afford to completely drive out these crucial workers.⁵² For this reason, towns that required a significant Black labor force, such as Elaine in the southeast part of the state, could be exceedingly racist (and violent) but never attempt a full racial cleansing of their community – even encouraging Black workers to return after violence had ended. Harper’s work helped establish that racism was not the only factor present in the white motivations behind these cleansings. Guy Lancaster has taken this further, documenting how many motivations such as politics, land, labor, and criminality could play a role in how and why these racial cleansings unfolded across certain parts of Arkansas and not in others.⁵³ While these generalized works on racial cleansing do a good job showing broadly how and where racial cleansings were occurring, they can often miss out on key factors in specific towns by not getting into details of individual expulsions.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 4-5.

⁵² Harper, *White Man’s Heaven*, xxiii-xxv.

⁵³ Lancaster, *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas*, 1-12.

⁵⁴ Patrick Phillips, *Blood at the Root: A Racial Cleansing in America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016). Phillips tracks a single case of racial cleansing in Forsyth County, Georgia. By focusing on one incident, Phillips is able to provide much more nuance in why this particular expulsion unfolded the way it did.

Only by understanding the unique landscape of an area like Catcher does it become possible to understand why some in this town took steps to forcefully expel its entire Black population rather than punish only the few who had allegedly committed the crime. On top of this, previous works on racial cleansings have not focused enough on how legal measures and newspapers played a vital role in the ultimate success of such cleansings. White communities would often turn to the courts when extralegal violence failed. Newspapers, in the aftermath, helped cover up what had just occurred – hiding the history for future generations. By examining, in detail, how the events in Catcher unfolded, it will become evident how and why this single town efficiently and intentionally transitioned into an all-white community that has been maintained into the present. It is a story that has been all but forgotten by those living in the region today.

Historians will never be able to fully document all the racial cleansings that have occurred in America. Many will endeavor to stay hidden. Providing evidence of these extreme cases where violence led to an indisputable racial cleansing (the worst of the worst, as Jaspin puts it) can help slowly chip away at a history that has been forgotten.⁵⁵ As these individual stories of racial violence in local communities are unearthed, it becomes necessary to place them inside the larger history of the country. The ‘Great Migration’ is a concept commonly taught across the nation in history classes which attempts to explain why six million Black citizens migrated from the rural south to the north, midwest, and west from roughly 1910 to 1970. The primary justification for this migration of Black citizens is told through the lens of economic reasons – essentially, Black Americans moved away from the south to gain better jobs, pursue education, and chase the ‘American Dream.’ Bestselling books like *The Promised Land*,

⁵⁵ Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*, 6.

Competition in the Promised Land, and *Landscapes of Hope* provide compelling economic (and even environmental) explanations for this migration.⁵⁶ While these justifications are vital to understanding the migration of most southern Black Americans, it is crucial that racial violence not be understated as an additional push factor in these decisions to leave. While the voluntary nature of this movement of Black citizens for economic reasons is undoubtedly true in most cases, it is not telling the entire story for all Black citizens living in the South.

Other researchers have echoed this, reminding audiences that Jim Crow era segregation and violence provide additional explanations for why Blacks fled the region. Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck found that out-migration amongst Blacks were significantly higher in counties that had experienced a lynching in the previous ten years.⁵⁷ Ira Berlin and Isabel Wilkerson, likewise, centered racial violence into their discussions of why many Blacks made the decision to leave the region.⁵⁸ The story of *Catcher* helps reiterate this point, explaining how racialized violence could take the decision to stay out of Black hands completely. All-white communities (or ones with a token Black family serving a white family) began to pop up at the same time the second iteration of the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow laws in America were at their apex. By examining what happened in *Catcher*, it will be shown that Black Americans did not always choose to leave. Many fought desperately to stay using any means available. This process was not always

⁵⁶ Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York: Vintage Press, 1992); Leah Boustán, *Competition in the Promised Land: Black Migrants in Northern Cities and Labor Markets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Brian McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope: Nature and the Great Migration in Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017). The economic explanation for this migration was taught at the elementary, middle, and high school I attended. No explanations involving issues of race or violence were ever considered. While vital to this overall story, it needs to include violence as well.

⁵⁷ Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck, "Racial Violence and Black Migration in the American South, 1910 to 1930," *American Sociological Review* Vol. 57, No. 1 (February 1992): 103-106; Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 215-230.

⁵⁸ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2010); Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).

voluntary. Studying this town provides a case study of a considerable number of Black men, women, and children who were forced out violently against their will by extralegal and legal means.

Forcing minority groups off valuable land created intergenerational poverty and instability in the Black families that were forced to leave Catcher that is still being experienced today.⁵⁹ These stories did not happen long ago. Most happened within the last one hundred years. In Catcher, over half of Black families owned their own land when the cleansing occurred.⁶⁰ Born in the shadow of slavery, many had created good lives for themselves sharecropping in the post-war years and did not want to leave the land and homes they had saved their entire lives to buy - even in the face of threats on their life. They hoped to pass this product of hard work to their children who would have had easier lives. Subsequent generations would have benefited tremendously from this. Before this was possible, though, they were forced out purposely, violently, and efficiently by a small segment of the white community who lived alongside them. Their parents and grandparents fled for areas like Fort Smith, Arkansas, Kansas City, Missouri, and Muskogee, Oklahoma. Future generations would spread all across the United States.⁶¹

It is vital to remember that towns, counties, and states did not commit these direct acts of racial violence against Black citizens – individuals did.⁶² The white community living in and around Catcher were not uniform in how they considered Black citizens of the town, though.

⁵⁹ Guy Lancaster finds that racial violence was often used to keep Black citizens economically downtrodden, even in areas where racial cleansings did not occur. Lancaster, *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas*, 18.

⁶⁰ Using the census records of 1920 and 1930 along with the county land records from 1923 and 1932, it becomes possible to roughly track the number of Black families in the town who owned property compared to how many lived there. U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920*; U.S. Census Bureau, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*; “Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1923,” p. 5-15; “Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1932,” p. 54-60.

⁶¹ Very few of the initial generation of people who fled Catcher moved beyond Fort Smith. The few that did not mostly end up in Kansas City and a few towns in Oklahoma. From there, though, family members moved all across America even by 1940.

⁶² Although, as will be shown, the state and county would play a role in the success of this violence.

There was far more nuance involved. While a small portion of the white population living in the town were ultimately able to guide the expulsion of the Black community, it is important to remember that not all white citizens would have wanted the Black population expelled from the area. As will be shown, many worked actively to try to prevent this expulsion from occurring, volunteering as sheriffs to stop lynchings, testifying as witnesses at the trials of the men, and helping Black citizens start new lives in the aftermath. Likewise, many white citizens would have had economic motivations for wanting their Black neighbors to remain. They rented property to these Black families, would have employed them on their farms, and worked with them on a daily basis. The segment of the white population in Catcher that drove this Black expulsion were not indicative of the entire mindset of the town. Instead, these individuals held distinctive motivations for why they took action directly against Black citizens.

Explaining the impulses behind individual human behavior can be difficult, but endeavoring to do so is essential as it demonstrates divergences in how both the Black and white communities responded to this racial violence. As Guy Lancaster has shown in his work, racial cleansings were caused by a combination of many factors. In his 2016 book, *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas, 1883-1924*, he attempted to organize the motivations behind why some white citizens would want to cleanse an area of Black citizens. He classifies these motivations into three large categories: 1) for political authority, 2) for land/labor, and 3) to stop supposed Black criminality.⁶³ The use of racial violence to maintain political authority was most common in the post-Reconstruction period and occurred with less frequency over time. More commonly, Black community members were driven out of areas because of the land or jobs they held (that white citizens stood to gain from a Black expulsion) or to express collective punishment after an

⁶³ Lancaster, *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas*, 13.

alleged wrongdoing by one or more Black citizens. Lancaster concedes these are not perfect categories - as many times they overlap with one another - but can be used as a way to organize a study of racial cleansing across the state.⁶⁴ In some cases, Lancaster finds, there were not any clearly expressed motivations preceding racial violence.⁶⁵

Explaining the motivation for the white individuals guiding the racial cleansing of Catcher requires not focusing too heavily on any single factor. Politics, land, labor, stopping supposed Black criminality, and racism all combined to explain the racial violence some white community members resorted to in late 1923. These factors would have overlapped and are difficult to always explain cleanly. As will be shown, one factor that made the racial cleansing of Catcher particularly unique was the newfound realization in the years prior that natural gas reserves under Black held land could be of commercial value. Removing Black claims to this land would have been extremely profitable for some white citizens who could buy up the land once the group was forced out. Beyond economic considerations, racist sentiments about the law-breaking nature of Blacks provided additional justification. As Fon Louise Gordon writes, “no longer subject to the civilizing influences of slavery, [Blacks were perceived as] rapidly retrogressing to their natural state of bestiality. To evidence this, white citizens often pointed to the growing Black crime rate and the “frequent attacks on white womanhood” committed by Black men.⁶⁶ Newspapers would constantly report on Black violence, reinforcing these beliefs in many of their readers. Land, mineral rights, labor, and supposed Black criminality all were factors in motivating white citizens to embark on a racial cleansing of the community. Again, though, the white community was not unified in these views.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 14.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Fon Louise Gordon, *Caste & Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas, 1880-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 26.

As these countless stories of racial violence and intentional expulsions are uncovered, many might question why they were forgotten in the first place. As will be shown in the final chapter, there was a deliberate effort by news outlets and local citizens around Catcher to cover up the violence that had just happened inside their community. Quieting the stories of this racial violence proved much easier in cases where outright violence was not necessary. Not talking about it often proved enough. In cases of violent racial cleansings, as happened in Catcher and many other southern towns – there was a common playbook to erase this history from the public memory. The first step was to blame the victims for the violence. The myth of the aggressive Black rapist and pervasive Black criminality made it far easier to justify these expulsions. Most of these cleansings started with an allegation of Black rape or fabrications that a race war was being planned by members of the Black community.

The second step was to deny (in the weeks after the cleansing) that the movement of Blacks out of the area had ever been forced. By claiming the decision had been made voluntarily by Black citizens for reasons beyond race, it became easier for whites to rationalize why their areas were increasingly less diverse. This notion, while somewhat true, removed white accountability for the migration of Blacks from areas and has been hard for the public and historians to shake.

The last step in forgetting these racial cleansings was that average citizens who experienced them – Black and white – rarely told future generations the truth of what had happened. White community members who had engaged in this violence did not want to be remembered badly. They wanted to remain local heroes that acted to keep their community safe. They likely told those closest to them the truth and remembered it fondly, but their children would have been hesitant to explain their parents' actions in a nation that was becoming

increasingly more progressive in views of racial equality. This was even more so the case for grandchildren and later descendants, especially considering that they perceived the actions taken by their families to have been out of the ordinary for the period.⁶⁷ Members of the white community who stood by or tried to help likely felt regret for standing by while others in their community used violent means to expel minorities that they knew and worked with. Some came to the aid of Black community members at later trials, but it was too late to reverse the expulsion that had already occurred.⁶⁸ They later refused to speak about what had happened to future generations, fearing they would be seen as cowards. Most astonishingly for modern audiences, perhaps, is that Black citizens who experienced this racialized violence were also extremely hesitant to tell others what had happened. Most of the descendants that were interviewed for this research had little idea that such an incident had ever happened to their family. No one ever told them. A feeling of disgrace associated with being pushed off land and being powerless to prevent helps explain this suppression. Dorothy Jean Trambell (a daughter of William Bettis' widow) echoed this when she stated, "we just did not talk about it...it was embarrassing."⁶⁹ In two or three generations, the stories were forgotten entirely.

The historical amnesia associated with these racial cleansings has endured into the present. Those who hear these stories and choose not to inform others about them perpetuate a legacy of silent culpability. While these stories be painful to recollect, they are vital to

⁶⁷ Moira Bryant did not know the story of what had occurred in Catcher despite growing up next to the Black cemetery on her family's property. Only when her father suggested the topic for a research paper in the late 2000s did she become aware and start taking an interest. To her credit, she wrote a fascinating piece on the topic soon after. Bryant, "Healing Catcher," 44-46.

⁶⁸ White community members such as Robert Gooding, Gus Brunt, Herman Denning, and Callie Jones all came to the aid of William Bettis at trial. the complete witness list from Bettis, Rucks, and Clay's trials are not available, but newspapers claim that white alibis came forward for all three. "Guilty Given as Verdict in Bettis Trial," *Southwest American*, January 6, 1924, p. 1.

⁶⁹ Wanda Gray Interview of Dorothy Jean Trambell (later daughter of William Bettis' widow), March 1, 2010. Transcript of interview provided to author by mail, September 9, 2020. Transcript in author's possession.

understanding a key component of why the nation's demographics look the way they do. For this reason, it is important to continue slowly uncovering these hidden stories of racial cleansings in rural communities. While these stories have been forgotten, their effects are still being felt. The history of counties, states, and ultimately the entire nation were radically impacted every time violence was used as a way to force minority groups away from certain areas. Exploring what occurred in Catcher, Arkansas in 1923 and 1924 will provide one small example of this much greater history the country still needs to come to terms with. It must be remembered that what happened in Catcher was not atypical, though, it was disturbingly ordinary.

Chapter One – Making a Racial Cleansing Possible

Even researchers with an expert knowledge of Arkansas geography would likely find it challenging to point out exactly where Catcher is located on a map of the state. Modern maps no longer display the rural town and even maps from the period rarely label it. Going there today, the only record of the town's existence is the main road that runs through the area, Catcher Road. Located ten miles east of Fort Smith – centered south between Van Buren and Alma – Catcher can be located on some late nineteenth century maps near the southern tip of the Ozarks and in the northern part of the Arkansas River Valley. The area contained excellent conditions for agricultural production. The temperate climate and variety of soils rendered the region perfect for growing berries, fruits, potatoes, melons, soybeans, and, most notably, cotton.⁷⁰ The fertile bottomland of the Arkansas River commanded numerous agricultural jobs. Because of this, the population in the region had been quite large since the earliest documented history of white settlement into the area.

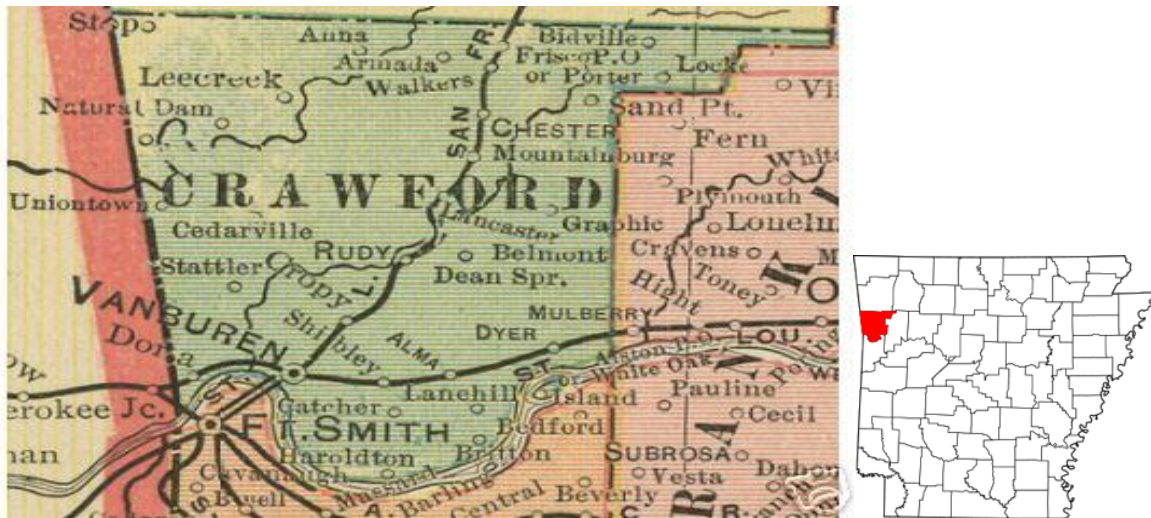


Image One: One of the few maps that shows the towns of Catcher and Shibley.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Gray, "Crawford County."

⁷¹ George F. Cram, *Map of Arkansas* (Higginsville, Missouri: Hearthstone Legacy Publications, 1898), <http://www.hearthstonelegacy.com/crawford1.html>. Catcher is not labeled on popular maps from the period such as the 1895 Rand, McNally, & Co. Map.

White settlers were obviously not the first humans to live in the region, though. Native tribes such as the Caddo, Cherokee, Osage, and Wichita had all, at various times, lived throughout the upper Arkansas River Valley region. By the early eighteenth century, Osage hunting parties were commonly roaming the region. With the United States' purchase of Louisiana from France in 1803, the United States began taking an interest in pushing Native groups off land sought by white settlers. Fierce fighting between the Osage and Cherokee tribes in the early 1800s over control of hunting territory near Fort Smith made it much easier for the United States to play these tribes off one another.⁷² The Osage, in particular, courted the United States to help them in their fight against the Cherokee and were willing to sign certain treaties ceding land around the Arkansas River to the young nation in return for a small payment and a belief that America would support them against the Cherokee. Although this military support never came, the Osage treaties of 1817 and 1822 ceded much of the area around Van Buren to the nation.⁷³ Many in the Osage tribe were upset with the terms of this cession and believed they had never yielded the land to the U.S.⁷⁴

Still, with fewer and fewer Native claims in the area, Crawford County became the third county in the Arkansas territory in October 1820.⁷⁵ The area would become of crucial importance for Native-U.S. relations as it would be located geographically between the American and Indian territories in modern Oklahoma.⁷⁶ Many Natives would be forced to

⁷² For a complete discussion on how the Cherokee and Osage war helped the United States gain land around the Arkansas River, see Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 201-220.

⁷³ Ibid, 208-211.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 224-225.

⁷⁵ It would be the eighth county in what was ultimately included in the state of Arkansas – most being part of the Territory of Missouri before this. Eno, *History of Crawford County*, 7-12.

⁷⁶ There were at least three Black persons who worked at the Arkansas Post in 1817 as well. Tonia Holleman and Angela Walton-Raji, *Black Chronicle of Northwest Arkansas* 1 (2004): 17. Holleman and Walton planned on this being a recurring series, but this was the only volume published. A copy can be found at the Van Buren Public Library.

migrate on the ‘trail of tears’ through the region. From 1851-1871, Van Buren even housed the federal court that handled all the legal affairs that arose out of Indian Territory.⁷⁷ The concerted use of state and federal power to relocate Natives away from land that white settlers desired would help provide a precedent for similar circumstances against the Black population of Catcher in 1923.

With Native claims in the region lessened, white settlers began flooding into Crawford County in the 1820s.⁷⁸ Ninety-six settlers were recorded there as early as 1821. Alongside these earliest settlers were thirty-four enslaved African Americans (aged ten to forty-five).⁷⁹ Slavery spread throughout the mid-south exponentially during this period. The slave population in Crawford County similarly ballooned with the most living in the southern part of the county:

Number of Enslaved and Free African Americans in Crawford County, 1820-1860 ⁸⁰		
Year:	Slaves in Crawford County:	Free Black Citizens:
1820	34	0
1830	352	0
1840	618	0
1850	933	6
1860	858	0

⁷⁷ Tom Wing, *Images of America: Van Buren* (Mount Pleasant, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2016), 7.

⁷⁸ “History of Crawford County” *Goodspeed*, 487-490.

⁷⁹ “Tax Lists of Crawford County for 1821-1829,” reproduced in Eno, *History of Crawford County*, 42-45.

⁸⁰ These numbers can also be found in the manuscript censuses for the years 1840, 1850, and 1860. This article provides the statistics of slaves by Arkansas county which can be helpful to see all at once. Carl Moneyhon, “Slavery,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/slavery-1275/> The years 1820 and 1830 are provided by the tax lists in Eno’s work but may not be accurate. Eno, “Tax Lists of Crawford County, 1821-1829,” 42-47. Tonia Holleman provides immense detail of slaves living in the county in 1840 in her work Holleman and Angela Walton-Raji, *Black Chronicle of Northwest Arkansas*, 21-40.

With cotton king of the south during this period, it is unsurprising that the region in and around Catcher attracted several large slaveowners who used forced Black labor to work in cotton fields during the antebellum period.⁸¹ The earliest accounts of the Catcher settlement reveal that the town “was inhabited by a larger percentage of African Americans than whites” – the only region in Crawford County to hold a Black majority.⁸² The reason for this was primarily the large number of slaves tied to individual owners working in this area. Matthew Arbuckle alone, for instance, paid taxes on thirty-nine slaves in 1855.⁸³ The region that would become Catcher would be tied inextricably with this history of slavery and explains how and why African Americans began arriving in the area. By 1860, around eleven percent of Crawford County’s overall population was enslaved.⁸⁴

In the years before the Civil War, some free Black citizens began to pop up in and around Crawford County. Van Buren, for instance, noted six recently freed ex-slaves living in its city in the 1850 census.⁸⁵ Fort Smith, likewise, had some three dozen.⁸⁶ In February 1859, Arkansas became the first - and only - state to pass an expulsion law forcing these free Black citizens to leave. Act 151, colloquially referred to as the “Act to Remove the Free Negroes and Mulattos

⁸¹ For insight into what life was like for a slave in Crawford County in see Holleman and Walton-Raji, *Black Chronicle of Northwest Arkansas*, 5-10.

⁸² It is unclear where Gray found these numbers at, but the quote is from her *Encyclopedia of Arkansas* article “The Catcher Race Riot of 1923.” It is known that the percentages of Black citizens in Catcher (around thirty percent) were the highest in Crawford County in the 1920 census. It appears the area had historically always had the largest percentage of Black citizens in the county. U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*.

⁸³ U.S. Census Bureau, *Slave Schedules of Crawford County, Arkansas 1860*. National Archives Publication M432 Microfilm Reel 25. A breakdown of slaveowners in Crawford County can be found here. <http://www.arkansasfreedmen.com/crawfslaves.htm>

⁸⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *Eight Census of the United States: 1860 – Population Schedule*.

⁸⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *Seventh Census of the United States: 1850 – Population Schedule*.

⁸⁶ Fort Smith had 29 free Black living in the city in 1840. This number was closer to 50 by the 1850 census. Tonia Holleman provides a list of all these persons in her work. Holleman and Angela Walton-Raji, *Black Chronicle of Northwest Arkansas*, 17-19.

from this State,” required all free Persons of Color to leave Arkansas before January 1, 1860.⁸⁷ Those who elected “not to leave would suffer the consequences, facing sale on the auction block.”⁸⁸ Coming off the back of the *Scott v. Sanford* decision in 1857, Arkansas officials believed there was legal precedent to refuse citizenship to any Black Arkansan not currently enslaved by a white owner. At that time, there were around 1,000 free Black persons living across the state. Because of the 1859 law, nearly 800 left. Twelve of these free African Americans wrote a plea to all Christians of the state asking them to support their right to stay.⁸⁹ Black advocates, similarly, described the dangerous nature of such a law for all citizens of the United States.⁹⁰ Unable to find any support inside Arkansas, 200 of these men and women fled for Ohio, the rest found new homes in Kansas and Missouri.⁹¹ One woman, it appears, was unable to find a state that would accept her and returned herself – and children – back into the bonds of slavery.⁹² By 1860, there were only 144 free Black citizens living in Arkansas – the lowest number for any state in the country.⁹³

⁸⁷ Act No. 151, “An Act to Remove the Free Negroes and Mulattoes from this State,” *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Arkansas* (Little Rock: General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 1859), pp. 175–178.

⁸⁸ Angela Y. Walton-Raji, “African American History in Western Arkansas: Enslaved and Free,” *Fort Smith Historical Society Journal* 34 (April 2010): 9.

⁸⁹ Brian K. Mitchell, “Appeal of the Arkansas Exiles to Christians throughout the World,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, January 6, 2023. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/appeal-of-the-arkansas-exiles-to-christians-throughout-the-world-12170/#:~:text=The%20E2%80%9CAppeal%20of%20the%20Arkansas,Free%20Negro%20Expulsion%20Act%20of>

⁹⁰ “Persecution of Free Coloured People in the United States.” *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, April 2, 1860, 85-86.

⁹¹ Warren Eugene Milteer Jr., *Beyond Slavery’s Shadow: Free People of Color in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 170.

⁹² “UA Little Rock researchers investigate Arkansas’s ‘other Trail of Tears,’” *Newswise*, March 01, 2019. <https://www.newswise.com/articles/ua-little-rock-researchers-investigate-arkansas-s-other-trail-of-tears>

⁹³ Angela Y. Walton-Raji, “Free Persons of Color Among Ft. Smith’s Earliest Residents,” *Fort Smith Historical Society Journal* 21 (April 1997): 29-30.

This law directly affected the free Black citizens living in Van Buren and Fort Smith in 1850.⁹⁴ These men and women were grocers, laborers, laundresses, and servants. By 1860, though, all of these free Black citizens were gone.⁹⁵ Because the Civil War would start two years later, the law was never formally enforced, and no other southern state passed a similar expulsion law, this history has become no more than a footnote in many histories of race in the state. The law was influential, though, in that it gave credence to the notion of using state authority to cleanse entire areas of Black citizens. This had been a common theme in the nation's history concerning Native American relocation, but no such law had ever been passed regarding free African Americans. In addition to this, the law implicitly worked to reinforce the notion that free Black citizens should be feared by white community members. While this was primarily because free Blacks provided a glimpse of freedom to slaves who might begin demanding similar freedom, it also demonstrated Blacks not surrendering to the racial hierarchy of the day. As Billy Higgins has written:

By promulgating such a law, Arkansas lawmakers bound themselves to a racial rhetoric that included an intense fear of African Americans who lived outside the constraints of slavery and so could not be controlled as easily. This fear increased in magnitude as the issue of slavery continued to divide the nation during the tumultuous decade of the 1850s.⁹⁶

History does not happen inside a vacuum. The racial cleansing of Catcher, Arkansas that would occur in 1923 came about in the direct aftermath of this longer history of white settlement into the region. Native relocation, the institution of slavery, and the 1859 expulsion law laid the groundworks for using state (and federal) power to embolden white citizens of the region. These

⁹⁴ While not from Van Buren, Higgins tracks the experiences of one such free Black person at the time of the 1859 expulsion law. Billy D. Higgins, *A Stranger and a Sojourner: Peter Caulder, Free Black Frontiersman in Antebellum Arkansas* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 2005).

⁹⁵ Walton-Raji, "African American History in Western Arkansas," 9-10.

⁹⁶ Billy D. Higgins, "Act 151 of 1859," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, September 13, 2022. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/act-151-of-1859-4430/>.

actions reinforced a mythic belief in white superiority that would endure and undergird many of the later actions taken by these citizens and future generations over the next sixty years. The Civil War would provide a brief period of recourse for these Black Arkansans who took up arms and helped forcefully win their freedom. Racial violence in the region would endure long after emancipation, though. Union troops stayed for some time after the war but as they left, so often did racial progress. From the end of Reconstruction to 1923, a normalization of racial prejudice became endemic in American society - from the highest positions in government all the way down to average citizens. This troubling racial history from the Reconstruction-era through to 1923 reinforced white citizens' understanding that it was in their power, and economic interest, to control the actions of minority populations living inside their communities. This prejudice would take its next natural step when forcing minority groups out of areas became economically beneficial to white citizens.

Reviewing key examples of racial violence that occurred in the leadup to *Catcher* – and the subsequent actions taken by the governor during these years – will suggest why some white citizens may have felt supported by their state in these hate-filled endeavors. Likewise, reviewing the nationwide normalization of prejudice throughout the mid-1910s and early-1920s will demonstrate why government officials would have been extremely hesitant to take significant action against groups of citizens perpetrating such violence. Without this context, those learning of *Catcher* for the first time might fall into the trap of assuming such racial violence was without equal in the history of the state and Jim Crow South. At the same time, examining the buildup to what occurred in *Catcher* will also reveal ways in which the expulsion of Black community members was, in fact, distinctive amongst other racial cleansings that were coming out of the period.

With the Civil War over, some of these newly freed Black citizens living in southern Crawford County likely stayed on the same land they had been slaves working as sharecroppers.⁹⁷ At the same time these recently freed people began working as sharecroppers, a surge of outside Black migration to the area was also occurring. Historian Story Matkin-Rawn has found that “between the end of the Civil War and World War I, Arkansas attracted more African-American migrants than any other state, well over 200,000.”⁹⁸ Cheap land, relatively high wages, non-farm labor jobs, and the fact that Arkansas was perceived as more racially tolerant encouraged a large amount of African-Americans to flood into the state during this period.⁹⁹ While a majority of these Black migrants settled in southeastern Arkansas, a significant number decided to instead follow the rail lines from Little Rock to Fort Smith which seemed to guarantee interesting new work. Van Buren, likewise, became a railroad junction for two railroads that were being built throughout the 1870s and 1880s. The St. Louis and San Francisco Railway and the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad both required cheap labor and often played up the hospitable nature of the region for Black migrants – with one even going as far as to describe coconuts growing plentifully in the area.¹⁰⁰ Notions of cheap land, abundant jobs, and racial hospitality fueled Black migration into areas near these rail lines.

As a result, Crawford County’s Black population swelled during the Reconstruction period. There had been 858 Black slaves living in the county in 1860, by 1870 there were 1,558

⁹⁷ How many ex-slaves stayed in the region and who fled is difficult to know with certainty since the 1860 census does not provide names of enslaved persons. The area of south Van Buren (where the majority of these slaves in the county were held) saw many Black migrants enter the region after the Civil War. U.S. Census Bureau, *1860 U.S. Federal Census - Slave Schedules*. A digital copy of the slave schedules from Crawford County can be accessed online at [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). These statistics were then compared to the 1870 census to try to estimate how many Black persons that stayed.

⁹⁸ Story Matkin-Rawn, “The Great Negro State of the Country: Arkansas’s Reconstruction and the Other Great Migration,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 72 (2013): 3.

⁹⁹ Specifically, Governor Powell Clayton’s tougher stance on Ku Klux Klan violence. *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Lancaster, “Nightriding and Racial Cleansing,” 247.

free Black citizens – nearly doubling the Black population in ten years.¹⁰¹ Crucially, this population surge occurred after the end of slavery, signaling a choice by recently freed African Americans to voluntarily migrate into the region. A majority of these Black citizens were ex-slaves who came from other southern states, most notably, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas.¹⁰² Throughout the 1880s, the region appeared to be as hospitable as advertised. The small town of Catcher became an attractive place for Black migrants to settle in as it provided numerous jobs on the nearby railroads as well as sharecropping work in the fertile river bottomland. On top of this, being a few miles away from the larger cities made buying land cheaper for these men and women who were hoping to save up to become landowners themselves.¹⁰³

Samuel White, an ex-slave who had been a sergeant in the Civil War lived in Van Buren and worked to bring together a Black presence in the county. In April 1871, White held a large county barbecue for all Black community members living south of Van Buren – 500 Black people attended, catching attention of the local paper.¹⁰⁴ Building off this connection, White spent the next ten years helping to fund the construction of three Black churches in Van Buren, Newtown, and Catcher. The church in Catcher - St. Paul's Baptist Church - was finished in 1880, providing this thriving Black community with a place to meet and worship together. Black

¹⁰¹ Found by comparing the 1860 and 1870 manuscript census records for the county. U.S. Census Bureau, *Eight Census of the United States: 1860*; U.S. Census Bureau, *Ninth Census of the United States: 1870*.

¹⁰² These Black migrants came from all across the South (rarely the North), but the most common were from those leaving Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas. U.S. Census Bureau, *Ninth Census of the United States: 1870*.

¹⁰³ Dennis Maddox was a Black citizen living in South Crawford County that helps show the area as a great place to move for cheap land. Maddox was a freed slave from Alabama who arrived in the county in 1869. He rented for six years before finally buying 160 acres of his own. By 1880, He had closer to 280 acres. He had five families living on his property and working for him by 1887. He would detail his accomplishments in the Goodspeed history of the region. "History of Crawford County" In *Goodspeed's Biographical and Memoirs of Northwest Arkansas* (Chicago: Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1889), 1171.

¹⁰⁴ Evelyn E. Tonia Holleman, "Samuel White: A Man About Town," *Fort Smith Historical Society Journal* 35 (April 2011): 41.

citizens like Robert Lyons and William Holland helped in funding the construction. Doctor Beal provided the land necessary.¹⁰⁵ Allen Bobo would become the congregation's first minister.¹⁰⁶ During the later racial violence in 1923, the black cemetery behind where the church had once stood would be symbolically ransacked.

By 1890, Black citizens made up around ten percent of the county's population – with many living in Catcher.¹⁰⁷ The Black community of Catcher soon began to experience that the area might not be as racially tolerant as they had hoped.¹⁰⁸ In July 1896, two white constables from Van Buren entered the Black community of Catcher to investigate a murder that had occurred in nearby Van Buren.¹⁰⁹ William Jones, one of the constables, was found days later, dead. His partner, Constable Perry, was seriously wounded.¹¹⁰ Seven Black men from Catcher – Henry Bell, Tandy Coggs, Tandy Ferguson, Bud Shepherd, William Shepherd, Robert Richardson, and Gus Richardson – were charged with ambushing the men and were charged with first degree murder.¹¹¹ A Fort Smith newspaper reported “the prosecution brought out evidence showing that there was a conspiracy among the worst class of the ‘Colony’ negroes to resist white officers when they appeared in that settlement.”¹¹² The seven men were able to secure a

¹⁰⁵ Doctor Beal was a Black farmer in the Catcher property who had moved into the area after living as a slave in North Carolina and initially moving to Kansas. He arrived in Crawford County in 1872 and was able to homestead forty acres. Within a few years, he had close to 300 acres. He helped fund and provide the land for the St. Paul's Church and Cemetery. He was later buried there. Beal's tombstone was one smashed in the later violence and provides image nine in this work. “Goodspeed's History of Crawford County,” 1123.

¹⁰⁶ Holleman, “Samuel White,” 39-41.

¹⁰⁷ Many of the 1890 census records were destroyed in a fire. Guy Lancaster reports that the Black population of Crawford County was “about ten percent” in his work. His citation leads to a link that no longer works. Nevertheless, the percentage seem on par when compared to the 1880 and 1900 census for how many Black citizens were in the county. Lancaster, “Nightriding in the River Valley,” 247.

¹⁰⁸ “Bob Richardson Convicted of Robbing Schlitz Bar,” *Fort Smith News Record*, March 11, 1902, p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ A constable is an elected position at the township level which provides law enforcement assistance.

¹¹⁰ The first name of Perry is not known. It is unclear what Perry would testify to seeing. “Negro Suspects Bound Over,” *Fort Smith Elevator*, January 19, 1906, p. 8.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

change of venue away from the county.¹¹³ Bell and Richardson were later found guilty of the murder.¹¹⁴ The other five men – some of which would go on to fight back against local law enforcement in December 1923 - were freed and returned to living in Catcher.¹¹⁵ The killing of Constable Jones remained a sore point in Crawford County. The murder would be used as justification for the racial cleansing some thirty years later. Local papers would continue to bring up the killing of Constable Jones as proof of “the lawbreaking class of [the Black] race.”¹¹⁶ From the 1880s to the early 1900s, the number of Black citizens living and working in the area continually dropped, likely in response to the unwelcoming area they had found in the River Valley and increasingly less desire by white citizens for Black labor on the railroads.¹¹⁷ At the same time, some members of the Black community of Catcher setup the county’s first Black-owned post office in 1891, signaling the intent of many residing there that they planned to stay permanently despite changing sentiments against them.

In 1907, an exodus of the Black population Catcher occurred. The *Van Buren Press Argus* informed its readers that a significant portion of the town’s Black residents (and its richest members) had decided to leave the region. Howard Folke and Alexander Hodnett - who between them owned the post office, general store, and trading point – along with twenty other Black community members packed what they had and left via the Iron Mountain rail line for Los Angeles, California. The group had built the New Monarch Church in Catcher only two years

¹¹³ Richardson and Ferguson motion for another change of venue at their 1924 trial.

¹¹⁴ The outcome of this trial would take ten years. “News and Gossip of Van Buren,” *Fort Smith News Record*, October 7, 1906, p. 7. https://fortsmithlibrary.historyarchives.online/viewer?k=catcher%20colony&i=f&d=01011875-12011923&m=between&ord=k1&fn=fort_smith_news_record_usa_arkansas_fort_smith_19061007_english_7&df=11&dt=20&cid=3012

¹¹⁵ Gus Richardson would lead the defense of the log cabin when the community was asked to leave. Tandy Ferguson would be one of the men to help. Robert Richardson’s children would also play a role.

¹¹⁶ “Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites,” p. 1.

¹¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *Tenth Census of the United States: 1880*; U.S. Census Bureau, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*.

prior but, for reasons unknown, these men and women chose to leave. This migration was deemed important news which even reached newspapers in Little Rock.¹¹⁸ Local papers reported, “they were quiet, unassuming negroes, educated, industrious, and frugal and had the respect and confidence of all that knew them...it is felt that the discordant element of negroes living in the Colony caused this better element of the race to leave.”¹¹⁹ The mail service that had run from Catcher’s post office since 1891 stopped delivering mail only months later.

It appears that these families had been able to quietly prosper in such a way as to gain the attention of even white community members who claimed to see their relocation as a genuine loss.¹²⁰ While the paper claimed that these migrants were fleeing from their own race, it is more likely that despite quietly prospering in the area, Black community members still sought more racially tolerant land found in other parts of the country, especially considering how recently they had invested in constructing a church building for the community. On top of this, Black families would have had a tougher time dealing with increased racialized violence being used against them – even if just in the form of verbal threats. For single Black men, it would be far easier to leave an area on short notice if violence appeared likely. For Black men with wives and small children, it was necessary to continually gauge the racial animosity in the region before such a situation of violence arose and it was impossible to leave.¹²¹

In 1913, Gus Richardson was again in the news. Richardson and his wife along with William Posey and his wife were all shot at in front of the Richardson home. Richardson, it was reported, had a fisherman come to his gate and ask if wanted to buy some fish. When Richardson

¹¹⁸ “News Stories From State Exchanges,” *The Daily Arkansas Democrat*, March 8, 1907, p. 5.

¹¹⁹ “Colored Colonists to California,” *Fort Smith Times*, March 6, 1907, p. 1.

¹²⁰ Locals might have also wanted to bring attention to these groups leaving in the hopes it would signal others from the Black community to do the same. *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Lisa Childs has made a similar point in her work. Lisa Childs, “Reexamining the Origins of Arkansas’ Republican Party,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 79 (Winter 2020): 317-347.

and Posey went to view the fish, they were shot at by a shotgun with squirrel shot. Richardson and his wife “were badly but not seriously injured.”¹²² Local officers looking into the shooting returned empty handed after a day-long investigation. Who shot at Richardson was never established but this random violence along with his earlier court case regarding the Constable’s death would likely play crucial factors in his decision to pick up weapons and fight back in late 1923 when violence again returned to his front door.

Still, it is important to remember that the Black and white families of Catcher were not always antagonistic towards one another. Many lived as friends and neighbors. By the time of the 1920 census, these families were interacting with one another on a daily basis.¹²³ This went beyond just working together. The *Southwest American*, for instance, reported on a “non-segregated” game of poker in 1917 that included white and Black men of Catcher that was broken up by local officers. Three white men – J. F. Widner, Frank Bowman, and W. T. Caldwell – and seven Black men – Tandy Ferguson, Arthur Shepherd, Jim Berry, Joe Ephram, Calvin Banks, and Charles Shelton were charged with breaking state gaming laws. The men all pleaded not guilty to the charges, claiming they were “just playing tiddley winks.”¹²⁴ Naturally, the report looked to again expose the lawlessness of the Black community of Catcher but in doing so it had unintentionally reported on Black and whites spending leisure time together with one another. Looking through census data from the period, Black and white communities continued to coexist in the town for the entirety of the period up until Effie Latimer’s murder. These citizens were direct neighbors in many cases, able to see each other from across their land – undoubtedly interacting daily.

¹²² “Is Investigating Mysterious Shooting,” *Southwest American*, July 1, 1913, p. 5.

¹²³ In Appendix item two, it is possible to see the family numbers in the 1920 census. Numbers close to each other were often neighbors. The big gaps in numbers are filled by white families.

¹²⁴ “Raided A Poker Game,” *Southwest American*, August 28, 1917, p. 8.

The Black Community of Catcher was thriving by the early 1920s.¹²⁵ The population living in Crawford County was one of the larger rural Black communities in Northwest Arkansas – boasting some 300 citizens. While some of its community members had left for California around 1907, the remaining families had intermarried and formed very close ties with one another. Looking at appendix item two and the 1920 census, it becomes clear how close this community truly was. Many of the families married off their sons and daughters to one another. Often times, the grandchildren from these marriages would live with the grandparents on owned land.¹²⁶ Land records, likewise, demonstrate how land was often shared between these families, their valuations combined between two of the fathers of the families.¹²⁷ Even the names of two of the major families ‘Ricks’ and ‘Rucks’ were close. It appears the two names had been part of a single family in the 1880s before a slight spelling change in the names differentiated the two.

This close-knit community of Catcher was made up by a majority of farmers (some ninety percent), many of whom worked together on their farms. A small portion (under ten percent) of the community were laborers for the nearby railroad and other wage-earning industries. Those who did not own land often sharecropped in the region for both white and Black landowners. The community of Catcher was known to throw several large picnics every summer at ‘Bethel’ - a large park in the heart of the town.¹²⁸ This community had a rich religious history as well, with at two Black churches in the area that community members attended – St.

¹²⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*.

¹²⁶ Such as the Perry family taking in grandchildren from a marriage between their daughter and the Brown family.

¹²⁷ “Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County for the Year 1923.”

¹²⁸ One such picnic is reported after a fight broke out at one. “Is Struck Over Head with Club; May Not Recover,” *Southwest American*, July 30, 1916, p. 8; Samuel White had thrown similar congregations for the Black community. Holleman, “Samuel White: A Man About Town,” 41.

Paul's Church and The New Monarch Church.¹²⁹ If the community living in Catcher had not been forcefully expelled, it is likely that it would still have a presence in the region today.

The daily interactions between the white and Black community members of Catcher can be difficult to accurately report in the years before 1923. It is possible, however, to provide crucial context into how issues of race were being dealt with across Arkansas in the lead up to the racial violence that would occur in Catcher in 1923. The return of soldiers, Black and white, from the war in Europe led to a stark rise in racial and labor unrest in 1918 and 1919. The so called 'Red Summer' of 1919 saw countless strikes and race riots as communities across the nation attempted to reshape American life after the war.¹³⁰ Arkansas was not immune to these problems. The state experienced a noticeable uptick in racialized violence in the post-war years, most notably with the Elaine Massacre of September 1919. In this incident, Black sharecroppers in Phillips County, Arkansas unionized in the hope of gaining a fairer share of profits from the recent cotton harvest. White planters, as well as poorer whites, perceived this unionization as a threat to white control of the local economy and banded together to bring an end to what they perceived to be mounting Black insubordination.¹³¹ The Black union, looking to keep their meetings private, posted several armed guards outside of a building they were convening in.¹³²

¹²⁹ Some also appear to have attended a church in Newton to the east of the county.

¹³⁰ Many historians have written on this 'Red Summer.' Jan Voogd, *Race Riots and Resistance: The Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008); Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods: The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice That Remade a Nation*, (New York: Crown Books, 2008); Jeannie Whayne, "Black Farmers in the Red Autumn: A Review Essay," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 68 (Autumn 2008): 327-336; Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2012); David F. Krugler, *1919, The Year of Racial Violence: How African Americans Fought Back* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹³¹ Jeannie Whayne has pointed out that it was not any single class of whites that led this violence. Jeannie M. Whayne, "Low Villains and Wickedness in High Places: Race and Class in the Elaine Riots," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 58 (Autumn 1999): 285-313.

¹³² The racial violence in Elaine has been written about by many historians. Ida Wells Barnett, *The Arkansas Race Riot* (Chicago: Hume Job Print, 1920); Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods*, 2008; Guy Lancaster, *The Elaine Massacre and Arkansas: A Century of Atrocity and Resistance, 1819-1919* (Little Rock: Butler Center Books, 2018); Steven Anthony, "The Elaine Riot of 1919: Race, Class, and Labor in the Arkansas Delta" (Ph.D.

Angered by the secret nature of this union, white community members sent three officers including a deputy sheriff to investigate. Although accounts vary over who started the altercation, W. D. Adkins, a white agent with the Missouri Pacific Railroad was shot and killed. Charles Pratt, the deputy sheriff, was also wounded by gunshot. Infuriated by this event, a posse of 500-1,000 white men arrived the next morning in Elaine to put down what they considered to be a Black insurrection in the making. False rumors of conspiracies of Black citizens hoping to start a race war by killing all white residents spread throughout the region. Governor Charles Brough ordered U.S. Army troops to help put down this violence. These troops, along with the large local white posse, commenced firing on Black citizens in the region – likely killing somewhere between fifty and two hundred in the process including many that had not participated in the union.¹³³ Hundreds of other Black community members were arrested. The Elaine Massacre of 1919 is now regarded one of the bloodiest racial conflicts in American history.¹³⁴

While Governor Brough was instrumental in directing the violent actions taken against the Black community members of Elaine, his successor - Thomas McRae - would be the one largely responsible for cleaning up in the aftermath. News outlets sympathetic to Black rights like *The Crisis*, *The Nation*, and *The Survey* began publishing incriminating articles taking Arkansas to task for its aggressive actions at Elaine.¹³⁵ Governor Brough (and later McRae)

Diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2019); Grif Stockley, Brian K. Mitchell, and Guy Lancaster. *Blood in their Eyes: The Elaine Massacre of 1919*, (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2020).

¹³³ Historians continue to debate whether the federal troops sent by Governor Brough fired indiscriminately at Black citizens. Grif Stockley and Jeannie M. Whyne, “Federal Troops and the Elaine Massacres: A Colloquy,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 61 (Autumn 2002): 272-283

¹³⁴ The numbers of the dead range from 2-800. Depending on the number, the incident is possibly the deadliest racial dispute in American history.

¹³⁵ Walter White, “Massacring Whites’ in Arkansas,” *The Nation*, Vol. CIX, No. 2840 (December 6, 1919): 715-716; “The Race Conflict in Arkansas,” *The Survey*, Vol. XLIII, No. 7 (December 13, 1919): 233-234; “The Real Causes of Two Race Riots,” *The Crisis*, Vol. 19, No. 2, (December 1919): 56-62.

understood that it was becoming increasingly necessary to keep stories of extralegal violence against Black citizens hidden from the rest of the nation – especially as courts were litigating in the aftermath of Elaine.¹³⁶ It is crucial to remember that, at this time, Arkansas wanted to encourage population growth through immigration from Europe as well as other states across the south. It also needed outside investors who had faith in the economic stability of the state. All of this required the state to demonstrate it could maintain law and order without having its citizens resort to violence in the streets. Establishing governmental oversight was key to the state's success going forward.¹³⁷

Thomas Chipman McRae was inaugurated as Arkansas Governor on January 12, 1921, hoping to prioritize economic, tax, and infrastructure measures.¹³⁸ His attention was quickly drawn away from these issues after the widely publicized lynching of a Black man in Mississippi County just two weeks into his term. As a result of this lynching (and the legal aftermath of Elaine), McRae was forced to shift his immediate attention to the more pressing issues of race, violence, and extrajudicial justice - or more explicitly, how to maintain law and order (which was vital to Arkansas's economy) in a state where white communities seemed determined to use violence to uphold white supremacy. On Christmas Day 1920, Henry Lowery, a Black tenant farmer from Mississippi County, confronted planter O.T. Craig over the incorrect pricing of his crops.¹³⁹ Arriving at the home of Craig during the family's dinner, Lowery demanded a written

¹³⁶ *The Crisis* notes that Governor Brough had taken steps to censor the publication for readers in Arkansas. "The Real Causes of Two Race Riots," 60.

¹³⁷ A similar claim was made by the *Arkansas Gazette* for why violence amongst citizens needed to be stopped by state officials. "Night Riding Must Not Be Tolerated in Arkansas," *Arkansas Gazette*, October 9, 1908, p. 4.

¹³⁸ W. David Baird, "Thomas Chipman McRae, 1921-1925," in *The Governors of Arkansas: Essays in Political Biography*, edited by Timothy P. Donovan, Willard B. Gatewood Jr., and Jeannie M. Wayne (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), 160.

¹³⁹ Jeannie Wayne, "Henry Lowery Lynching: A Legacy of the Elaine Massacre," in *Race, Labor, and Violence in the Delta*, 65.

settlement of accounts. Craig was furious at the insubordination of one of his tenants and the two shouted at each other. What happened next is unclear, but shots were fired. Once the smoke cleared, Craig and his oldest daughter were dead.¹⁴⁰

Lowery, wounded during the shootout, escaped to the backwoods of Arkansas “with bloodhounds and mobs on his trail.”¹⁴¹ Managing to elude capture for several days, he fled to El Paso, Texas where he was eventually identified and arrested.¹⁴² Pat Neff, the Governor of Texas, demanded of McRae that Lowery be given a fair trial if handed over. McRae, facing pressure from both Neff and the NAACP, wanted the same. Given these assurances, Lowery was put on a train for transport to Little Rock under heavily armed guard. McRae was as shocked as anyone to hear, then, that Lowery’s train was intercepted in Sardis, Mississippi (many miles east of Little Rock) by a group of rogue white community members who forcefully removed the prisoner from the custody of state officers. Later that night, on January 26, 1921, Lowery was burned to death at Nodena Landing in Mississippi County.¹⁴³

The brutal lynching of Henry Lowery garnered national and international attention - creating further bad press for Arkansas.¹⁴⁴ As historian Karlos Hill has demonstrated, the lynching even became a key talking point in the NAACP’s anti-lynching campaign of the early 1920s.¹⁴⁵ The association produced a pamphlet entitled “An American Lynching” that provided several newspaper responses to Lowery’s lynching, showing how barbaric the use of

¹⁴⁰ Wayne, “Henry Lowery Lynching,” 66. Karlos Hill, *Beyond the Rope: The Impact of Lynching on Black Culture and Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁴¹ Wayne, “Henry Lowery Lynching,” 66.

¹⁴² “Negro, Hunted by Arkansas Mob, Tells El Paso Detective of Slaying Two Men on Farm,” *El Paso Herald*, January 19, 1921, p. 4.

¹⁴³ “Mob Burns Negro after 100 Mile Trip,” *New York World*, January 27, 1921, p. 4

¹⁴⁴ Wayne, “Henry Lowery Lynching,” 70.

¹⁴⁵ Hill, *Beyond the Rope*, 49-66.

extrajudicial violence had been.¹⁴⁶ Governor McRae was furious.¹⁴⁷ He had expected Lowery to get a fair trial and was quoted as being astounded by the “lamb-like docility” of the officers who had been tasked to transport him safely and were overpowered by a group of local citizens.¹⁴⁸ In response, McRae gave a statement showing his exasperation with local officers:

I make no comment on the roundabout way in which the negro was brought from El Paso. I have no sufficient facts before me, and it is possible that none the many messages I sent by telegraph, telephone, and letter may have reached the officer in charge of the man. But I consider the happening most disgraceful and inexcusable. The negro had surrendered and had consented to return without requisition, relying upon a fair trial by the courts. This I had promised him, considering that he would be brought directly here, where he could be held safely until the time of the trial. I shall recommend to the legislature the enactment of a law which will place the responsibility directly upon the officers having custody of prisoners and will recommend some act by which a sheriff who permits or does not prevent, the lynching of a prisoner in his charge be removed from office.¹⁴⁹

McRae’s powerlessness in preventing the lynching of Henry Lowery further exposed his inability to maintain law and order when it came to issues of racialized violence. McRae would push for legislation to punish sheriffs who did not do everything in their power to stop these lynchings, but nothing would come of this request.¹⁵⁰ Likewise, little was done to stop the violence at its stem – by punishing those who had committed the lynching. No federal or state anti-lynching law was ever passed. Of the six cars carrying over twenty men that had violently taken Lowery away from state officers, none were ever brought to trial or punished for their actions, despite being undoubtedly known throughout the community.

¹⁴⁶ “An American Lynching: Being the Burning at Stake of Henry Lowry [sic] at Nodena, Arkansas, January 26, 1921, as Told in American Newspapers,” (New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). A digital copy can be found at <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/pageturn/mums312-b017-i452/#page/1/mode/1up>.

¹⁴⁷ “Governor Irate at Lynching of Negro: Will Ask for Law Providing for Removal of Weak-Kneed Officers,” *Arkansas Gazette*, January 27, 1921, p. 1.

¹⁴⁸ “Mob Burns Negro After 100-Mile Trip,” p. 4.

¹⁴⁹ A transcript of McRae’s statement can be found in this article. “Governor Irate at Lynching of Negro,” p. 1.

¹⁵⁰ Whyne, “Henry Lowery Lynching,” 75-76.

Still, McRae's experiences in dealing with the public backlash of the Elaine Massacre and Lowery Lynching would have a profound impact on how he would deal with the racial violence that would come out of Catcher only two years later. McRae understood that it was becoming increasingly necessary to use the power of the state to mitigate the violent action of vigilantes.¹⁵¹ McRae and officials around the state would begin seeking new ways to diminish the racial violence that was coming out of these areas by allowing the government to take control of this violence through both the courts and local officers. As will be shown, state legislation was reconsidered in ways to help transform 'illegitimate' violence, perpetrated by mobs of community members against minority groups, into 'legitimate' violence performed by the state through capital murder trials and other means.¹⁵² Governor McRae would never advocate for full Black legal equality, but he well understood that legitimating the process of trial and sentencing would help prevent citizen-led violence from casting a bad light on the rest of the state. Importantly, these legal decisions would be guided by white community members at every turn. Many white men and women were only willing to reject outright violence in their communities if it meant having increased power through other avenues. This became a desirable choice considering the outcomes of a legitimized 'nonviolent' approach would be largely indistinguishable from messier, violent forms of white control that had historically been implemented.¹⁵³

The legitimization of 'nonviolent' racism and prejudice through all levels of American society is no better encapsulated than through the second iteration of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Guy Lancaster, *American Atrocity*, 56.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

the 1920s.¹⁵⁴ The organization was revived in 1916 following the immense success of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, a film considered by many to be Hollywood's first blockbuster movie.¹⁵⁵ The film portrayed newly freed Black citizens destroying what was left of the post-war south, attempting to rape southern white women in the process before ultimately being stopped by members of the KKK. The film was widely viewed across America. President Woodrow Wilson even held a private showing at the White House – making the film quite possibly the first movie ever to be shown there.¹⁵⁶ Wilson publicly supported the film, claiming “it is like writing history with lighting. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.”¹⁵⁷ The success of *The Birth of a Nation* helped spark a nationwide resurgence of the Klan from the years 1916 to 1926.¹⁵⁸ Over this decade, the second iteration of the Klan became shockingly mainstream, touting massive enrollment numbers anywhere from two to five million members nationwide – most notably north of the Mason-Dixon line. The large membership of the 1920s KKK is pointed out by historians to help dispel any notion that the group was only filled with crazy, uneducated,

¹⁵⁴ The KKK would espouse rhetorically the importance of ‘nonviolent’ actions. Nevertheless, the actions taken by the Klan to influence local communities was always undergirded by a history of violence that allowed nonviolent approaches to be successful.

¹⁵⁵ Maxim Simcovitch, “The Impact of Griffith’s ‘Birth of a Nation’ on the Modern Ku Klux Klan,” *Journal of Popular Film* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1972): 45-54. Simcovitch, as many other historians after her, argues that the 1916 film was the spark point for the rise of the 1920s Klan.

¹⁵⁶ Arthur Lennig, “Myth and Fact: The Reception of *The Birth of a Nation*,” *Film History* 16 (April 2004): 117-141; “Movies on the Lawn,” *Washington Post*, June 27, 1914. *Cabiria* was likely the first movie shown at the White House in June 1914. In this case, *Birth of a Nation* was the second movie ever shown in the White House.

¹⁵⁷ Mark E. Benbow, “Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and ‘Like Writing History with Lightning,’” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, Vol. 9, no. 4 (October 2010): 509-533. Benbow believes the quotations to be possibly misattributed to Wilson leading to a collective story that has been repeated countless times. Nevertheless, Wilson was clearly a racist and no doubt gave support to the film.

¹⁵⁸ Unlike the first iteration of the KKK in the Reconstruction era 1860s, the 1920s Klan claimed to want to move away from using violence as the primary means of achieving its long-term goals for American society. Instead, the organization attempted to use modern methods of rallying, marketing, and even carnivals to drum up political support for candidates they believed would seek the prejudicial changes they were demanding. The Klan was largely successful in this endeavor. Linda Gordon has concluded in her work that the Klan infiltrated all levels of the U.S. government, influencing nominations, lobbying publicly for certain legislation, and forcing its agenda into public view. Around sixteen U.S. Senators and dozens of Representatives were card-carrying Klan members. Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Liveright, 2017), 164-165.

and backwater supporters.¹⁵⁹ Quite the contrary, the 1920s Klan was filled with perfectly reasonable citizens and was considered ordinary and respectable in its time.¹⁶⁰

The second iteration of the Klan was particularly popular in Arkansas.¹⁶¹ The state held 150 Klan chapters boasting tens of thousands of members.¹⁶² Unlike the Klan chapters in the north, however, the KKK of Arkansas was far more prone to turning to extralegal violence to achieve its community goals.¹⁶³ Kenneth Barnes, the leading expert on the Arkansas Klan, argues that while the organization hoped to find solutions through benign political avenues, it was more than willing to resort to extralegal violence when other diplomatic channels failed.¹⁶⁴ This willingness to turn to violence if legal or political solutions were not established was well understood by Governor McRae who was regarded by the KKK as a “friendly neutral” during his

¹⁵⁹ A key point of contention in the historiography of the 1920s Klan is establishing the average member. Early historians tended to favor the belief that they were rural, dumb, and uneducated. More recent works have shown that the second Klan was highly respected and made up of middle-class, urban, Protestants more than any other group. With that said, the appeal of Klan rhetoric stretched across all classes. Charles Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1965); Arnold Rice, *The Ku Klux Klan in American Politics* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1972); Wyn Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1987); Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁶⁰ Many historians have made this point, but Gordon’s work argues it most effectively. Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*.

¹⁶¹ The 1920s Klan was shockingly mainstream in Arkansas. Donald Holley and Kenneth Barnes have both uncovered secret roll call lists for the Klan chapters in Monticello and Bentonville. In both cases, they found that enrollment numbers likely hovered around fifteen percent of all white males – a number on pace with estimations by researchers of other states across the nation. Donald Holley, “A Look Behind the Masks: The 1920s Ku Klux Klan in Monticello, Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 60 (Summer, 2001): 131-150; Kenneth Barnes, “The Ku Klux Klan in Faulkner County, 1921–1924,” *Faulkner Facts and Fiddlings* 56 (Fall/Winter 2014): 20-39; Kenneth Barnes, “Another Look behind the Masks: The Ku Klux Klan in Bentonville, Arkansas, 1922-1926,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 76 (2017): 191–217.

¹⁶² Charles Alexander, “White Robed Reformers: The Ku Klux Klan Comes to Arkansas, 1921-1922,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 22 (Spring 1963): 8-23; Charles Alexander, “White Robes in Politics: The Ku Klux Klan in Arkansas 1922-1924,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 22 (Autumn 1963): 195-214; Charles C. Alexander, “Defeat, Decline, Disintegration: The Ku Klux Klan in Arkansas 1924 and After,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 22 (Winter 1963): 311-331.

¹⁶³ Brooks Blevins, “The Strike and the Still: Anti-Radical Violence and the Ku Klux Klan in the Ozarks,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 52 (1993): 405-425; Guy Lancaster, “Many a Civil Monster: Lynching and the Ku Klux Klan in Hot Springs, 1922,” *The Record* (2019): 4.1–4.22. Both these works make this point effectively, pushing back on the national works by historians like Linda Gordon that violence was not used by the second Klan.

¹⁶⁴ Kenneth Barnes, *The Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Arkansas: How Protestant White Nationalism Came to Rule a State* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2021), 5.

time in office.¹⁶⁵ McRae's primary concern of keeping the state moving forward economically often meant appeasing Klan demands to prevent the association from turning to violence.¹⁶⁶ As a result, this 'invisible empire' of the 1920s held substantial control across the natural state. Even when the Klan did ultimately turn to extrajudicial violence - as occurred during the Harrison Railroad Riot of 1923 – the Governor did little to hold them accountable.¹⁶⁷

The area in and around Catcher was heavily influenced by this invisible empire. The KKK chapter operating in Fort Smith was one of the earliest and largest Klans in the state.¹⁶⁸ *The Searchlight*, a Klan newspaper in Atlanta, even described how one correspondent (along with around 200 others) were initiated by the Fort Smith Klan in March 1922. The men were alleged to have been brought blindfolded deep into a forest outside of town. The men were momentarily allowed to glimpse the scene around him and saw, "a crowd of robed figures, estimated at 1,500-2,000 men, gathered round an immense American flag and flaming cross."¹⁶⁹ The Fort Smith chapter had huge meetings and constantly funded causes they believed to be good for the towns surrounding them. Alma and Van Buren, likewise, had extremely active Klan chapters.¹⁷⁰ An October 1922 edition of *The Searchlight* reported that over a thousand Klansmen assembled on a hill north of Van Buren and initiated a class of their own.¹⁷¹ A local citizen of Alma remarked on how he could "remember seeing a large Klan rally where the Alma football

¹⁶⁵ Alexander, "White Robes in Politics," 205.

¹⁶⁶ The Klan kept an active state-by-state evaluation of all U.S. Senators based on their support of the Klan's overall goals. Rory McVeigh, *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan: Right-Wing Movements and National Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), figure 12.

¹⁶⁷ During the Harrison Railroad Riot in 1923, white locals, fed up with the actions of a railroad union and led by members of the KKK, formed a one-thousand men mob that used force to violently break the strike.

¹⁶⁸ Inside these Klan chapters were prominent citizens. Barnes found that the average Klan member in Arkansas was respectable, middle-class, and Protestant. Barnes, *The Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Arkansas*, 4-7.

¹⁶⁹ "Klan initiations in Fort Smith, Arkansas," *The Searchlight*, March 11, 1922, p. 6.

¹⁷⁰ It is unclear if Alma and Van Buren had separate Klan chapters or a combined one. The way the meetings are discussed leads more credence to the belief that there were two different chapters.

¹⁷¹ "Klan initiations in Van Buren, Arkansas," *The Searchlight*, October 28, 1922, p. 4.

field is now...it was very impressive, and I can see why chicken thieves would quit.”¹⁷² Besides just stopping chicken thievery, these three Klan chapters were heavily involved in directing their local communities. Most commonly, they would use their power to influence how judges and juries operated. The Klan was said to have given funding to prosecutors if they wanted them to bring cases against certain members of the community.¹⁷³ Kenneth Barnes has even found that “the circuit court in Crawford County refused the attempt of lawyers during *voir dire* to ask whether prospective jurors were members of the Klan.”¹⁷⁴



Image Two: The “Keep Klean Klub” Suit Shop (Pictured Left) on Main Street in Van Buren.¹⁷⁵

The Klan would use this power to dominate communities ideologically. It was common for a local chapter to provide rewards for help in arresting people, in many cases “actively assist[ing] law enforcement officers in identifying lawbreakers and bringing them to justice.”¹⁷⁶ Likewise, the Klan would often make explicit and implicit threats to judges and juries to help influence their verdicts in key cases. Barnes discusses how, in a case in his own families’ history,

¹⁷² J. C. Starbird, “Ku Klux Klan in Krawford Kounty,” *The Heritage* 21 (March 1978): 9-10.

¹⁷³ Marcus Blair, “Ku Klux Klan Played Politics in Fort Smith,” *Southwest Times Record*, July 4, 1999, p. 124.

¹⁷⁴ Barnes, *The Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Arkansas*, 62.

¹⁷⁵ Ray Hanley and Steven Hanley, *Sebastian and Crawford Counties* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 1999), 94.

¹⁷⁶ Barnes, *The Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Arkansas*, 61.

the KKK – wearing their full infamous garb - simply entered the courtroom during a trial and thanked the judge for his work.¹⁷⁷ This action suggested the outcome the Klan desired.

Unsurprisingly, such a verdict was returned days later. Even when the Klan did not explicitly place itself in the middle of an issue, it was well understood the larger power the secret group held over how local communities would operate. Violence always lurked under the surface, ready to strike if a pro-Klan outcome was not delivered.

The three Klan chapters in Fort Smith, Van Buren, and Alma formed a small triangle around Catcher and were at the zenith of their powers by late 1923 when the racial cleansing of the town would unfold. Few have considered the role of the KKK in this racial violence, but those that have appear to believe it had no bearing on the incident:

while there was something of a country race riot of Catcher southeast of Oak Grove somewhere around this time, it does not seem to be connected to the Klan. It resulted in a large number of black people moving to Fort Smith.¹⁷⁸

The notion that these active Klan chapters would not have been acutely interested in the rumors of three Black men raping a young white woman is difficult to reconcile. No evidence has surfaced, however, that proves the Klan played an explicit role in this particular violence. That is, the group did not force these Black citizens out while wearing their traditional outfits or by decree of the Klan. Nevertheless, many of these white community members who advocated for using force to remove Black citizens from the town were likely card-carrying members of the Klan. Even those that weren't members would have undoubtedly been bolstered by the massive current sweeping across Arkansas and the rest of the nation throughout the 1920s that advocated using white supremacist beliefs to legislate over local communities. When legitimate channels of enforcing this control – laws, courts, police – were unwilling to sustain white authority, the Klan

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, ix-x.

¹⁷⁸ Starbird, “Ku Klux Klan in Krawford Kounty,” 9.

and ordinary white citizens were more than willing to turn to explicit violence to force their objectives.

The commonly used methods of the Klan – guiding investigations, pressuring judges, lynch mob tactics – would all be used in Catcher even if not upon the explicit orders of the KKK itself. So, at the same time the fourth star was being added to the top of the Arkansas state flag to signify its historic membership in the Confederate States of America – a treasonous government founded solely to keep slavery legalized – the town of Catcher expelled with impunity a significant portion of its town’s population based solely on the color of their skin.¹⁷⁹ To not correlate the rise of the second iteration of the KKK at the same time as this racial cleansing would be a mistake. This normalization of prejudice - making it mainstream, institutionalized, and legitimate - was a key tenet of Klan ideology in 1920s and one that played a key role in how the 1923 racial cleansing of Catcher unfolded.

Politicized prejudice swept across the state, nation, and globe throughout the 1920s.¹⁸⁰ That alone, though, does not explain why a racial cleansing occurred inside Catcher in 1923. Instead, it is necessary to look beyond just race to truly explain the rise of violence against this specific Black community. While racism would make the cleansing of Catcher possible – leaving Black citizens historically powerless to stop it from occurring – a mixture of other factors made such a cleansing desirable. Guy Lancaster has reiterated this in his own general investigation into

¹⁷⁹ Airic Hughes, Will Teague, and Marie Totten, “A Confederate Star: Arkansas’ Flag and the Lost Cause,” University of Arkansas Libraries, October 16, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o8dINhK_i34&t=4122s

¹⁸⁰ A nationwide (and global) attempt to assemble a racial hierarchy of superiority was very common during this time and backed by many. Madison Grant’s work was perhaps the most infamous. It proposed a theory of Nordic superiority over all other races. Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race or The Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916).

Black expulsion in Arkansas, stating that there were many antecedents for why racial cleansings occurred including a mixture of racism, criminality, land, labor, and politics.¹⁸¹

One outside factor that is imperative not to overlook in the case of Catcher was the newfound awareness, in the years leading up to 1923, that natural gas wells underneath Crawford County could be profitable for citizens who owned the mineral rights to them. Natural gas wells had been discovered throughout the Arkoma Basin in the late 1880s.¹⁸² Vast wells were tapped in Fort Smith and Van Buren as early as 1907, but it was assumed there was no way to make substantial money off the gas.¹⁸³ In the first few years after discovery, such wells were considered largely insignificant and were only practically used to fuel streetlamps in the city – saving the lamplighter who would have had to otherwise ride one-by-one lighting lamps on moonless nights.¹⁸⁴ This mindset began to change around the time of World War One. It soon became apparent that there were unexploited markets for natural gas in generating electricity. Production levels skyrocketed. While little commercial production of natural gas in Crawford County had occurred before 1915, by 1923 there were around 3,000,000 cubic feet of gas pulled out of the county per year – providing some \$190,000 for citizens in the region.¹⁸⁵ These numbers would dramatically spike over the next few decades as natural gas was found to be useful in glassmaking, chemical weapons, and fertilizers after the war. The value of these mineral rights would continue to rise before dwindling in the 1970s – leading to millions of dollars in minerals pulled out of the ground in the county.

¹⁸¹ Lancaster, *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas*, 1-12.

¹⁸² Gerald Forbes, “Brief History of the Petroleum Industry in Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 1 (March 1942): 28–40; Larry Taylor, “Natural Gas,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, September 1, 2022. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/natural-gas-4251/>

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ Mary L. Crider, “Discovery of Natural Gas Fuels City’s Growth,” *Insight 2000*, 96.

¹⁸⁵ See table below for further details.

The largest of the early gas fields in Arkansas was found in Kibler – five miles east of Catcher – in late 1915. J. S. Burke informed the *Southwest American* soon after “I have been drilling wells in Oklahoma and other southwestern fields for twenty years and the well at Kibler is the greatest gas well I ever saw...the news of the big well is spreading far and wide.”¹⁸⁶ P. L. Bucy, an oil executive from Oklahoma arrived in Crawford County not long after and echoed the need to buy up large swaths of land before others did, “I am going after it...I intend to lease [as much as I can] this week.”¹⁸⁷ Newspapers across the state began reporting on the hysteria caused by these potential minerals under citizens’ land. The *Southwest American* began running an “Oil and Gas News” section every other Sunday to update citizens on the recent discoveries in Arkansas and Oklahoma. Fort Smith seized upon this discovery of gas in the area to appeal to migrants from other states. A 1923 brochure released by the city’s chamber of commerce boasted about the natural gas supply alongside its railroads and glass factories.¹⁸⁸ Other cities throughout the Arkoma Basin began following suit, realizing in the aftermath of the oil discoveries in El Dorado, that local communities stood a lot to gain by boasting even the potential of resources within its borders.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ “More Natural Gas Than Neighboring Cities Can Use Certain in New Field,” *Southwest American*, November 18, 1915, p. 1.

¹⁸⁷ “Bucy Believes Oil is Here; Will Develop,” *Southwest American*, May 14, 1916, p. 2.

¹⁸⁸ The cover of this brochure was reproduced in Crider, *Insight 2000*, 97.

¹⁸⁹ The discovery of immense oil reserves in El Dorado, Arkansas in the late 1910s also helped spark a nationwide shift in the mindset of citizens and the state concerning the importance of natural resources below their land. Standard Oil Company - one of fifty-nine competing oil contracting companies in El Dorado - purchased access to a large amount of these citizens’ mineral rights for \$2,225,000 alone. This would have been, adjusted for inflation, worth \$40,177,540 today. Glen Martel, “Oil and Gas in Southwest Arkansas,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 4 (Autumn 1945): 196–214; El Dorado’s population surged from 4,000 residents in 1921 to 30,000 in 1925 as people across the country fled to the city hoping to find fame and fortune by being around the oil. Such discoveries helped changed the nationwide mindset regarding citizen’s owning land near such minerals. A.R. Buckalew and R.B. Buckalew, “The Discovery of Oil in South Arkansas, 1920-1924,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 33 (Autumn 1974): 197; For an overview article on the impact of oil discovery in El Dorado on the rest of the region see. Kenneth Bridges, “El Dorado (Union County,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, March 13, 2023. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/el-dorado-999/#:~:text=El%20Dorado%20is%20the%20county,oil%20boom%20in%20South%20Arkansas.>

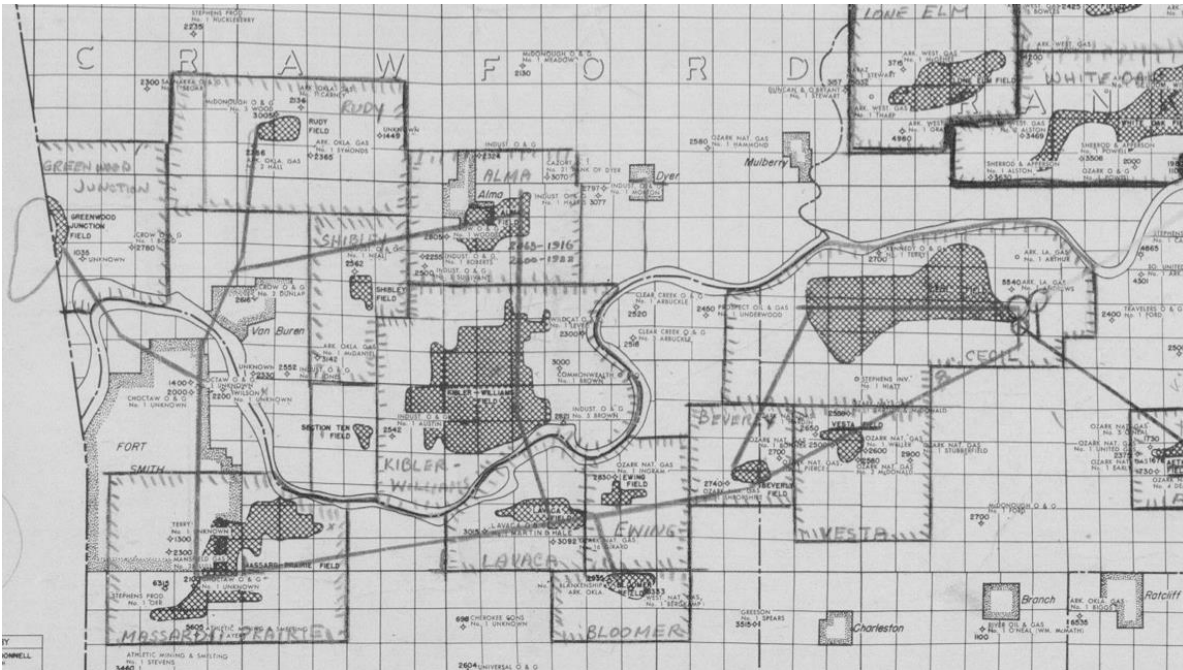


Image Three: The Gas Fields of Crawford County – Notice the Fields North, South, and East of Catcher.¹⁹⁰

Black families owned large swaths of land in the area just west of the Kibler gas field – several even began receiving payments for their land. Newspapers of the period would, in a shocking lack of privacy, list the contracts between oil and gas companies and citizens – going as far as to say the names and locations of these families. In a 1915 edition of the *Southwest American*, for instance, the Clear Creek Oil & Gas Company contracts take up several pages. Several Black families of Catcher reported their contracts: Tandy and Eliza Coggs had a three-year contract over sixty acres they owned; Frank and Johnoma Sanders had a three-year contract on forty acres; Harrison and Betty Richardson had three years on forty acres; Silas and Dora Ricks had three years on seventy acres; Pleasant and Kate Richardson had five years on twenty acres.¹⁹¹ These families began to bring in considerable amounts of money on land they had bought within the last ten years. Many of the other families in the area began wondering if they

¹⁹⁰ J. L. McDonnell, “Arkansas Valley Well Location Map With Fields,” Division of Geology, Arkansas Resources and Development Commission, Little Rock, 1956: <https://www.aogc.state.ar.us/maps/Historical/Fields/Arkansas%20Valley%20Well%20Location%20Map%20With%20Fields.pdf>.

¹⁹¹ “Oil and Gas Lease Record,” *Southwest American*, November 24, 1915, p. 12.

had land that was also on top of gas. Far less land changed hands inside the county between 1910 and 1920, likely as a result.¹⁹²

Three years later, another major gas field –Williams Field - was discovered just two miles southeast of Catcher in 1919. Local papers reported that it was estimated to be even bigger than the one found in Kibler.¹⁹³ The Crowe Oil & Gas Company bought up a huge amount of the mineral rights in the area and soon discovered that the field held 12,000,000 feet of natural gas.¹⁹⁴ It was reported that “large holders of leases across the [area] were congratulating themselves yesterday on the recent developments in the Crawford gas field.”¹⁹⁵ The largest access to this well was found to be on the property of a Black community member - Charles Rucks. The well, referred to as the “Charley Rucks tract” in newspapers would become synonymous with the Williams Field.¹⁹⁶ The largest of these wells is still labelled under Rucks’ name to this day.¹⁹⁷ Rucks was later the first and only man murdered in the violence that would break out in Catcher in 1923 when he was killed by a recently deputized citizen. His son, Spurgeon, had been surprisingly named as one of the murderers of Effie Latimer only days before. All of this occurred just four years after his property was found to hold one of the county’s biggest natural gas wells. To not draw some inferences between the two would be a mistake.

¹⁹² The number of landowners in the region can be tracked roughly using the census. The earliest property records (with full records is 1919). It appears the sale of land dropped immensely once gas was discovered in 1915. “Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County for the Year 1919”; “Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County for the Year 1923.”

¹⁹³ “Another Gas Well In Williams Field,” *Southwest American*, March 23, 1919, p. 1.

¹⁹⁴ “Latest Crowe Gas Well Brings 12,000,000 Feet More For Fuel,” *Southwest American*, June 24, 1919, p. 1.

¹⁹⁵ “Big New Gas Wells Put Added Impetus Into Development,” *Southwest American*, June 25, 1919, p. 1.

¹⁹⁶ This article is one of several to refer to the site as the ‘Charley Rucks’ well. “Big New Gas Wells,” p. 1.

¹⁹⁷ The well near Catcher is still known as the Rucks’ tract on the Arkansas Oil and Gas Commission website. <https://aogc.state.ar.us/WellData/Wells.aspx>

The Commercial Value of Natural Gas Production in Crawford County, 1923-1930 ¹⁹⁸			
Year:	Production (in Cubic Feet):	Value:	Adjusted for Inflation:
1923	3,879,543	\$192,482	\$3,293,203
1924	3,780,303	\$185,361	\$3,157,480
1925	4,742,284	\$229,808	\$3,821,616
1926	5,307,434	\$238,268	\$3,926,859
1927	4,496,815	\$262,611	\$4,413,242
1928	3,762,518	\$218,659	\$3,717,450
1929	2,701,957	\$186,719	\$3,174,434
1930	2,218,990	\$131,044	\$2,289,040

From 1919-1923, gas wells were setup all across the Kibler and Williams fields, bringing in hundreds of thousands of additional dollars for families – many Black – who owned the mineral rights. Unsurprisingly, disputes over who owned such land often broke out amongst neighbors. In a case from the Black community, for instance, Allen Bobo (who had helped fund the construction of the 1880 St. Paul’s Church and Cemetery) was found severely injured with a fractured skull.¹⁹⁹ The *Southwest America* reported that J. B. Cox had struck the older man after hearing that Bobo had talked to a girl, he was interested in.²⁰⁰ Cox was arrested for the crime but

¹⁹⁸ “Natural Gas Records in Crawford County,” box 66, folder 5 (Crawford County), MSH62, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The adjusted inflation of these numbers was provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Their website has an inflation calculator that produced these findings. https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.html.

¹⁹⁹ Cox would claim the action was in self-defense. “Self Defense Cox Plea For Slaying Bobo,” *Southwest American*, December 1, 1916, p. 8.

²⁰⁰ Bobo eventually died because of the injuries. “Is Struck Over Head with Club; May Not Recover,” *Southwest American*, July 30, 1916, p. 8; “Blow on Head Fatal to Negro,” *Southwest American*, August 2, 1916, p. 2.

managed to escape for a couple days before he was tracked down by law enforcement. Cox was initially given five years by the jury but was later given a pardon by Governor George Hays.²⁰¹ Interestingly, tacked onto the end of most of this reporting was the notion that Bobo and Cox may have actually had an economic dispute with one another over who owned a tract of land that the Clear Creek Oil & Gas Company desired to lease for gas production.²⁰² The company had placed a massive gas line on Cox's property, which Bobo believed to be his, yet "evidence in the murder hearing failed to develop a connection with the litigation over the leases."²⁰³ Importantly, Bobo was reportedly going to file suit against the company for not properly ascertaining who owned the land. The fact that Governor Hays provided a pardon soon after the guilty verdict was issued likely raised some eyebrows.

Several of the other families who reported gas on their property like the Coggs, Ricks, Richardson, Rucks, and Sanders families likewise would be primary targets for the racial violence that would erupt in the town a few years later. Several would send their children to stay and fight for their right to the live and own land in the region. The lucrative minerals laying under this Black-held land unquestionably played a role in the changing nature of racial sentiments throughout the town. After the Civil War, Black citizens had lived in the area and were desired for work as sharecroppers and as laborers on the nearby railroads. While perhaps not treated equally, they had made good lives for themselves inside the community. By the 1910s, though, this began to change. Black community members were becoming landowners at extremely high rates. The 1920 census would be the first to report a majority of Black families owning land rather than renting in the area.²⁰⁴ Black citizens were now holding land that could

²⁰¹ "Cox Pardoned; Convicted But Few Days Ago," *Southwest American*, December 12, 1916; p. 10.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*.

be exponentially valuable. Jealousy as well as irritation at the changing racial hierarchy associated with these findings surely changed the sentiment of living near Black citizens for some in the white community.

Racially cleansing an area for economic benefit was not without precedent in American history. Native Americans, most notably, had been pushed across the country in the eighteenth and nineteenth century when valuable resources were discovered on land they hunted or farmed. Interestingly, during the 1920s boom of oil and gas in the Arkoma Basin, Native tribes once again felt the wrath of white citizens who desired their land. Studying one such example can reinforce the hysteria associated with these oil and gas booms of the 1920s. In his 2017 book, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, David Grann details how the Osage had been pushed from their hunting grounds in Kansas onto presumably worthless land in northern Oklahoma – 150 miles west of Catcher. The tribe’s luck changed, however, when large oil reserves were found under their land. Oil company owners like J.P. Getty and Frank Phillips had to come before the Osage to bid on the land at auction. In 1923, alone, “the tribe [of only 2,000 members] took in more than \$30 million, the equivalent today of more than \$400 million.”²⁰⁵ The Osage became by far the richest people per capita in the world with the average member of the tribe reportedly owning eleven cars each.

Believing the Osage incapable of managing such wealth responsibly, the United States’ Congress passed a law that required an American guardian for each Osage family to oversee their finances. Unsurprisingly, the system was wrought with corruption as these guardians attempted to swindle money from the tribe. A later case in 1929 found that \$27 million had been

²⁰⁵ David Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* (New York: Doubleday, 2017), 6.

stolen from these families by such guardians.²⁰⁶ Guardians were not the only ones trying to steal Osage oil. A few white community members began attempting to find ways to gain headrights to these minerals as well. In what became known as the “reign-of-terror,” murders of these Osage oil inheritors began one-by-one. One’s house was bombed, several were shot in the back of the head, five were poisoned.²⁰⁷ By 1923, the death toll had reached over twenty. At that point, the Bureau of Investigation (B.O.I.) began to take an interest in the killings – one of the first homicide investigations of the bureau.²⁰⁸ A lawyer looking into these murders for the bureau was himself thrown off a moving train to stop his investigation.²⁰⁹ The B.O.I. ultimately found and convicted only one man, William Hale, of murder. Hale had persuaded his nephew to marry a full-blooded Osage woman – Mollie Kyle. Soon, Kyle’s sisters, mother, and cousin were all arranged to be killed. When Hale’s plot was exposed by the B.O.I., Mollie herself was also being poisoned. Grann speculates there were likely hundreds of Osages who were killed in an effort to steal these mineral rights.²¹⁰

The oil and gas boom of the 1920s in the Arkoma Basin created a mania in the region as average citizens hoped to find channels to this extraordinary wealth. Because of the lucrative nature of these mineral rights, some white community members likely began to reconsider the ownership of land by minority citizens. Black and Native community members had lived relatively peaceful lives on land in the previous decades until these discoveries were made. This was largely because they had been in their subordinate place in society. The Osage had been pushed to what was presumed to be worthless land – out of the way of Americans seeking land in

²⁰⁶ Garrick Bailey, *Art of the Osage* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 142.

²⁰⁷ Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, 25-36.

²⁰⁸ This organization would later become the Federal Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I.)

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 113-125.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 280-291.

the midwest. Likewise, the Black community of Catcher provided crucial labor for the town. Neither group was a threat to white authority and so their existence in the region was largely uncontested. When it became known that these Black and Native groups owned land that was potentially valuable, this mindset may have started to have shift. Dorothy Jean Trambell, daughter of Will Bettis' wife, perhaps put it best when she was asked why her community was run out of Catcher. She replied immediately, "the land, to get the land."²¹¹

Many factors came together by December 1923 in Catcher, Arkansas that provided the foundation for why racialized violence would become increasingly likely against the Black community living there. Racism, politics, the rise of the KKK, labor, mineral rights, and land all played a role in creating a shift in mindset amongst some white citizens that minority groups no longer belonged inside their community. To focus solely on any one of these would neglect the importance of the others and leave out a crucial part of explaining why this Black expulsion ultimately occurred. Racial cleansings across the South, likewise, happened for a myriad of reasons that are difficult to categorize singularly. The common thread that bridged these cleansings was the minority status in American society of the groups involved. Black citizens (along with countless other racial and ethnic groups) had little recourse to stop violence occurring against them. Some white community members would leverage this historical privilege in society against these groups for personal gain, understanding their actions were unlikely to be prosecuted. Because Black citizens had historically been relegated to a subordinate status in American society, they were much easier targets to steal from. At the same time, Black landownership, wealth, and power were seen as threats to white control of the region. For all

²¹¹ Dorothy Jean Trambell was the later daughter of William Bettis' wife after she remarried. She was very interested in his life and asked her mother many questions about his life growing up despite not being directly related to him. Wanda Gray Interview of Dorothy Jean Trambell.

these reasons, some in the white community began to question the need for Black citizens inside the town. All that was needed was a spark point.

Chapter Two - The Murder of Effie Latimer

The return of soldiers from the war in Europe, the second revival of the Ku Klux Klan, and the discovery of lucrative gas reserves throughout the Arkoma basin all impacted Black-white relations in the region around Catcher. The societal and economic pressures associated with these concurrent events ignited in the town with the shocking murder of twenty-five-year-old Effie Mitchell Latimer.²¹² Around 2:30 p.m. on December 28, 1923, Latimer was found by her neighbor Florence Johnson in a pool of blood on her kitchen floor, barely clinging to life. She had been shot in the back with a shotgun at close range and clubbed on the head. Johnson called for help, but by the time Dr. B. L. Bennett of Kibler arrived on the scene, Effie's chances of survival were all but none. Bennett's efforts to save Effie proved unsuccessful. She was pronounced dead shortly before 5:00 p.m. that night. Bennett maintained that Latimer had come in and out of consciousness while he was providing aid and that she was lucid about what had just occurred. Most remarkably, he stated that she had managed to utter "Son Bettis shot me" to those at the scene.²¹³

This testimony would immediately turn the attention of investigators toward William 'Son' Bettis, a local cotton farmer living in the Black community of Catcher. The rumored guilt of Bettis in the murder - and presumed sexual assault - of Latimer would lead the white community of Crawford County to demand immediate retribution and provided the spark point necessary for the racial cleansing of the community that would take place over the next forty-eight hours. The belief that Black citizens were more criminalistic was reinforced by this rape

²¹² "Van Buren Woman Foully Murdered, Negro Identified," *Fayetteville Daily Democrat*, December 29, 1923, p. 1; "Farm Woman in Crawford County Dead," *Southwest American*, December 29, 1923, p. 1.

²¹³ "Negro Fiends Will Die in Electric Chair Feb. 15, Calmly Hear Sentence Read," *Van Buren Press Argus*, January 11, 1924, p. 1; "Van Buren Woman Foully Murdered, Negro Identified," p. 1; "Farm Woman in Crawford County Dead," p.1.

and murder was the last straw for many white community members. The brutal nature of the crime may have even pushed some neutral whites over the edge who might have otherwise advocated for the rights of Black citizens inside the town. Either way, it would not take long after Latimer's murder to remove the entirety of the Black population through a mixture of violence and legal tactics.

Effie Latimer has since become largely forgotten to history other than her role in this racial violence – that is to say, her murder. To properly understand the context of her death and ascertain who the likely culprit in her murder was, though, it is necessary to dig a bit more into the life of Effie and her immediate family to show why she was living alone in late December 1923. Doing so will not provide conclusive evidence that the three Black men accused of the crime were innocent, but it will cast serious doubts on the conclusions of local law enforcement. The racial undertones associated with sex across the color line as well as the belief in Black criminality would be essential in explaining why the racial expulsion of the community occurred.

Effie Nancy Mitchell was born on August 14, 1897, as the second (and last) child of Jesse Mitchell and Mary Mahala Orme.²¹⁴ Jesse and Mary formed a connection largely born of necessity when they met in Van Buren, Arkansas in 1892. Jesse was a widower with several kids and was in his sixties when he met Mary.²¹⁵ Mary Orme was a (likely) widow with six children

²¹⁴ Effie Latimer's birthday was found by looking at her death certificate. "Effie Mitchell Latimer," *Death Certificates, 1923*, Arkansas Department of Vital Records, Little Rock, Arkansas, Roll 6.

²¹⁵ Effie's father, Jesse, was born in Maury County, Tennessee in 1828 and married Martha Ann Latta in 1846. Jesse and Martha had six children over the next two decades before moving to Jefferson County, Illinois. In 1863, the thirty-six-year-old Jesse was drafted to fight for the Union Army of Illinois in the Civil War. After surviving the war, the family stayed in Illinois for the following few years. With their children out of the house, Martha and Jesse decided to move to Van Buren, AR sometime around 1880. For the next ten years, the husband and wife lived together as a small farm family near Catcher with one of their sons, John Mitchell, helping from a neighboring farm. In 1890, Martha died of influenza leaving the widowed Jesse to run the farm alone. The families' movements were tracked using the census records for 1870 and 1880. Jesse's service record can be found at "Union Soldiers Compiled Service Records, 1861-1865," National Archives and Records Administration; Washington, D.C.; Record Group Title: *Records of the AGO, 1780s-1917*; Record Group #: 94; Series Number: M395; Roll #: 0122. Copy found on ancestry.com.

of her own after her husband had “rode off into Indian territory and never returned.”²¹⁶ Mary had been left alone with the large household and feeling the burden of being a poor, single woman in rural Arkansas. Jesse Mitchell, coming off his wife’s recent death, likewise, would have been seeking help around the house so the two married on September 15, 1892, in Van Buren, AR when Jesse was sixty-four and Mary was thirty-six.²¹⁷

The pair had their first child, Jesse James, in late 1893. Effie was born four years later in 1897. The family owned a small farm in Catcher where Jesse worked as a farmer and Mary took care of the home and eight children. Tragedy struck in 1898 when the second deadliest tornado in Arkansas’s history formed over Fort Smith.²¹⁸ The cyclone made its way across the Arkansas River and into Crawford County where it killed fifty-five people.²¹⁹ The Mitchell family home was hit directly and Ed Blakemore, the fifteen-year-old from Mary’s previous marriage, was killed after being “carried away by the storm” in his sleep.²²⁰ His younger brother, Irving, was sleeping next to him and was severely injured but fortunately survived. The rest of the family was left unscathed, but the family’s home lay in ruins. By 1900, the family had managed to rebuild a life from the wreckage and were renting a small plot of land for Jesse and the teenage boys to farm.²²¹

²¹⁶ Linda Griffith interview with Tom Garrett (grandson of Daisy Blakemore), December 2010.

²¹⁷ Linda Griffith has done extensive genealogical research into her family and shared a family tree she had constructed with me. Author interview with Linda Griffith (great grandniece of Effie Latimer), October 2, 2020.

²¹⁸ Mark K. Christ, “Fort Smith Tornado of 1898,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, June 9, 2022. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/fort-smith-tornado-of-1898-9061/>

²¹⁹ “Appalling Disaster at Fort Smith.” *Arkansas Democrat*, January 12, 1898, p. 1; “Death-Dealing Wind and Flame.” *Arkansas Gazette*, January 13, 1898, p. 1–2; “Forty-five Dead.” *Arkansas Gazette*, January 15, 1898, p. 1.

²²⁰ “Unchained Elements Cause a Terrible Loss of Life and Property: The Number of Dead at Last Report Amount to Forty-Four,” *Van Buren Press Argus*, January 15, 1898, p. 1.

²²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900 – Population Schedules*. Found online at [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com)

By 1910, the life of the family had begun to change. Jesse, now at the age of eighty-two, continued to farm the rented plot of land as best he could. The remaining children from Mary's previous marriage had left the home to form their own lives in areas like Fort Smith, Missouri, and Oklahoma. The family now consisted of only Jesse, Mary, and the pair's two biological children. Jesse James, age sixteen, operated as a wage-earning laborer on various farms around the Van Buren township. The twelve-year-old Effie and her fifty-five-year-old mother completed the daily tasks in and around the home.²²²



Image Four: Effie and her brother, Jesse James, on a boat around 1910 – Courtesy of Linda Griffith.

Effie and Jesse were both still attending school at this point. While Jesse would have kept his primary focus on helping around the farm, both he and Effie could read and write.²²³ Effie appears to have done well in school, staying enrolled into her late teenage years. Interestingly,

²²² U.S. Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910 – Population Schedules*.

²²³ *Ibid.*

she is present in all her school photos wearing glasses - a strange occurrence for the period. Glasses would not become common, especially in a place like rural Arkansas, until the 1930s. They were considered medical appliances that would never have been worn for fashion or style. Wearing glasses was “considered to cause social humiliation” and only used as a last resort for someone with truly terrible vision.²²⁴ Because of this, a stigma often evolved around the use of glasses in the early twentieth century. There was a correlation formed between wearing glasses and having a mental handicap, especially for women. This would taint the view of the young girl into the modern era with one interviewer finding several descendants of Catcher recalling Effie to have been “mentally deficient.”²²⁵ This was echoed by Wanda Gray in the earliest forms of her *Encyclopedia of Arkansas* article but was reconsidered in the latest update of the entry.²²⁶ Discussions with Gray centered around whether these reports of her mental deficiency were truly valid.²²⁷ Interviews with descendants from Effie’s family - as well as the pictures of her attending school well into her teenage years - seem to put these rumors to bed.²²⁸ Nevertheless, they are important to remember when considering the narrative around her murder.

Not much more can be known about Effie’s family life around this period. It appears they were surviving year-to-year, but Jesse’s old age left the future of the family uncertain. These fears came to fruition when Jesse died in late Winter of 1912 at eighty-four years of age. Mary filed for a veteran pension in February 1913 but was encouraged to apply for the Confederate

²²⁴ Graham Pullin, *Design Meets Disability*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 16-17.

²²⁵ Moira Bryant completed a fascinating oral history of Catcher based on interviews with direct descendants. Bryant claimed that Latimer had mental problems in this work. Bryant, “Healing Catcher,” 48.

²²⁶ Wanda Gray died in the Summer of 2022. Her last update came in March of that year. Gray, “Catcher Race Riot of 1923.”

²²⁷ Gray admitted that she the belief that Effie was mentally deficient was told to her by people she had interviewed. The more she investigated Effie’s life, however, she found little evidence to corroborate this. Author interview with Wanda Gray.

²²⁸ Linda Griffith interview with Tom Garrett; Author interview with Linda Griffith.

pension of her previous husband instead.²²⁹ After providing substantial record of his involvement and capture in Virginia as part of the Confederate army, Mary was approved for a \$100 annual pension.²³⁰ Interestingly, she was not asked to provide record of his death as was often needed for a pension file of this nature. It was not known (and still isn't) whether her previous husband was truly dead at that point.

The \$100 afforded by the Confederate pension would have helped the family but would not have been enough to survive on.²³¹ In being approved for the pension, Mary had to state that she was indigent and unable to perform the manual labor necessary to bring in income. For this reason, the family was forced to give up its rented farm after Jesse's death. The family moved in with one of Mary's previous children, Daisy Blakemore Garrett, in Fort Smith, AR.²³² Housing Mary and Effie was likely a large burden for Daisy and her husband George who was working as a butcher in north Fort Smith. Jesse James did not move with the family and instead began his own life working as a farm laborer in Van Buren. He married Ada Goodman in 1913 and the pair moved to Oklahoma where Jesse took up work as a driver. He would later be drafted from the state to fight in World War One in 1917. Effie and Mary lived with the Garrett family as the war in Europe began. Effie had developed a burgeoning social life by this time. Various pictures from the period show Effie posing with friends and generally enjoying life.²³³ Still, it would have

²²⁹ It appears Mitchell could have applied for either a Union or Confederate pension – for either of her previous husbands. It is strange, then, that Mitchell would have applied for a Confederate pension when the benefits for Union soldiers was considerably better. Mary Mitchell Application for George W. Blakemore's Confederate Pension. Pension Certificate 17187; B. U. Ratchford and K. C. Heise, "Confederate Pensions," *Southern Economic Journal*, Vol. 5 (Oct. 1938): 209; Theda Skocpol, "America's First Social Security System: The Expansions of Benefits for Civil War Veterans," *Political Science Quarterly* 108 (Spring 1993): 100-102; Steven Warren, "Civil War Pensions," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, December 12, 2021.

²³⁰ Mary Mitchell Application for George W. Blakemore's Confederate Pension. Pension Certificate 17187. Filed July 24, 1912, by C. M. Wofford. County Clerk of Crawford County. Found on ancestry.com.

²³¹ Adjusted for inflation, \$100 in 1912 would be worth around \$3,000 now.

²³² In Mary's application for the pension, she references now living with Daisy and her husband.

²³³ Linda Griffith provided me copies of many pictures of Effie Latimer, some of which are used throughout this work. Author interview with Linda Griffith.

been too much of a burden to keep living with Daisy's family. Mary was sixty by this point and Effie, at nineteen, was not bringing in income to help the family. For this reason, Mary likely urged upon Effie the necessity to begin seeking a marriage. Finding a husband who could help bring in a weekly wage would be paramount to the mother and daughter's survival going forward.



Image Five: Effie and her mother, Mary, at their farm near Catcher Road – Courtesy of Linda Griffith.

It is unclear how Effie met Robert Cleveland Latimer. Much of Robert's life is difficult to piece together. He was born in Howell County, Missouri, in December 1884. The Latimers were living in south central Missouri until the turn of the century at which point the family moved to Osage, Oklahoma looking for new opportunities. Robert's father died in 1908 when he was twenty-four which left him alone to care for the family.²³⁴ Robert was still living and working in Osage, Oklahoma, when he met Effie. It seems much more likely that Robert came across Effie

²³⁴ Linda Griffith phone interview with Robert J. Latimer (son of Robert C. Latimer), June 11, 2008. Robert died in 2015 before the author could interview him. Transcript in author's possession.

while she was in Fort Smith than the opposite.²³⁵ Either way, the two married on March 19, 1917, in Crawford County. They listed Osage, Oklahoma as the place of residence on their marriage license.²³⁶ The two lived alone in northeast Oklahoma for the next two years. Robert registered for the draft in September 1918 but was not selected to serve as the war would end only a few months later.²³⁷

Effie and her mother were extremely close.²³⁸ Living far away from Mary would have been upsetting to Effie who had relied on her mother for her entire life. Likewise, Mary yearned to return to her home in Van Buren and saw Effie and her husband as the only chance of that happening.²³⁹ Mary got her wishes as Robert and Effie decided to move back to Crawford County to own and operate a farm. This angered Robert who would later recall the tension his mother-in-law put on their marriage. Around 1920, Mary with her Confederate pension and son-in-law's wages, saved enough to buy a small plot of land in Catcher, Arkansas. Situated only miles from the Black community on Catcher Road, the land was relatively cheap and provided a return to the life Mary had built over the last three decades. She placed herself – on the 1920 census – as the head of household over Effie and Robert.²⁴⁰

²³⁵ Linda Griffith believes that the pair met after Robert was introduced to Effie after working with her brother Jesse on a job. Author interview with Linda Griffith.

²³⁶ Marriage License for Effie Mitchell and Robert Latimer. *Arkansas, U.S., County Marriage Index, 1837-1957*. Found online. https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/2620099:2548?tid=&pid=&queryId=7918b8d0364a0f79e195f32fd57cac49&_phsrc=GbO285&_phstart=successSource

²³⁷ Robert Cleveland Latimer's life was tracked primarily by using the census records from 1900 and 1910. U.S. Census Bureau, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*; U.S. Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910*. Copies found on ancestry.com.

²³⁸ Author interview with Linda Griffith.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920*. Copy found on ancestry.com.



Image Six: Effie and Robert Latimer at their home on Catcher Road – Courtesy of Linda Griffith.

Robert was not at all happy about the arrangement.²⁴¹ The family lived in the cramped, two-room house and Robert was forced to work on the farm. Robert developed a reputation for not being a hard worker and eventually started going to Van Buren to work as a wage laborer instead. On a typical day, Robert would “walk about six to eight miles - if he could not get a ride – and spend the day with the other men on the ‘spit and whittle’ bench telling tall tales and outright lies.”²⁴² He would then begin the slow walk back. This helped ease the tensions between Robert and his mother-in-law who hated living in the same house with one another. Robert’s son would later state that while his father did not talk much about his time in Arkansas, “he did tell me never to live with my mother-in-law, he said Effie’s mother drove him away.”²⁴³ Effie helped make ends meet by selling eggs and vegetables from the farm. The Latimer home was well known to passersby, white and Black, as a good place to acquire eggs. For about the next three

²⁴¹ Author interview with Linda Griffith; Linda Griffith phone interview with Robert J. Latimer.

²⁴² Linda Griffith interview with Tom Garrett.

²⁴³ Linda Griffith phone interview with Robert J. Latimer.

years, the family continued this daily farm and wage-earning lifestyle – managing to survive but not at all happy about the arrangements.

Sometime in mid 1923, a final dispute occurred between Robert and his mother-in-law. He and Mary decided that it was no longer working to be living in the same small farmhouse. Effie's mother took her belongings and moved back to Fort Smith to, once again, live with her daughter Daisy and her husband.²⁴⁴ Robert was pleased with this, but Effie was sad to see her mother out of her life for the second time. Robert and Effie managed to only make it until December of that year until their own relationship began to splinter as well. After six years together, something occurred in the days leading up to Christmas 1923 that sent Robert out of the house and away from Effie. The *Arkansas Gazette* would report that Robert had left a week prior "taking a dozen chickens and half of the provisions of the house."²⁴⁵ The *Van Buren Press Argus* confirmed this writing that "two weeks ago [Robert] left and went to Oklahoma after dividing up their belongings with his wife."²⁴⁶ The fact that Robert took half the chickens seems to suggest he was not just leaving to blow off steam and then come back.²⁴⁷ He planned on leaving for good. While the couple never formally divorced, this would have likely occurred in early 1924 if not for Effie's murder only days later.

With Mary in Fort Smith and Robert leaving to work at the Flat River Mine in Oklahoma, Effie was left deserted on the farm. She continued to sell eggs and vegetables to locals but must have been unsure of what the future would hold going into the twenty-sixth year of her young life. This uncertainty would have loomed over her as she awoke on December 28, 1923, alone in

²⁴⁴ Author interview with Linda Griffith; Linda Griffith interview with Tom Garrett.

²⁴⁵ "Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest," p.1.

²⁴⁶ "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

²⁴⁷ Linda Griffith argues these stories may not be accurate. According to family history, Robert did not have a wagon and he left on foot after their fight. Because of this, it seems unlikely he would have been able to take half the chickens. Author interview with Linda Griffith.

the house. Sometime early that morning, Effie encountered an intruder in her home who violently attacked her.²⁴⁸ The two struggled for some time, leaving clear signs of their scuffle throughout the two meagerly furnished rooms of the home. Effie put up a fierce fight, with “several of [her] fingernails torn from their roots” attempting to stop this attacker.²⁴⁹ The drawn out fight devastated the small home leaving “bloody sticks of stovewood and broken-down furniture scattered about the house.”²⁵⁰ Due to the strong defense she was mounting, she was clubbed on the side of the head with a blunt force object – most likely the butt of a shotgun or a piece of stovewood. As she stumbled away from the offender, she was shot in the back, just above her left hip, with heavy bird shot rounds from a shotgun.²⁵¹ The wound from the shot was catastrophic and immediately incapacitated her. As Effie lay dying on her kitchen floor, the murderer stepped over her body, out the backdoor and into the early morning light.

Later that afternoon, Effie’s nearest neighbor - Mr. J. H. Johnson – checked his mailbox to find he had “received a letter from Mr. Latimer in his noon mail...[with] some word to his wife in the letter.”²⁵² Mr. Johnson asked his daughter, Florence Johnson, to immediately deliver the message to Effie.²⁵³ Florence, who had also only recently separated from her husband, walked the nearly quarter mile distance to reach the Latimer home to deliver this letter.²⁵⁴ As

²⁴⁸ At trial, prosecutors estimated that she was attacked around 8:00 a.m.

²⁴⁹ “Negro Fiends Will Die in Electric Chair,” p. 1.

²⁵⁰ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

²⁵¹ There is no way to know for sure whether the head wound, or gunshot occurred first. It seems more likely, though, that she was clubbed over the head to stop her defense then shot in the back as she was stumbling. To shoot her in the back when she was aggressively defending herself would have been difficult.

²⁵² “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

²⁵³ This letter is crucial to understanding what occurred that morning to Effie. The letter has never been found and no one I have asked has been able to verify its existence. It is referenced in the newspaper and then by Johnson at trial and then forgotten about.

²⁵⁴ Florence Johnson would formally divorce Godfrey Perdue on September 15, 1924. The two were already long separated. She would remarry on September 27, 1924, to Wilbur Baykin. Marriage License for Wilbur Baykin and Florence Johnson, Arkansas, U.S., County Marriages Index, 1837-1957, September 27, 1924. Found online at ancestry.com. https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/1730636:2548?tid=&pid=&queryId=404e7d61954cc725076458bb9f435138&_phsrc=GbO316&_phstart=successSource

Johnson arrived, she found the backdoor to the Latimer home ajar and walked in to find Effie in a pool of blood on the floor barely breathing. The young woman was “lying unconscious on the floor, her hair, face, and clothing matted with blood that had flowed from a three-inch scalp wound that had laid the flesh open to the skull.”²⁵⁵ Johnson also recalled that Latimer’s arms and midsection were terribly bruised and that she had deep gashes across her head and torso.²⁵⁶

Johnson promptly called for help but the distance between towns made it difficult for anyone to arrive quickly. When Dr. B. L. Bennett of nearby Kibler finally arrived on scene to administer medical aid he was shocked by the sight. Bennett noted that Effie’s head showed clear signs of blunt force trauma and that there was a gaping hole in her back where the rounds had ripped through her body.²⁵⁷ Dr. Bennett claimed that Effie stirred in and out of consciousness while he was attempting to help her. Most astonishingly, she gained enough strength to even “give [a] description of the negro” who had just attacked her.²⁵⁸ With her dying breath, Effie Latimer allegedly uttered “Son Bettis shot me” as Florence Johnson and Dr. B. L. Bennett crouched over her.²⁵⁹ Effie would succumb to these wounds around 5:00 p.m. that night with none of her family present. Upon hearing the news of her death, her half-sister Daisy fainted, and her mother wept inconsolably.²⁶⁰ The family would hold funeral services at the home in Fort Smith on December 31 – two days after her murder.²⁶¹

Effie’s deathbed testimony provided the spark point for the racial cleansing that the rest of this work is most concerned with investigating. For that reason, it becomes critical to assess

²⁵⁵ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

²⁵⁶ Florence Johnson’s account of what she saw upon entering the Latimer home can be found in, “Women Slain by Negro Assailant,” *Arkansas Gazette*, December 29, 1923.

²⁵⁷ “Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites,” p. 1.

²⁵⁸ “Negro Fiends Will Die in Electric Chair,” p. 1.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁰ “Farm Woman in Crawford County Dead,” p. 1.

²⁶¹ Linda Griffith interview with Tom Garrett.

the validity of the witness statements of Bennett and Johnson who were the only ones present to record Effie's final moments - significantly, the overwhelming belief that Effie had directly accused Son Bettis of perpetrating this awful murder. It was stated in the *Fort Smith Times Record* that "authorities, on the strength of statements made by [Florence Johnson], arrested Bettis Saturday and lodged him in jail on investigation."²⁶² Newspapers and lead investigators had little reason to doubt this testimony, which was the preeminent justification for why the three Black men were later brought up on charges. The community-wide fury caused by Effie's death – and supposed sexual assault – made it difficult for investigators to consider any other possibilities in those critical first few hours of forensic investigation. The desire for quick vengeance in the small town led investigators to instantly lose control over this case. Without such pressure, though, it fortunately becomes far easier to make judgements about Effie's supposed witness statement. Scrutinizing this evidence was essential for investigators and their inability to do so was a major mistake in the case.

Two key facts were well established by all reviewing the scene. First, Effie had been shot in the back at extremely close range from heavy bird shot rounds leading to the loss of blood that ultimately killed her. Second, that she had been clubbed on the head causing a large three-inch wound on her head. It is important to remember she was presumed to have been attacked early that morning.²⁶³ This meant that her body lay on that floor for at least three to five hours before Florence Johnson arrived at the scene. Johnson then immediately made the call for help in the early afternoon. This help was coming from Kibler, a town over. Given the slowness of communication and transportation, the quickest Dr. Bennett could have made it there was an

²⁶² "Two Negroes to be Given Trial Friday," *Fort Smith Times Record*, January 2, 1924, p. 1.

²⁶³ "Farm Woman in Crawford County Dead," p. 1.

hour later. All this means it would have been very close to her time of death (just before 5:00 p.m.) before Dr. B. L. Bennett could have arrived on scene to administer aid.²⁶⁴

Effie had grave enough wounds to kill her from blood loss. Alongside this, she had a massive wound on the side of her head. Whether Effie truly came in and out of consciousness after several hours on the ground – but just before her death - is impossible to know. For that reason, a judgment must be made over what is credible about the testimony of Johnson and Bennett. Florence would have been on the scene far longer than anyone else and would have had the best chance to talk with Effie as they waited together for help. It seems probable, then, that Florence conveyed to Dr. Bennett what Effie had told him once he arrived. Both were called to testify in the murder trial against Son Bettis, but the weight of the testimony came from Florence Johnson alone. With that in mind, her testimony has to be corroborated as much as possible. That leaves the letter she was delivering to Effie to be of evidentiary importance. The letter provided the rationale for why she was at the Latimer house while also establishing an alibi for Robert. Essentially, why would he send a letter if he was already in town and could have committed the crime himself. Also, why would he place the letter in a neighbor's mailbox and not his own? Astoundingly, the letter was referenced constantly at trial but never brought forward as evidence to demonstrate why she visited the Latimer home in the first place. This letter has never been found.

When Dr. Bennett arrived on the scene, he would have needed to be filled in by Florence Johnson on what occurred. If Effie was lucid enough to explain to Dr. Bennett who her killer was, it is strange that she would not have implicated the other two men in the crime as well – only Son Bettis was ever named. Even if she did come in and out of consciousness in the

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

presence of the doctor, could she not have simply been asking in a disoriented state ‘somebody shot me?’²⁶⁵ If this occurred, Dr. Bennett would have turned to Johnson and asked her what she thought she was saying. Whether nefariously or just by accident, Florence Johnson heard ‘Son Bettis shot me.’

The Black community living in Catcher at that time have forever been skeptical of these key details of Florence’s account. Ray Willis, the nephew of the accused William Bettis, wrote in a 2006 *Lincoln Echo* article his analysis of Florence’s testimony:

That’s how the official story goes, but there’s another plausible scenario, which paints a completely different picture concerning what likely happened. According to this alternate version, the victim’s husband was allegedly having an affair with the same neighbor woman who “found” the mortally wounded woman and who it is believed, fabricated the erroneous story implicating Son Bettis to cover up what really led to the woman’s demise. The victim’s husband, by the way, was conveniently “out of town” when the incident happened.²⁶⁶

Willis writes that it was common knowledge that Florence and Robert were having an affair and that this caused the rift between Effie and Robert that sent him out of the house with half the family’s belongings the week prior. Many descendants of Catcher’s Black community have reached the conclusion that Florence or Robert killed Effie.²⁶⁷ The first of these makes little sense, however. Even if Florence was having an affair with Robert and was jealous of Effie - their recent separation would have been a good thing for her. It would have given her a realistic chance to start a new life with Robert. Also, it was reported that Effie’s fingernails were bent backwards as a result of the attack so whoever killed her would have likely had scratches

²⁶⁵ This theory was posed by Linda Griffith and seems to make more sense than the accepted narrative. Author interview with Linda Griffith.

²⁶⁶ This is the common theory put forward by descendants of Black community members from Catcher. Ray E. Willis, “The Ray Willis Report,” *Lincoln Echo*, August 22, 2006.

²⁶⁷ Discussions with the living direct descendants of Catcher have been very insightful. I have met many of them on M. C. Richardson’s radio show, *Guess Who’s Coming to Kansas City*.

all over their arms and face.²⁶⁸ Surely Dr. Bennett or investigators would have immediately noticed such signs in their investigation.

This leaves Effie's husband, as the primary suspect to be considered by those whose ancestors once lived in the Black community of Catcher. The *Chicago Defender*, one of the leading African American newspapers of the day, echoed these sentiments at the time, stating:

in their haste to prove [Bettis, Clay, and Rucks] guilty, authorities have overlooked the fact that the women's husband left home a week ago and took most of the provisions from the home. Since the death of his wife he has not returned, nor has he sent any inquiry to the police concerning the affair...all investigations into the death of Mrs. Lattimer have centered about the men held in jail to such an extent that the husband has been forgotten and is being allowed to go unquestioned.²⁶⁹

It is well substantiated that Robert was, in fact, out of the house at this time after a dispute with Effie.²⁷⁰ Even if this was due to an affair with Florence or annoyance with the life he had with Effie, none of this – crucially – proves Robert to be capable of murder. Still, it is important to consider that a recent Center for Disease Control study found that over half of all female homicides (for women between the ages of eighteen and forty-four) across eighteen states involved intimate partner violence – that is, current or former male partners.²⁷¹ Most commonly, precipitating factors like anger and jealousy often pushed this history of violence over the edge into murder. On the flip side, only sixteen percent of all homicides against women were perpetrated by complete strangers – even less so by strangers of a different race.²⁷² This all

²⁶⁸ “Negro Fiends Will Die In Electric Chair,” p. 1.

²⁶⁹ “Brave Men, Unarmed in Cabin, Defy Mob Until Help Arrives,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 5, 1924, p. 3.

²⁷⁰ “Farm Woman in Crawford County Dead,” p. 1; “Nightriders Bring on Riot,” *Moberly Monitor Index*, December 31, 1923, p. 1; “Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners,” p. 1.

²⁷¹ Emiko Petrosky, MD; Janet M. Blair, PhD; Carter J. Betz, MS; Katherine A. Fowler, PhD; Shane P.D. Jack, PhD; Bridget H. Lyons, MPH. “Racial and Ethnic Differences in Homicides of Adult Women and the Role of Intimate Partner Violence – United States, 2003-2014,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly*, Vol 66 (2017): 741-746; The UN concluded 87,000 women were killed in 2017 and fifty-eight percent were murdered by their IPV. “Global Study on Homicide: Gender-Related Killing of Women and Girls,” United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, (July 2019), https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet_5.pdf.

²⁷² Ibid.

seems to suggest investigators should have eliminated Robert as a suspect before moving on to anyone else.

Documenting Robert's life after Effie's death helps put this potential for domestic violence into perspective. Robert left Effie and their home in early December 1923 and never returned. By all accounts, he was unwilling to return to Arkansas after her murder.²⁷³ He lived for a time in Osage, Oklahoma working at the Flat River Mine. He met his second wife, Edith King sometime in the late 1920s and the two had their first of three children in 1929. They were married later in 1930 and lived in Oklahoma and Missouri for most of the next decade.²⁷⁴ Edith was routinely being abused by Robert during these years. To get away from this, she decided in 1939 to pack the three children and their belongings into the car and drive to Oregon. Their granddaughter recalled that Edith "was so afraid of him that she didn't tell anyone where they were going. She got a job, rented a house and put the kids in school. One day, she was doing the dishes and looked out the window and saw Robert walking up the driveway. She said her heart almost stopped."²⁷⁵ Robert apologized for violence towards her, and she felt she had to let him move back in with the family. This arrangement wasn't much better and the two eventually divorced in June 1944. Listed under the cause or ground for absolute divorce was "cruel and inhuman treatment."²⁷⁶ Robert signed the divorce papers without contest.

Robert Latimer's own son (also named Robert), in a 2008 interview with Linda Griffith, admitted even he had serious doubts about his father's innocence in Effie's murder. When asked

²⁷³ Linda Griffith phone interview with Robert J. Latimer.

²⁷⁴ Robert Latimer can be tracked through the 1930 and 1940 census. U.S. Census Bureau, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930 – Population Schedules*. U.S. Census Bureau, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940 – Population Schedules*. Copies found on ancestry.com. Copies found on ancestry.com.

²⁷⁵ Linda Griffith phone interview with granddaughter of Robert Latimer (named removed for anonymity), December 2010, Linda Griffith phone interview with Robert J. Latimer.

²⁷⁶ Washington County Circuit Court, Oregon. Divorce between Robert and Edith Latimer, docket 109, June 26, 1944, p. 28. Found on ancestry.com.

whether Robert had ever mentioned Effie's murder to him, Robert Jr. fired off, "you know, I always thought dad might have had something to do with that."²⁷⁷ When prompted for further clarification he admitted that his dad was pretty tough on his mother (whom he married after Effie's death) and the two divorced after continued domestic violence against her. So much so, that Robert Jr. was the only one in the family who would talk to their dad. His two sisters and mother never wanted anything more to do with him.²⁷⁸ Robert Jr. concluded the interview by stating that he asked his dad whether he ever thought about avenging Effie's death. To that, his father claimed that he had "snuck back into Arkansas once and got some vengeance."²⁷⁹ Still, Robert hedged on these sentiments, "well, I guess he couldn't have [killed Effie], he said he was in Oklahoma looking for work when she died."²⁸⁰

It is ultimately impossible to prove a definitive connection between the separation of Robert and Effie Latimer and her murder less than a week later. Ongoing efforts by descendants of Effie as well as the three accused have looked into the possibility of an exhumation of her body to see if modern forensics could ascertain the killer using DNA under her fingernails. Given the amount of time since her death and the lack of burial care during this time, though, that prospect seems unlikely.²⁸¹

Identifying Effie Latimer's murderer seems, at this this date, more up to speculation than science. Looking into the lives of Effie and Robert will never conclusively prove anything, but it does help to demonstrate how incompetently detectives handled the ensuing investigation into Effie's murder. Neither Robert nor Florence was ever considered as a person of interest in the

²⁷⁷ Linda Griffith phone interview with Robert J. Latimer.

²⁷⁸ Linda Griffith phone interview with granddaughter of Robert Latimer.

²⁷⁹ Linda Griffith phone interview with Robert J. Latimer.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Effie was buried in a \$75 casket designed by the Arkansas Coffin Company in Fort Smith. This would have been a very expensive casket for the period. Effie Latimer, "Record of Funeral," December 30, 1923.

direct aftermath of the murder. Robert Latimer was “not heard from” by Crawford County investigators until after the new year.²⁸² By that time, Bettis, Clay, and Rucks were already in jail and set for trial and the scratch wounds on the killer must have been beginning to fully heal. Scrutinizing these minor details in the testimony and lives of all those involved may seem like nitpicking, but it is important when considering that the accusations pointed at William Bettis in the direct aftermath of Effie’s death set the course for the investigation and all that would occur thereafter. Even if the guilt of the three men was proven conclusively, nearly three hundred Black citizens still living in Catcher, Arkansas were forced to leave their lives and homes behind for a crime they had nothing to do with - merely for the color of their skin.

²⁸² “Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest,” p. 1.

Chapter Three - A Mob Mentality Takes Hold

News of Effie's murder circulated quickly through Catcher. Rumors of the young woman naming Son Bettis as her killer inflamed those in the white community who began demanding swift justice against the Black farmer.²⁸³ The brutal murder and assumed rape of a married, twenty-five-year-old-white woman reinforced racist Jim Crow era stereotypes about Black males being violent and overly sexual.²⁸⁴ As fury spread throughout Catcher, a mob mentality began to take hold. Investigators were tasked with resolving the case before it spiraled further out of their control. Those entrusted with upholding law and order – police, judges, lawyers, etc. – grasped these desires for vengeance and worked with white community members to stave off a public lynching. Working hand-in-hand with white community members to ensure order began to backfire, though, when a few members of this larger mob were left unsatisfied by due process. Their anger would boil over and ultimately be directed at the hundreds of Black community members still residing peacefully in Catcher instead.

The mob spirit that seized Catcher in the first forty-eight hours after Effie Latimer's murder is critical to explaining why the later racial cleansing occurred. By using a mixture of both extralegal and legal measures, this mob succeeded in achieving the expulsion of a significant portion of the population – even with some white members opposing such aggression. The movements and actions of this group of around 500 men, women, and children across Crawford and Sebastian County demonstrate that they had some assurance no harm would befall them as they looked to push Black community members off extremely valuable land. The only

²⁸³ "Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners," p. 1.

²⁸⁴ Many historians have written about this, but the best overall work is Angela Davis, "Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist," in *Women, Race, & Class* (New York: Random House, 1983), 171-201. Fon Louise Gordon provides an interesting study of these stereotypes in Arkansas in her work, Gordon, *Caste & Class: The Black Experience in Arkansas, 1880-1920*, 25-30.

action suppressed by this mob was a public lynching of the three accused. While state officials would proclaim this as a major win for the racial rights of those living in northwest Arkansas, it came at the price of two rushed death penalty verdicts, a life sentence for a fourteen-year-old, and the removal of the hundreds of Black Arkansans living in Catcher.²⁸⁵ The narrative that extralegal justice had been prevented in Catcher, then, is false. Instead, this mob went beyond the bounds of normal law and order measures to force the hands of those acting in positions of power. Exploiting this privilege, the white mobs of Catcher successfully forced Black Arkansans out of the town and off the valuable land that they owned.

Speculation surrounding Effie's murder spread throughout Catcher reaching a large portion of the town. One who did not hear this news, however, was Son Bettis. As Sheriff Albert D. Maxey (35) of Van Buren and Deputy Sheriff William A. Bushmiaer (43) of Kibler were casing the crime scene in and around Effie's house, Bettis was purportedly out farming in a cotton field near his home.²⁸⁶ Upon their arrival at the crime scene about 5:30 p.m. that night, the two investigators were unsure how to organize the bloody room. The sun would have been setting between 5:00 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. that night leaving the investigators on scene without any natural light. This would have drastically cut down their ability to properly examine in and around the house until the next morning. Even if there had been more natural light, forensic technology in the 1920s was not sophisticated enough to solve the crime without concrete evidence like a smoking gun, eyewitness testimony, or clear motive.

²⁸⁵ "Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching: Saves Accused Negroes From Mob," *Arkansas Gazette*, December 31, 1923, p. 1.

²⁸⁶ The numbers in parenthesis are their ages. This article was the first to discuss Bettis' alibi for the time of the murder. "Van Buren Woman Foully Murdered, Negro Identified," p. 1.

Modern forensic techniques like blood-spatter analysis, ballistics, and DNA profiling could have helped greatly in solving this crime but were decades away from common usage.²⁸⁷ More established methods of crime-solving like fingerprinting and shoeprint analysis were unhelpful in the Latimer home without a murder weapon or noticeable prints left at the scene.²⁸⁸ As investigators Maxey and Bushmiaer looked around the crime scene, they realized they did not have much to go on. Florence Johnson helped direct their investigation, however, when she informed them, Effie had named Son Bettis as her attacker.²⁸⁹ There is little indication of how this witness statement occurred, but it appears clear that the two men would have seen little reason wasting any more time in the Latimer home. Going off the only lead they had, Maxey and Bushmiaer began their search for Bettis.

It is important to consider several key elements when discussing the supposed guilt of William Bettis. It is well established that the attacker of Effie Latimer almost certainly had clear scratches on their face and body after their struggle with the young woman.²⁹⁰ With her nails being bent backwards defending herself, it seems unlikely the attacker did not have this evidence on their body. While newspaper journalists would suggest that Bettis had such marks as well as “blood on his clothing,” none of this entered any official record until trial and appears to have first come from a newspaper article.²⁹¹ This would have been a major corroborating point in

²⁸⁷ Kate Winkler Dawson, *American Sherlock: Murder, Forensics, and the Birth of American CSI* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020), 4-6.

²⁸⁸ It is likely there were shoeprints and fingerprints left on the scene given the struggle when Effie was murdered. There is no indication the investigators looked for these. It is important to remember it was dark by this point so it would have been difficult to dust for fingerprints, especially. At trial, M. Stallings would testify that he “saw footprints near the Latimer house the day after the killing and [was of] the opinion the prints were made from” the rubber boots of Charles Ruck. “State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge,” p. 1.

²⁸⁹ It was reported that “authorities, on the strength of statements made by [Johnson], arrested Bettis Saturday and lodged him in jail on investigation.” Nothing else is said of Florence’s testimony to Maxey and Bushmiaer the day of the murder or how it impacted their investigation. “Two Negroes To Be Given Trial Friday,” p. 1.

²⁹⁰ “Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners,” p. 1; “Negro Trial is Scheduled Next Friday,” p. 1; “Negro Fiends will Die in Electric Chair Feb. 15,” p. 1.

²⁹¹ “Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners,” p. 1.

establishing Bettis' guilt. The failure of investigators to remark on this when they met Bettis and its only mention at trial being Effie's half-brother, John Mitchell, commenting on the marks he saw that day suggests they may not have been there.²⁹² Also, assuming Bettis was the murderer of Effie Latimer, it would seem likely that he would have fled the area after her murder. One of the common explanations in the later trial of Bettis and Rucks was that they tried to kill Effie Latimer to silence her after raping her – knowing she would be able to identify them to police. The obvious problem with this analysis is that Effie was not left in an incapacitated state, she was still allegedly speaking for some nine hours after the attack. Also, the charge of rape was later dropped at trial. Shooting someone in the back just above their hip seems a poor way of permanently silencing them. Surely, the killer would shoot her again in the head to be sure she could not testify against them.

If they did shoot her in the back, then feel remorseful about the act, it seems unlikely they would go back to their home less than two miles away and wait for police to find them. The person who killed Effie struggled with her in that kitchen, was scratched across their face, body, and neck. They then shot her as a way to win that fight and either felt remorse or wanted her to suffer as they fled the home. They would have not wanted to be anywhere near that house when investigators started looking around. For all these reasons, Maxey and Bushmiaer had to be surprised when they walked to the Bettis family home, knocked on the door and saw Will Bettis walking to the door to greet them.²⁹³ Bettis was shocked by the claims he had been involved in a

²⁹² The seventy-year-old John Mitchell would testify that he “saw scratches on Ruck’s neck the day after the murder. Importantly, Maxey and Bushmiaer never substantiate this despite questioning he and Bettis multiple times. “State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge,” p. 1.

²⁹³ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

murder only hours prior but was nevertheless taken into custody. Assuming a mistake had been made, Bettis calmly surrendered to the two officers and went to jail that night without a fight.²⁹⁴



Image Seven: William Son Bettis circa 1910 – Courtesy of Dorothy Jean Trambell.

William Son Bettis had lived in Catcher for the entirety of his life.²⁹⁵ He was born in the township on September 3, 1887, to Laura Johnson and Andrew Bettis.²⁹⁶ His father had moved from Texas to work on a farm in Van Buren where he married Laura in 1878.²⁹⁷ The two were living with each other in 1880 but were divorced soon after. While Laura decided to remarry in May 1882 to Wesley McNutt, she still clearly harbored feelings for Andrew as the two had

²⁹⁴ “Farm Woman in Crawford County Dead,” p. 1.

²⁹⁵ William Bettis’ life was tracked using the 1900, 1910, and 1920 census. U.S. Census Bureau, *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900 – Population Schedule*; U.S. Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910 – Population Schedule*; U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*. Copies of these census records were found on ancestry.com.

²⁹⁶ Bettis’ birthday was found by viewing his WWI draft card. “William Bettis,” *U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918*, Arkansas, Crawford County. A copy can be viewed at https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/25006429:6482?tid=&pid=&queryId=4fe0a3aa593ac42c0ee02f5b5183cf76&_phsrc=GbO294&_phstart=successSource

²⁹⁷ Marriage License for Laura Johnson and Andrew Bettis,” *Arkansas, U.S., County Marriages Index, 1837-1957*, November 7, 1878. Found on ancestry.com.

William Son Bettis out of wedlock in 1887.²⁹⁸ Andrew Bettis would marry Betty Bettis in 1898 and the pair would have four children of their own. The family rented out a small farm in Catcher. By 1900, Will was thirteen and working as a farm laborer on the land. He attended two months of school that year and could read and write.²⁹⁹

William Bettis moved out of the house not long after and married sixteen-year-old Zula Rivers in 1906.³⁰⁰ The couple had one child, Carrie, and then divorced. Bettis would go on to have another child, George, out of wedlock with Ora Ferguson in 1909 before meeting Plitha Shepard sometime in late 1913.³⁰¹ William and Plitha Bettis married in February 1914 and had their first son, Thayola, in September of that year.³⁰² The pair would go on to have three more children, Grace, Ray, and Pecolia from 1917 to 1920.³⁰³ Will Bettis registered for the WWI draft but was not selected for service.³⁰⁴ After the war years, the family rented out a couple acres of land to farm cotton. By December 28, 1923, William (36) and his wife Plitha (32) had established firm roots in the Catcher community and were quite settled with their four young children.³⁰⁵ The knock on the door around 7:00 p.m. the night of Effie's murder surely came as a shock to the Bettis family. As William Bettis walked to the door to meet investigators Maxey and Bushmiaer, he was surprised by their line of questioning. The Bettis and Latimer homes

²⁹⁸ Some sites like ancestry.com seem to suggest that Betty Bettis was William Son Bettis' mother. The problem is she was born in 1876 and would have had to have birthed William when she was only 11. It seems more likely his true mother was Laura Bettis from his father's previous marriage. It is impossible to say for sure.

²⁹⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Twelfth Census of the United States: 1900 – Population Schedule*

³⁰⁰ Marriage License for William Bettis and Zula Rivers," *Arkansas, U.S., County Marriages Index, 1837-1957*, February 10, 1906. Found on ancestry.com.

³⁰¹ Plitha Shepard is the most common name used. She also is in the census records as 'Politha' as well as using the surname Brown. U.S. Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910 – Population Schedule*.

³⁰² The timeline of this suggests that Plitha was known to be pregnant before the two were married.

³⁰³ Pecolia Bettis lived up to the age of 90, dying in 2010. It is extremely regrettable that the author was unable to interview her before her death. Wanda Gray was able to interview her in 2010, just before her death. Wanda Gray interview with Pecolia Bettis Freeman (daughter of William Bettis), March 1, 2010.

³⁰⁴ "William Bettis," *U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918*, Arkansas, Crawford County.

³⁰⁵ *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*.

were about two miles away from one another.³⁰⁶ While they had been looking around the Latimer home for evidence, Bettis purportedly was out tending to cotton crops just before the sunset. He claimed that he had been working in the field the entire day and stated he had multiple persons, white and Black, who could support those alibis. Bettis, by all accounts, was respectful to the two men and allowed them to take him in for further questioning.³⁰⁷

With the arrest of William Bettis secured, sheriff Maxey had to decide where to take the suspect to await sentencing. Maxey understood the horrific nature of the crime and knew that a lynch mob was possible.³⁰⁸ By now, though, it was around 8:00 p.m. and it would have been easier to just keep Bettis in the Crawford County jail in Van Buren for the night. Fortunately, the sheriff did not take any chances and had Bettis immediately transported across the Arkansas River to the Sebastian County Jail in Fort Smith. That night, the nucleus of a mob was already beginning to form and would have likely tried to lynch Bettis if he had been closer.³⁰⁹ As the *Van Buren Press Argus* reported days later:

Realizing the fact that the ire of the white citizens throughout the Catcher community would reach a white heat during the night, and wishing to avoid trouble, the Sheriff took Bettis to Fort Smith and lodged him in the Sebastian County jail for safe keeping.³¹⁰

Even under intense questioning, Bettis refused to confess to the crime leaving police in a tough spot.³¹¹ They believed that Bettis was their man but knew that the secondhand testimony of those on scene might not be enough evidence to convict at trial. They realized they would need to keep investigating Effie's murder to definitively connect William Bettis to this brutal crime.

³⁰⁶ The distance between the homes was estimated by looking at the 1923 land records to see where the Bettis and Latimer home were in relation to one another. "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1923."

³⁰⁷ "Farm Woman in Crawford County Dead," p. 1.

³⁰⁸ "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

³⁰⁹ "Van Buren Woman Foully Murdered, Negro Identified," p. 1.

³¹⁰ "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

³¹¹ "Farm Woman in Crawford County Dead," p. 1.

Early the next morning (Saturday, December 29), the investigation into Effie's murder continued. Led by Sheriff Maxey, local officials once again returned to the Latimer home. With natural light from the sun beaming down, the investigators finally completed a full assessment of the crime scene. The Latimer home was small with only two rooms – a kitchen/living area and a bedroom.³¹² Still, because the Latimer home was cluttered and the struggle that occurred during the attack, it was difficult to precisely state what had been moved or if anything had been stolen. The entirety of the fighting, it seemed, had taken place near the kitchen and fireplace of the home. Several bloody pieces of stove wood and broken furniture were scattered around where Effie had died. It was unclear whether she had been hit with some of this wood or the butt of the shotgun that eventually killed her.³¹³

After closely surveying the scene and available evidence, officials came across a piece of wood that appeared to be foreign to the Latimer home tangled in the dress Effie had been wearing that day.³¹⁴ Not much more was said about how this evidence was collected and whether it came undoubtedly from the fight and not those aiding Effie afterwards. Importantly, the wood piece was said to not match the grain of wood found in either the stove wood, floor, or furniture. Sheriff Maxey theorized that this splintered piece of wood must have come from the murderer's weapon after they had clubbed Effie on the back of the head.³¹⁵ No further information could be gleaned from the home, so the officials decided to pursue this only lead they had. After leaving the house, local neighbors from Catcher must have wanted to see this crime scene for themselves. One such woman, Mary Creekmore, walked through the house and claimed to find a

³¹² It was reported that the small farmhouse only had two rooms. Linda Griffith stated that it included a kitchen and living area and not much else. "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1; Author interview with Linda Griffith.

³¹³ "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

³¹⁴ Some sources say it fell out of her hair when carried out of the house. Others say it was in her dress. This is the one most aligned with what was argued at trial. "Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners," p. 1.

³¹⁵ "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

bloody dime next to where Effie had died.³¹⁶ This would become an essential part of the trial later but was not discovered by police investigators. While it seems unlikely that police would have missed something as large as a dime in their survey of the home after finding a small piece of splintered wood, not closing off the crime scene was another critical mistake. Because of this, it is impossible to say whether Mrs. Creekmore found this dime, or if it was nefariously planted to help corroborate the leading narrative at trial.³¹⁷

By mid-morning, Sheriff Maxey had begun to form a plan of action to attain additional evidence against Bettis. The foreign piece of splintered wood appeared the key to solving this case. Because it was foreign to any other wood in the Latimer home, he concluded it must have been from the murder weapon itself.³¹⁸ After closely examining her wounds, it was evident that the weapon that killed Effie was a shotgun. Although the murderer had obviously taken this weapon away from the scene, they would not have realized that the investigators could prove the weapon was at the scene of the crime. All Maxey had to do, then, was match this missing piece to a shotgun in Catcher. The only problem was that most homes in Catcher owned a shotgun. For this reason, Maxey realized he would have to essentially go house-to-house asking to see the shotguns in each house in the town. Knowing how difficult of a task this was, Sheriff Maxey knew he needed to cast as small a net as possible. To do this, he decided to search the houses of those that might know Bettis and could have helped him cover up the crime – those living in the Black community of Catcher.³¹⁹

³¹⁶ Mary Creekmore was the wife of Frederick Creekmore who would kill Charles Ruck during this violence.

³¹⁷ Mary Creekmore would present this ‘bloody dime’ at trial to corroborate the confession of John Henry Clay. “State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge,” p. 1.

³¹⁸ “Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners,” p. 1.

³¹⁹ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

Going house-to-house of all the Black citizens living in Catcher, local officials would walk through each and ask to view any gun they owned.³²⁰ Focusing only on the Black houses of Catcher was problematic from an investigatory standpoint. It stands to reason that Sheriff Maxey and other officials were only considering Black individuals being associated with the crime at this point. After several houses and no significant findings, the men entered the house of fifty-three-year-old Henry Clay Sr. The poor Black farmer lived in the rented home with his wife, Emma, and four children.³²¹ On the walkthrough of the house, the men did not find anything of note. As they were leaving, they asked if any guns were in the house besides the ones they had already seen. Clay mentioned that his son had recently received his own shotgun as a birthday present. Checking under the bed of his fourteen-year-old-son, John Henry Clay, officials found a double-barrel shotgun.³²²

The gun, noticeably, had a piece of the stock missing. As they compared the splinted piece of wood to the shotgun, they found that the piece perfectly fit into the missing stock.³²³ The young boy was brought into the room and declared that the gun did indeed belong to him. It was noted that there was “evidence that he had tried to remove blood stains from [the gun] by scouring it with sand.”³²⁴ It appears that Clay was not willing to confess to any crime immediately at this point. At the later trial, it was said that he only confessed after Jim H.

³²⁰ Descendants of the Black community of Catcher had family stories related to this shoddy investigation. Many came together on M.C. Richardson’s radio program to discuss these. M. C. Richardson, “1923 Catcher, Arkansas Cold Case,” *Guess Who’s Coming to Kansas City*, January 18, 2014. <https://kkfi.org/program-episodes/1923-catcher-arkansas-cold-case-encore/>; Author interview with M. C. Richardson.

³²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*.

³²² John Henry was known for having competed against a mechanical drill to fashion a railroad tunnel with nothing but his hammer. Importantly, this legendary accomplishment from the slave meant different things to the white and Black listeners of the tale. For Black community members, the story was a cautionary tale. The name was very common in the U.S. South during this period. Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin’ Man: John Henry: The Untold Story of an American Legend* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press), 2-10.

³²³ “Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners,” p. 1; “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

³²⁴ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

Johnson and Frederick Creekmore, two locals who had decided to “join the party of officers on the day following the shooting,” pulled him aside.³²⁵ Importantly, none of the actual investigators heard such a confession until after this community pressure by Johnson and Creekmore.

It was still late morning (the day after Effie’s murder) when John Henry Clay was brought to the Crawford County Jail in Van Buren for further questioning. Sheriff Maxey, interestingly, did not take the same precautions with Clay as he had with Bettis the night before. Perhaps because he thought the boy was too young for a mob to attack or because he was the principal material witness against Bettis, Clay was left inside the county lines.³²⁶ After bringing him into the jail and questioning him for several hours, Maxey stated that Clay had finally confessed to the crime and, surprisingly, implicated thirty-year-old Spurgeon Rucks in the crime as well – the first time Rucks’ name is associated with this crime.³²⁷ Rucks had been visited three or four times by law enforcement on charges of whipping his wife but had been acquitted every time.³²⁸ He was best known for being the son of Charles Rucks.

Clay’s confession suggested that on the previous morning he had gotten up to help farm when he came across William Bettis and Spurgeon Rucks who were on their way to go rabbit hunting. They asked Clay if they could borrow his shotgun. The young boy agreed on the condition that he would be able to accompany them. As they were on their way to hunt, Bettis decided he wanted to stop to buy some eggs for breakfast from Effie Latimer. As Bettis and Rucks entered the home of Effie, the young boy was left outside to wait. As he was waiting a

³²⁵ “Life Imprisonment Given Johnnie Clay by Verdict of Crawford County Jury,” *Southwest American*, March 12, 1924, p. 1.

³²⁶ Newspaper articles reported on Clay being in the Crawford County jail. Also, he was known to be in the jail when the mob attempted to lynch Bettis and Ruck. “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

³²⁷ Rucks appears for the first time in newspapers (as well as Clay) in a special edition of the *Van Buren Press Argus* for the *Arkansas Gazette*. “Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners,” p. 1.

³²⁸ Rucks would have been well known by law enforcement looking into the murder of a young woman. “Van Buren – Is Acquitted,” *Southwest American*, December 4, 1912, p. 8.

loud scream occurred and, “the woman dashed from the room, her hair disheveled and her face bruised and bleeding, pleading with Clay to summon aid...it was then that Bettis snatched the shotgun from Rucks’ hands and shot the women in the back.”³²⁹ According to this narrative then, Bettis and Rucks had attempted to rape Effie. After she had broken free, Bettis clubbed her over the back of the head. As she made her way to the front door to scream for help, Rucks grabbed the gun and shot her in her back.³³⁰

It is important to consider that John Henry Clay likely underwent violent interrogation at the hands of Crawford County investigators.³³¹ He was taken off to the side by Jim Johnson – who was not associated with the police department - when he initially confessed that day.³³² After that, the fourteen-year-old boy was taken to the intimidating environment of the local jail where he was surrounded by older white men asking him about the murder of woman he did not know personally. He probably thought that agreeing with the investigators was the only way out of the situation and back to his family. What is known is at the trial only days later, “it was noticed as he appeared on the stand that several scars were on his face and hands, indicating that he had gone through a severe third-degree method.”³³³ Under these brutal investigation techniques, few could stand up – certainly not a fourteen-year-old-boy. The narrative that he was friends with two over thirty-year-old men and would accompany them on a hunting trip (that they were going on without a gun of their own) seemed illogical. Nevertheless, Sheriff Maxey

³²⁹ “Negroes Convicted of Murder in Death of Mrs. Effie Latimer to Go to Death Chair February 15,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, February 12, 1924, p. 1.

³³⁰ Clay’s portrayal of what happened first appears here. “Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners,” p. 1.

³³¹ *The Chicago Defender* would speculate on the notion that Clay was coerced into confession. Nathan Hopkins, “Mob is Pacified When Death Verdict is Given,” *Chicago Defender*, January 12, 1924, p. 1.

³³² Jim Johnson is listed as being present (and guiding) the confessions of both Rucks and Clay. In other documents, Frederick Creekmore and John Mitchell are also involved. The newspapers suggest that there were other members of the community present, but they are not listed by name. Johnson and Mitchell’s names appear in “Negro Fiends Will Die in Electric Chair Feb. 15,” p. 1.

³³³ Hopkins, “Mob is Pacified When Death Verdict is Given,” p. 1.

left the interrogation convinced he now needed to now track down a third conspirator in this heinous rape and murder – Charles Spurgeon Rucks.

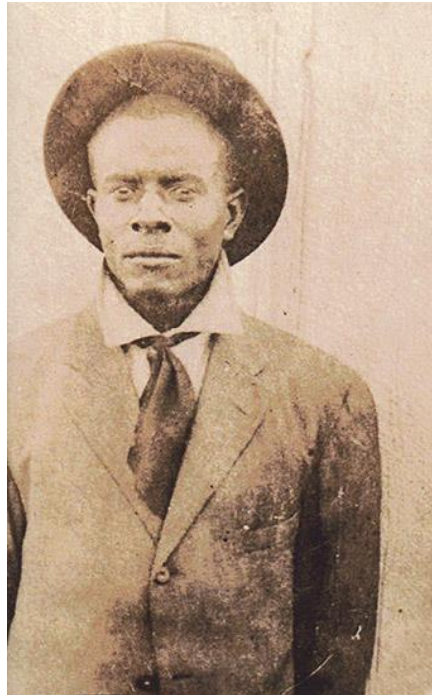


Image Eight: Charles Spurgeon Rucks – Courtesy of Margaret Estella Nance.

Charles Spurgeon Rucks was born on July 30, 1893, in Catcher to Charles Rucks and Elizabeth Beachum.³³⁴ Rucks was named after Charles Spurgeon, an English Baptist preacher well known for being outwardly critical of slavery in the United States.³³⁵ The Rucks family had owned a small home in the Black community of Catcher with their seven children since 1910.³³⁶ Charles Rucks had worked as a farmer while Elizabeth stayed home with the children. Spurgeon, as a young boy, helped out on the farm, rarely going to school. Neither he nor his siblings

³³⁴ Rucks' date of birth was found on his death certificate. "Spurgeon Rucks," *Arkansas, Death Certificates, 1914-1969*; Little Rock, Arkansas, Year: 1924, Roll: 3. Found on [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/158007:61777?tid=&pid=&queryId=7fe3adaeb3ab654861fba53f76fc4046&_phsrc=GbO300&_phstart=successSource).
https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/158007:61777?tid=&pid=&queryId=7fe3adaeb3ab654861fba53f76fc4046&_phsrc=GbO300&_phstart=successSource

³³⁵ Matt Carter, *Steal Away Home: Charles Spurgeon and Thomas Johnson, Unlikely Friends on the Passage to Freedom* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2017), 1-9.

³³⁶ Charles Rucks had been a slave in South Carolina. He moved with his wife to Van Buren, Arkansas in the 1880s. The family had rented property up until around 1910. In both the 1910 and 1920 census, they were listed as landowners. U.S. Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910 – Population Schedule*; U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*.

reported attending school in the census, and none could read or write.³³⁷ This situation worked for the family until Elizabeth died in 1910. The following year, the eighteen-year-old Spurgeon moved out of the house and married Lydia Sanders on October 16, 1911, when she was twenty-two.³³⁸ The couple rented a small house in Catcher and Spurgeon worked as a general laborer around the town, occasionally working on the nearby railroad. He registered for the draft in 1917 but was not asked to serve.

The Rucks family struck it rich in 1919 when their tract of land was discovered to be sitting directly above the best well access for the massive Williams Gas Field.³³⁹ Charles Rucks name soon became synonymous with the field in local reporting about the gas in the area – likely drawing jealousy from those living nearby.³⁴⁰ The “Charley Rucks Well” appears to have helped the family gain an immense out of wealth in a short amount of time.³⁴¹ By 1920, Spurgeon had learned how to read and write. He and his wife appeared quite content and did not have any children as they worked daily in Catcher.³⁴² The Rucks family luck would take a severe downturn with Rucks now implicated for rape and murder.

Spurgeon Rucks’ name did not enter the discussion of Effie’s murder until it was supposedly put forward by the fourteen-year-old John Henry Clay the afternoon after Latimer’s death.³⁴³ Clay had claimed that Bettis and Rucks had tricked him into going along with them to

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ ‘Lydia’ Sanders is listed on the marriage license, but the name ‘Lillian’ is listed on the 1920 census. Marriage License for Lydia Sanders and Spurgeon Rucks, *Arkansas, U.S., County Marriages Index, 1837-1957*, October 16, 1911. Found on ancestry.com. https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/2615510:2548?tid=&pid=&queryId=9101673229b76bd4460551d106844ea2&_phsrc=GbO314&_phst art=successSource

³³⁹ “Another Gas Well In Williams Field,” p. 1.

³⁴⁰ “Latest Crowe Gas Well Brings 12,000,000 Feet More For Fuel,” p. 1.

³⁴¹ “Big New Gas Wells Put Added Impetus Into Development,” p. 1.

³⁴² This can be found using the 1920 census. In the 1920 census, though, it lists Rucks as being a farmer. Descendants from his family claim he worked on the railroad as well. Wanda Gray phone interview with Margaret Nance (niece of Spurgeon Rucks), March 8, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*.

³⁴³ It appears first in “Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners,” p. 1.

the Latimer home under the promise of a rabbit hunt. By the time the boy understood the nefarious nature of their visit, there was little he could do to stop it.³⁴⁴ News of Rucks' part in the murder quickly spread amongst the civilian volunteers helping the local officials. So much so, that many of the same men who had interrogated Clay arrived at the Rucks family house alongside investigators.³⁴⁵ As deputy Bushmiaer was bringing Rucks out of the house to take him to the local jail for further questioning, he was stopped by this group of white men. In this group were at least six men, including John Mitchell (the half-brother of Effie), Jim Johnson (the man who had supposedly attained a confession from John Henry Clay), and W. M. Stallings as well as several other anonymous citizens of the town.³⁴⁶ Both Mitchell and Johnson would reiterate at trial that they forced deputy Bushmiaer to stop walking with Rucks so that they could instead question him first alone.³⁴⁷

Spurgeon Rucks was then taken into a local wooded area at which point he was supposed to have confessed to the crime in front of these men from the community.³⁴⁸ At trial, these men would testify that they had simply "asked Rucks to come clean and tell us the truth."³⁴⁹ They claimed to have not considered being violent towards Rucks, insisting, "he was not threatened."³⁵⁰ Rucks would later refute this stating "that the confession which he made to a party of white men after his arrest by Sheriff W. S. Bushmiaer, the day following the killing, was done at the instance of threats against his life."³⁵¹ Whether the confession occurred or not is largely immaterial to the case against the men themselves considering the coercive nature of

³⁴⁴ "Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners," p. 1.

³⁴⁵ "Negro Fiends Will Die in Electric Chair Feb. 15," p. 1.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ "State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge," p. 1.

³⁴⁸ "Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners," p. 1.

³⁴⁹ "State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge," p. 1.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

these interrogations. Anyone would have confessed to this crime given the violent nature of examination used to attain it.³⁵²

Reviewing the nature of the confessions of John Henry Clay and Spurgeon Rucks helps to demonstrate the coercion white community members expressed throughout every part of this investigation into Effie's murder. Clay was brought out of his house and questioned by a group of men led by Jim Johnson to evoke his confession. When Clay finally conceded (under undoubtable coercion) and named Rucks as a co-conspirator, this group of men used that knowledge to appear hand-in-hand with the local police to question the man. When the acting local police deputy attempted to arrest Rucks and transport him to the jail for the courts to decide his fate, he was stopped by this band of citizens. They forced the official to turn over Rucks so that they could instead question him away from the officer. Again, under coercion Rucks may or may not have confessed. Did it really matter, though? Simply put, men with no actual authority – other than their skin color - imposed their will on the course of this investigation at every step. They were then given crucial roles in the trial against the men, testifying to these confessions and assuring the jury of their guilt.³⁵³

After Spurgeon Rucks confessed to this band of citizens, he was allowed to return to Deputy Bushmiaer to be transported to the Crawford County Jail. As Bushmiaer was in the process of taking Rucks to the Van Buren Jail, Sheriff Maxey reiterated to him that it would be much safer for all involved if he was instead taken directly to the Sebastian County Jail in Fort

³⁵² There have been countless peer-reviewed studies that have conclusively proven that witnesses can be coerced into false confessions quite easily, especially children. Here is a review of the literature on this science. S. M. Kassin and G. H. Gudjonsson, "The Psychology of Confessions: A Review of the Literature and Issues," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5 (2004): 33-67.

³⁵³ Jim Johnson, M. Stallings, and James Mitchell all testified at trial against Bettis, Ruck, and Clay. Mary Creekmore (the wife of Frederick Creekmore) and Henry Johnson – who had gone into the crime scene to collect evidence – also had key roles. "State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge," p. 1.

Smith.³⁵⁴ Maxey surely knew, as with Bettis, that a local mob might possibly attack the men that night if they were in the closer jail. The farther they were from Catcher the better. Rucks was quietly moved to the Sebastian County Jail to await trial. It was assumed the Arkansas River would provide enough of a natural barrier to the forming mobs against the two accused. The vitriol of the white community began to boil over once it was publicly announced that three Black men had been arrested for the rape and murder of Effie Latimer. Within thirty minutes of Rucks' arrest, a group had already begun to form outside the Crawford County Jail. There was little doubt what the crowd desired. They shouted at Sheriff Maxey to turn over the three men so they could deliver the punishment themselves.³⁵⁵

Lynchings after an interracial crime were extremely common during this period.³⁵⁶ The Equal Justice Initiative has documented 4,084 lynchings of Black men that occurred from 1880 to 1940 and concluded more than half of these occurred after accusations of interracial rape or

³⁵⁴ The *Van Buren Argus* speculated that Rucks and Clay had both been taken to the Crawford County Jail and that Rucks was transported from there – once violence began – for safekeeping. The lynch mob would arrive very soon, however, so it seems more likely that he was taken directly to the Sebastian County Jail in Fort Smith. “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

³⁵⁵ This lynch mob is documented in several places: “Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners,” p. 1; “Jail is Stormed,” *The Lima News* (Ohio), December 30, 1923, p. 1; “Near Riot Develops Near Fort Smith,” *Fayetteville Daily Democrat*, December 31, 1923, p. 1; “Catcher Negro is Wounded by Deputy Sheriff,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, December 31, 1923, p. 1; “Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest,” p. 1.

“Nightriders Bring on Riot,” p. 1.

³⁵⁶ Many historians have researched lynchings, but these works formed the context for this piece: Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1999); Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2002); Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1878–1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); William D. Carrigan, *Lynching Reconsidered: New Perspectives in the Study of Mob Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*; Ashraf Rushdy, *American Lynching* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). For the best books on lynching in Arkansas specifically, see Harper, *White Man's Heaven*; Guy Lancaster, *Bullets and Fire: Lynching and Authority in Arkansas, 1840–1950* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2017); Lancaster, *American Atrocity*.

murder.³⁵⁷ The fear of sex between the two races elicited a very strong response in white communities during this period. It was assumed that sex between the races had to be non-consensual which led to the stereotype of the hypersexual and violent Black male becoming popular opinion of the time.³⁵⁸ Feeling unable to count on the justice system to remedy this supposed wrong, some white communities across the South would turn to extrajudicial forms of justice to punish the accused instead. Lynchings became public spectacles used for purposes far beyond quick retribution of a crime, though. Importantly, they served to entrench in the minds of the community the indisputable nature of white supremacy.³⁵⁹ If the goal of a lynching had simply been to seek swift retribution for a crime, it could have occurred outside the public eye in the nearby woods. That a majority of these lynchings occurred with huge crowds and cameras present demonstrates the larger significance of these spectacles to the racial order of the time. Doling out vigilante punishments such as lynchings, then, was a way for white community members to express their standing in society and keep Black Americans in a subordinate role.

This potential for extrajudicial justice would have been in the minds of everyone living in Catcher, white and Black, after the brutal murder of Effie Latimer. This is made apparent by the fact that Sheriff Maxey had already relocated two of the accused men across the river to Fort Smith. Even he was surprised, though, to see how quickly a mob mentality had formed to oppose his attempt to go through the proper channels of law and order. By midafternoon, a group of around one hundred men had formed, chanting for the men to be turned over to the crowd. There

³⁵⁷ Arkansas had 492 lynchings during this period. Per capita this makes it the third highest lynching state behind only Mississippi and Florida. Although, it is important to remember that the Elaine Massacre accounts for a large portion of these. “From ‘Popular Justice’ to Racial Terror,” *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, Equal Justice Initiative, 2013, <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>; A study from 1995 found the number to similarly be around half: Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*, 97-98.

³⁵⁸ Davis, “Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist,” 171-201.

³⁵⁹ The use of photography to disseminate these lynching images reinforced this supremacy across communities who had not even had a lynching Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 1-4.

was little doubt to anyone present that the mob was clamoring for a public lynching to occur. Sheriff Maxey had expected some sort of public backlash given the brutal nature of the crime but was shocked, nevertheless, by the crowd's response:

The action of the Crawford County crowd is said to have puzzled Sheriff Maxey. Private citizens first had the two negroes [Clay and Rucks] in custody and turned them over to the sheriff without the slightest reluctance. Yet, ten minutes after the negroes had been placed in jail their life was sought.³⁶⁰

By giving the accused men to local officials and then forcefully asking for them back to lynch only minutes later, the crowd was expressing this need for a public spectacle. Simply taking Clay and Rucks and killing them before the rest of the community was involved would not have as forcefully proven the hierarchy of white supremacy in the town. Instead, it was necessary for the individuals to be given over to police and forcefully taken from the jail. By going about the lynching in this way, it was possible to display the power of average white citizens inside their community.

By midafternoon, the mob had continued to grow, reaching at least 300 men, women, and children. The mob chanted at Sheriff Maxey and asked to see the three prisoners.³⁶¹ Unbeknownst to the crowd at the time, Bettis and Rucks had already been taken to Fort Smith for safekeeping. This left only the fourteen-year-old John Henry Clay in the Crawford County jail that day as the crowd swelled. Clay was being kept in a cell that was protected by a large combination lock similar to those seen in bank safes of the period, but Maxey still feared that the large mob could overpower him and take control of the situation if he was not careful.³⁶² Sheriff Maxey and Van Buren Mayor Martin mulled over ways to appease this crowd without turning

³⁶⁰ "Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching," p. 1.

³⁶¹ "Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners," p. 1; "Nightrider Bring on Riot," p. 1.

³⁶² The *Van Buren Press Argus* reported that Clay was kept in a cell with such a lock. "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

over control of the jail to them.³⁶³ Two ideas emerged over how to accomplish this. The first was to send an official to Judge James Cochran's (of the Fifteenth Judicial District) house to get him to agree to convene a special term of court Monday morning to proceed with the trial. If he would agree to this, the update could be announced publicly to the crowd to prove that the prisoners would be given a speedy trial and punishment, the hope being that this would disperse the crowd over the weekend and allow emotions to die down. While Judge Cochran would ultimately agree to this, it did not occur in a swift enough manner to dampen the mob mentality that was currently seizing Van Buren.

The second option Sheriff Maxey decided upon was riskier but more likely to dissipate the crowd and avoid bloodshed. He decided he would announce that two of the men were not inside the jail and allow members of the mob to tour the building to verify these claims to be accurate. He and one of his deputies, N. R. Whitlock, considered ways to allow this to happen, the main concern being that men with hidden weapons could get into the jail and kill the young boy.³⁶⁴ The sheriff likely knew that Governor Thomas McRae had made several public statements about stopping vigilante justice and allowing local men into the jail without a fight would prove a costly mistake if the situation turned violent. Still, the circumstances were quickly turning dire. Women and children had joined the crowd, and this had only further enflamed the mob. The *Van Buren Press Argus* detailed that "several white women from the Catcher community, some with children at their sides and some with children in their arms, mingled with

³⁶³ Little is known about Mayor of Van Buren's role in this entire incident. He is briefly mentioned as having gotten attorneys and met with the local Judge, but otherwise his role (and full name) is unknown. He is reported as having been there in "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

³⁶⁴ The actions taken by Maxey and Whitlock are described here. "Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching," p. 1.

the different groups of men, urging their husbands not to let the negroes escape.”³⁶⁵ Interestingly, adding women and children to the situation seemed to only make the crowd more violent.

Sheriff Maxey realized he had few options left. He had only a few deputies by his side and trying to repel the mob if they decided to force their way into the jail would have meant much bloodshed and likely would not have been successful. For this reason, Maxey made the decision to negotiate with the mob. The sheriff announced to the crowd that he would allow a committee of three unarmed men from the group to be shown throughout the jail to prove that Bettis and Rucks were no longer there.³⁶⁶ Likely fearing that he made a mistake keeping the fourteen-year-old in Crawford County, Maxey had to once again hope that the youth of the child and the importance of him as a material witness against the other two men would be enough to stop violence from being directed at him. The crowd agreed to this. Three men were disarmed of their weapons, searched thoroughly by Maxey, and then shown throughout the jail.³⁶⁷ They went room to room of the building and only found the scared boy cowering in his cell. Fortunately, the crowd seemed to understand the importance of Clay as a witness against the other men and no physical harm came to him.³⁶⁸ As the three men left the jail, they informed the crowd that Bettis and Rucks were not there. The mob began to disperse, but a key question still hung over many in the crowd. If Bettis and Rucks weren’t being held in Crawford County, where were they? The sheriff was unwilling to give any additional information.

³⁶⁵ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

³⁶⁶ These negotiations were described in detail by the *Van Buren Press Argus*. Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ The *Van Buren Press Argus* would argue that “the crowd seemed to realize the importance of Clay as a material witness against the older men...[so] no attempt was made to lynch him.” There is likely more to the story, but it is difficult to make any other justifications for why Clay was not harmed. Ibid.

Most of the crowd left once the jail had been searched.³⁶⁹ The situation outside the Crawford County Jail appeared to finally come to an end. Sheriff Maxey had to feel relieved that he had avoided bloodshed and kept the situation under some modicum of control. Given the circumstances, Maxey had probably handled the situation as well as he could. He would be lauded for his actions that day in the later newspapers.³⁷⁰ Still, it must be remembered that the mob in this situation wielded significant power and control over the local police. By gathering around the jail and clamoring for the lives of Bettis and Rucks, they secured access to the inside of a county jail. If the two men had been in the Crawford County Jail that night, they would have likely been pulled out and lynched publicly. The white mob gained most of the concessions they were seeking, the only goal they didn't accomplish – lynching the two men - was not possibly because they were not physically there.

The secret of where Bettis and Rucks were being detained was not kept for much longer. Later that day, someone close to Sheriff Maxey must have leaked news that the two men were being held inside the Sebastian County Jail in Fort Smith.³⁷¹ With this knowledge, a group of white citizens in Catcher quickly mobilized to stage a similar protest as had just concluded in Van Buren. The problem was that the Fort Smith jail was around eleven miles away from Catcher. Adding to this, the jail was located across the Arkansas River. It would be necessary to drive to get there. Even with the booming car market of the 1920s, cars were not overly common in rural Arkansas, so it required a considerable amount of organization and planning to transport some 200 men from Catcher to Fort Smith as soon as possible. Remarkably, the *Van Buren Press*

³⁶⁹ Only one newspaper (from Moberly, Missouri) reported on the crowd dispersing in Van Buren. It is unclear how fast this process took place or if anyone stayed. "Nightriders Bring on Riot," p. 1.

³⁷⁰ "Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching," p. 1.

³⁷¹ It is unknown how this occurred, but it was probably someone close to Maxey. He had personally driven both Bettis and Rucks across the bridge into Sebastian County and was one of the only people to know for sure where they were. It seems unlikely that after all that had occurred, he would have finally revealed the two men's location after the crowd had already dispersed.

Argus would report that “the highway was filled with automobiles, but it was evident that they were not filled with joy riders, as they were only stern-faced men and excited youths in them.”³⁷² In only a couple of hours, the white community of Catcher had mobilized and moved several hundred people over ten miles to form a lynch mob against Bettis and Rucks.

Sheriff Pink Shaw of Fort Smith, fortunately, had been given advanced notice that this lynch mob was on its way. Shaw had lived Fort Smith for the majority of his life and likely well remembered a similar mob that had formed in front of the Sebastian County Jail in 1912.³⁷³ In that instance, Sanford Lewis (a Black citizen) had been placed inside the Fort Smith jail after allegedly murdering a white man. A mob of 1,000 angry white community members soon arrived at the jail and began pulling at the bars of his jail cell. Jailers and local police reportedly stood by as the mob slowly gained access to the jail over the course of an hour.³⁷⁴ Upon gaining access to his cell, Lewis was severely beaten. He was then pulled across the street “half dead, but yet pleading for mercy, [where] he was strung up to a cross arm while the frenzied mob cheered.”³⁷⁵ Lewis died soon after, hung in front of the cheering mob. To their credit, the Fort Smith city council decried the vigilante violence, going as far as to suspend the chief of police, a night jailer, and police captain for their inaction that night.³⁷⁶ Likewise, the county took quick legal action against the mob members who had guided the lynching – setting a rare precedent that mob

³⁷² “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

³⁷³ Pink Shaw had previously been a barber in the city before becoming Sheriff of the county.

³⁷⁴ “Condemn Fort Smith Lynching,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 27, 1912, p. 1.

³⁷⁵ Quote from “Negro Victim of Fort Smith Mob,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 24, 1912, p. 1; Several other articles detail the night’s incident. “Arrest Alleged Leader of Mob,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 29, 1912, p. 1; “Sandford Lewis’ Murder Brings Two to Prison,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 29, 1912, p. 1.

³⁷⁶ “Dismissed Ft. Smith Officers,” *Laclede Blade* (Laclede, Missouri), April 5, 1912, p. 2; “To Probe Fort Smith Lynching,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 25, 1912, p. 1; “Probing Fort Smith Lynching,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 26, 1912, p. 1.

violence would not be tolerated inside their city.³⁷⁷ Shaw likely recalled this mob violence – and the reaction by the city to police inaction – as he prepared to face a similar mob.

As the sun was setting over the Sebastian County jail, Sheriff Shaw mobilized every officer he could. Afraid these numbers would not be enough; Shaw even deputized an additional group of men from the community and entrusted them with riot guns to help hold off the crowd.³⁷⁸ As Shaw prepared for the worst, it soon arrived. By 8:00 p.m., a crowd of 500 strong had formed in front of the Sebastian County Jail.³⁷⁹ They chanted at the Sheriff and demanded Bettis and Rucks be given to them to be lynched. The mob continued to grow as civilians from all around the Fort Smith and Van Buren area heard news of the imminent lynching about to occur. Cars continually circled up to the jail, dropping off additional members of angry community members before speeding off for more.³⁸⁰

The sight of these reinforcements forced Sheriff Shaw to reconsider the strength of his own forces. He commanded his officers to secure the jail. He wanted all doors to the building locked. He placed armed guards at every window and told the officers to not let anyone in or out of the building without his permission.³⁸¹ It was initially his belief that the best course of action was to stay in the jail and not address the crowd. It seems he thought that communicating with the mob would only stoke their anger more. After the first hour, however, it became clear that the

³⁷⁷ “23 Indictments Follow Lynching,” *Arkansas Gazette*, May 3, 1912, p. 1; “Alleged Lynchers on Trial at Waldron,” *Arkansas Gazette*, August 14, 1912, p. 2; “Arrest Alleged Leader of Mob,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 29, 1912, p. 1.

³⁷⁸ “Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners,” p. 1.

³⁷⁹ Interestingly, there is some dispute about when this second mob formed in front of the Sebastian County Jail. The *Van Buren Press Argus* suggests in its article (on January 4) that it occurred the morning following the Van Buren protest - around 9:00 a.m. Several other accounts including the *Fort Smith Times Record* (written December 31), however, more convincingly suggest it occurred only hours after the incident in Van Buren. Since the Fort Smith paper was closer to the action, and written only two days later, that timeline has been given here. This timeline also makes more sense considering what occurred the next day concerning the eleven nightriders.

³⁸⁰ “Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners,” p. 1.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

mob was only becoming more and more violent. Only hours before midnight, the *Arkansas Democrat* estimated the mob to be at least 1,000 members in strength.³⁸² The members of the crowd were shouting, and there were rumors that the mob would rush the jail in an attempt to get to the prisoners inside.³⁸³ Around 10:00 p.m., Sheriff Shaw made the decision to speak to the crowd. He wanted this communication to come from a position of power. He opened the doors of the jail and stepped out in front of the mob with his shotgun in hand. He called on Judge Joseph M. Hill and several other prominent men from the community to stand alongside him.

After the crowd silenced enough to hear the sheriff, he declared that he understood the brutal nature of the charges against the two men and how the crowd must be feeling. He reminded them, though, that it was his job to keep the men safe until they could be sentenced by the state.³⁸⁴ Judge Hill spoke briefly as well, assuring the mob that the three men would be quickly brought to trial and their sentence would be just and fair.³⁸⁵ He begged the mob to let the law take its natural course through the proper channels. After this call for reason, Sheriff Shaw put it a blunter way. He announced that if the crowd did decide to attack the jail, he had enough armed men and guns at his command to “kill every man in Crawford County before they could mob the prisoners and that they would have to walk over his dead body to get them.”³⁸⁶ He reportedly concluded, “try and tear down my jail and there will be some new widows in Crawford County and some new Crawford faces in hell.”³⁸⁷ It was clear he intended to complete his task of keeping the two men safe.

³⁸² “Armed Officers Balk Threatened Lynching, Keep Crowds at Bay,” *Arkansas Democrat*, December 30, 1923, p. 1.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

³⁸⁵ Amelia Martin, “Judge Joseph M. Hill,” *Fort Smith Historical Society Journal* 21 (September 1997): 15. Judge Hill was very well respected within the community. He had served as chief justice of Arkansas for four years in 1909 to 1912. He was a member of the Fort Smith bar for 34 years.

³⁸⁶ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

³⁸⁷ “Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching,” p. 1.

Sheriff Shaw's statements only brought forth further jeers from the mob. The next two hours were extremely tense. The crowd trusted the sheriff's word that he was not going to be bullied into changing his view on the matter. His actions seemed to have the desired effect on the mob. Instead of resorting to violence, the crowd tried to reason with the officer as they had with Sheriff Maxey in Van Buren. Members of the crowd cried out, "we don't want bloodshed, but we want those negroes."³⁸⁸ The crowd believed it was only fair to them that negotiations be opened so a compromise could be met. Shaw, unlike Maxey, was unwilling to allow members of the crowd to enter the jail to see if Bettis and Rucks were still there. That had been easier for Maxey since the prisoners were not physically there and could not possibly be lynched. He did not see a similar compromise that could occur. The fundamental concession the crowd wanted was the lives of the two men while Shaw's chief objective was keeping them safe. There was no way a compromise could be met in such a situation.

Unbeknownst to the crowd, Sheriff Shaw was sweating. He understood that if the over 500-men mob did storm the jail it would be impossible to repel them.³⁸⁹ Many lives would be lost. Talking with his fellow officers, Shaw decided on two courses of action. First, as had happened in Crawford County, he reached out to Judge Cochran of Paris, Arkansas for confirmation that the sentencing of Bettis and Rucks could be moved up to the next two days on the following Monday morning.³⁹⁰ This would take time to confirm, though, and announcing it

³⁸⁸ "Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners," p. 1.

³⁸⁹ It is unclear exactly how many people were in this mob in front of the Sebastian County Jail in Fort Smith. The *Van Buren Press Argus* and *Fort Smith Times Record* would report on around 500. The *Arkansas Gazette* would say closer to 1,000. Because of the proximity to the violence, the 500 number is likely more accurate. "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1; "Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners," p. 1.; "Armed Officers Balk Threatened Lynching," p. 1.

³⁹⁰ Cochran appears to have been called personal friends W. H. Neal, Mayor Martin, E. L. Matlock, and O. D. Thompson who had experienced the violence at the Crawford County jail. Cochran explained that he could only move the date up so much. Before these conversations were over, the crowds had already formed. The crowds never seemed to get the word of these conversations. "Brutal Black Murders," p. 1.

prematurely to the crowd would be disastrous if it was shown to be untrue. While Shaw awaited word from the judge, he realized something else had to be done. He decided that the two men needed to be secretly taken out of the building and moved out of the county. With them out of the building, he could negotiate with the crowd as Maxey had done hours before. Also, the only way to assure their safety was to get them out of northwest Arkansas. Still, this plan had serious complications, - most obviously, how to transport the two men out of the jail without the mob noticing. If they were discovered halfway through this plan, the officers would assuredly be overpowered, and the prisoners would be lynched. Also, once they were out of the building, where could they be taken that would be safe? The majority of the mob in front of the building had just driven over ten miles to be there that night. Any jail in the nearby region would have a similar fate.³⁹¹

Sheriff Shaw decided that it was critical to remove the men from the area even if it meant further risk on their lives. As these discussions were ongoing between Shaw and his officers, a loud bang was heard just outside the building. Around 11:30 p.m., someone in the mob had thrown a firecracker at the jail.³⁹² All hell broke loose for several minutes as the officers attempted to determine whether this was a gunshot and the start of a larger riot. The officers began readying themselves, once again, for a possible siege. Sheriff Shaw likely thought that his plan to remove the prisoners had been leaked to the crowd. Likewise, many in the crowd had no idea that the sound had been a firecracker, and many took cover assuming a larger fight had been started. After several minutes, a calm returned.³⁹³

³⁹¹ "Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching," p. 1.

³⁹² "Armed Officers Balk Threatened Lynching," p. 1.

³⁹³ Ibid.

Shaw went back to planning how to safely transport the two prisoners out of the county. One of the men he had deputized earlier in the day had recently purchased a brand-new Packard motor car.³⁹⁴ The man suggested using his car, parked outside, to move the men out of the area. The luxury automobile was extremely fast which was critical as the police vehicle of the period – the Ford Model T – was no faster than any car civilians would be using. Also, being in the middle of the Prohibition era, many civilians had altered their cars to be much faster than police cars. Sheriff Shaw realized he needed the Packard car to outrun anyone who would attempt to follow. By this point, Sheriff Maxey and Deputy Whitlock from the Van Buren jail had arrived to help assist the officers in holding off the mob. As Maxey was brought up to speed with the plan, he agreed to be the officer that would sit with the men in the car as it was driven out of the area. He suggested that the car go as fast as possible to the local railroad station so that he could have the men put on the Rock Island train from Fort Smith to Little Rock.³⁹⁵ Everyone agreed to the plan, and it was set in motion.³⁹⁶

The most difficult part of the plan, though, was secretly moving the men from out of the jail and into the car without the mob realizing. Sheriff Shaw had to suspect that there were civilians he had deputized earlier that day that were likely providing inside information to the mob outside. For this reason, he seems to have only discussed the plan to transport the prisoners to the officers closest to him.³⁹⁷ By this point, it was well after midnight and most of the crowd

³⁹⁴ “Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching,” p. 1.

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ There are differing accounts of how this happened. Some reports suggest the men were taken straight from Van Buren and the prisoners were never at the Fort Smith jail. This makes little sense for several reasons. First, Maxey had allowed three men to walk through the jail to prove the men were not there. It is known that Maxey is the one that transported Bettis and Rucks to Little Rock. Second, there is no reason that Pink Shaw would not say the men were not there in Fort Smith that night. He had little to gain by protecting the jail with his life if Bettis and Rucks were not there. The timeline provided fits the known facts of what happened as closely as possible.

³⁹⁷ “Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching,” p. 1.

had started to disperse.³⁹⁸ Only the most committed citizens remained in front of the jail. Still, there several dozen people of the mob still outside and it appeared they were watching the area in shifts. Sometime in the very early morning hours, Shaw put his plan into action. He first went and relieved all of the deputized citizens who had helped that night that were securing the basement of the jail. By sending them to get rest and telling them to return tomorrow, he hoped “that no inkling of the [prisoner’s] departure could get to the mob before a safe lead could be gained.”³⁹⁹ As several of these men left the jail, it was also hoped that it would spread to the mob that the exciting actions of the night were over.

With the mob’s attention fading and no word of the plan leaking, Sheriff Shaw decided to start moving the men. Bettis and Rucks “were spirited out through the basement of the jail,” to the back of the building where the Packard motor car was sitting with its lights off.⁴⁰⁰ Sheriff Maxey and officer Whitlock transported the two prisoners out the back of the jail under the cover of darkness, quickly climbing into the back of the motor car. The citizen who owned the Packard car drove the five cramped men as they sped for Mansfield, Arkansas in south Sebastian County. The Frisco Union railroad station in Mansfield, Arkansas was selected as the best place to take the men. Located about 20 miles south of Fort Smith it would take around a half an hour drive to get them there safely.⁴⁰¹

Sheriff Shaw and Maxey must have assumed that once they got the two men into the car and on their way that they were in the clear. Unfortunately, news again leaked to the mob that the prisoners had just been secretly moved away from the jail.irate at this update, the remaining

³⁹⁸ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

³⁹⁹ “Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching,” p. 1.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ The *Arkansas Gazette* provided a detailed breakdown of how this took place and lauded both Sheriff Shaw and Maxey for their work in keeping the two men from being lynched. Ibid. Interestingly, the papers from Van Buren and Fort Smith do not provide much detail into how the men ended up in Little Rock.

crowd members began to pile back into their own cars to stop the police caravan. The *Arkansas Gazette* reported that 35 to 40 men piled into half a dozen cars and trucks and made haste to catch up to the prisoners.⁴⁰² Many more crowd members hailed the cars hoping to get a ride but there were not enough spots to take everyone. The mob was informed that the prisoners were being taken to the Rock Island rail line and sped after them. It became clear that they were “endeavoring to overtake the automobile in which the negroes were being taken to the railroad station.”⁴⁰³ A lynching of the men would have certainly occurred if the mob had overtaken Sheriff Maxey and the two prisoners. Fortunately, due to the lead they had and the speed of the Packard motor car, the sheriff safely transported the two men to the Frisco Union Station in Mansfield without incident.

The Mansfield Branch of the St. Louis – San Francisco Railway (known as Frisco, for short) had operated in rural southern Sebastian County since 1887.⁴⁰⁴ The Rock Island line which connected Fort Smith to Little Rock was the chief mode of transportation for those looking to get from areas like Kansas City or Texas to Little Rock.⁴⁰⁵ Sheriff Maxey and the two prisoners pulled into the Mansfield station around 5:00 a.m. that morning.⁴⁰⁶ They would have likely had no indication that there was a group attempting to track them down. The sheriff and deputy thanked the citizen that had let them use his Packard car and sent him back on his way home. The four men – Bettis, Ruck, Maxey, and Whitlock – secured a train car and set off for Little Rock around 5:30 a.m. The group reached Little Rock around 11:00 a.m. that morning with no incident.⁴⁰⁷ Sheriff Maxey made the decision to keep the two prisoners separated before they

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ John Dill, “A Look at the Frisco Mansfield Branch, Sebastian County, Arkansas,” *The Arkansas Scrambler* 31, no. 8 (April 2018): 2-5.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ “Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching,” p. 1.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

went before the Grand Jury later that week. Wanting to keep them from working out a story together, Maxey also made the decision to have them transported to different facilities for safekeeping. Bettis was taken to the Pulaski County Jail and Rucks was taken to the state penitentiary in Little Rock. Throughout the ride, Bettis continued to proclaim his innocence asking Maxey to let them go. Rucks was said to be too frightened to talk. Sheriff Maxey ordered that the men stay in Little Rock until their trial date when they could be transported back to Crawford County.⁴⁰⁸

Back in Catcher, the mob spirit had not died down. Citizens of the area awoke at first light that day to news that the men had been spirited away the following night. Angered by these developments, some white community members felt they needed to take definitive action. It was unclear, though, what they could do now that the men were no longer in the county. A small group of the white population of Catcher turned their attention to the prosecutors of Van Buren who had assured them the night before that there would be swift law and order concerning the three men. Dozens of men arrived at the houses of these men and demanded clarification over how this would occur. Attorneys W. H. Neal, E. L. Matlock, and O. D. Thompson all had visitors throughout the morning asking how the cases would proceed. Other men stopped at the house of Mayor Martin raising similar questions. The prominent men of Van Buren had spoken to Judge James Cochran – who was tasked with leading the trial against the three men – the night before.⁴⁰⁹ Judge Cochran had stated Saturday (at the same time the mob was on the Crawford County jail lawn) that the earliest he would convene a special inquisitorial body to investigate

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

Effie Latimer's murder would be January 17, or fifteen days after the crime.⁴¹⁰ This had been relayed to the white community members of Catcher but was met with anger.

The attorneys and mayor came together and again called Judge Cochran by long distance phone early that morning. They urged the judge to reconsider his sentencing date as mob violence was expected – potentially even against the judge himself – if the trial date was not changed. This shifted Judge Cochran's thinking about the matter. He told the men since violence was likely with delay, he would convene a special term of court Tuesday morning so that the sentencing could occur Wednesday, January 2.⁴¹¹ This was the earliest date that would be possible. He told the men to disseminate the news to the crowd, the sheriff, as well as the local press. He and the attorneys likely assumed that broadcasting this update would calm the members of Van Buren and bring about a return to order.⁴¹² This would not be the case, however, as the white community members would instead turn their attention back to seeking vengeance against the Black community of Catcher.

The mob mentality that seized Catcher, Van Buren, and Fort Smith in the first 24 hours after Effie's death reinforces the power a small group of white community members could hold in the rural Jim Crow South. Even if these mobs had been a full 1,000 strong (as some sources reported), that was still a small part of the nearly 26,000 living in the county at that time.⁴¹³ Inside this segment of the population, several motivations appear to have been influencing the actions taken - not everyone joined the mob for the same reason. As Guy Lancaster has shown,

⁴¹⁰ Cochran had previously announced the trials against the men would be held on January 17. He thought this would be fast enough to disperse the mobs. After further pressure, he finally conceded to move the trial date up. This was not quick enough, however, to dispel mob violence in front of both the Crawford County and Sebastian County jails or the violence against the remaining Black citizens still living in Catcher. "Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest," p. 1.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ U.S. Census Bureau, "Composition and Characteristics of the Population of Arkansas, For Counties: 1920," p. 8.

one of the most likely reasons because of a supposed belief in inherent Black criminality. One of the group leaders, James Mitchell, was half-brother to Effie Latimer. He undeniably was there to get revenge for his sister who had died. Likewise, many other citizens had read the local papers for years which only discussed Catcher when it was reporting on crimes the Black community had committed. Myths of widespread interracial rape, specifically, enflamed white minds and caused them to lash out at anyone they perceived as standing in the way of alleviating these anxieties.⁴¹⁴ For others in the mob, they would have been there because they saw it as a form of entertainment. The pervasive photography associated with these ritualistic mobs and lynchings reveals that many were there because it was something to do.⁴¹⁵

The primary goal of this mob – to lynch the three accused – was not achieved. This was not through lack of trying, however. The mobs of Catcher were organized, using modern forms of transportation to track down the accused in the hope of having a public spectacle of vengeance against the men.⁴¹⁶ While the lynchings of Bettis, Clay, and Rucks were fortunately prevented by the sheriffs and local systems of power, that does not mean that law and order truly won the day. Instead, the primary upholders of law and order – judges, sheriffs, police, and attorneys – worked hand in hand with these white citizens to negotiate compromises and uphold white supremacy throughout the region. To be fair, there was little else these officials could do. They were coming up against overwhelming force and had to concede on most terms to assure a lynching did not occur. Nevertheless, it was clear that a small group of passionate white members could direct the actions of these officials when necessary.

⁴¹⁴ The rape charges at the trial of these men would still be used as part of the prosecution's case but would be thrown out later as the murder charges were enough for the death penalty. "Abatement of Rape Charges," *Arkansas v. Bettis, Rucks*, Crawford Circuit Court, July 7, 1924. Scanned copies of these records were sent to me by Kristen Edwards, a court administrator for the Crawford County Circuit Clerk's Office.

⁴¹⁵ Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 1-4.

⁴¹⁶ The *Van Buren Press Argus* reports on how cars and trucks were used to keep the members of the town close to the where the men were. "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

A small group of white community members of Catcher guided the investigation of Effie Latimer's death from the beginning. Going primarily off the word of one neighbor, the entire community took for granted the guilt of William Bettis. This forced police in the community to both speed up their investigation as well as search Catcher's Black community alone for further evidence. This shoddy investigation led them to the fourteen-year-old, John Henry Clay, who did not fit any of the expectations of who would have been involved in such a brutal crime. Meanwhile, white citizens of the community were back at the crime scene completing their own investigation. Mary Creekmore would produce a bloody dime at trial that she picked up off the floor after investigators were done with the home.⁴¹⁷ Jim Johnson would claim to have found a bloody shoeprint that fit the rubber boots Spurgeon Rucks owned.⁴¹⁸ All of this would be allowed into evidence at trial and was far beyond the proper channels of a normal investigation where officers, in positions of actual authority, collect the evidence for a case.

Even with John Henry Clay being placed under arrest for his supposed role in the crime, community members forcefully removed him from police and coerced a confession from him before he was formally questioned by investigators.⁴¹⁹ The naming of Rucks by the young boy was heard by community members over the shoulders of police interviewers and they arrived hand-in-hand with these officers to arrest Spurgeon Rucks. After Rucks was arrested, the men again took him away from Officer Bushmiaer and questioned him themselves before returning him back to police. These back-alley confessions would be used as critical evidence at court.⁴²⁰

After the investigation was over and the men had supposedly confessed to the rape and murder, the mob turned their attention to swift vengeance. As the *Chicago Defender* put it, "men

⁴¹⁷ "State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge," p. 1.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

of our Race were at once accused and the police and papers began arousing the mob instinct in the semicivilized whites of the community until they became a bloodthirsty monster.”⁴²¹ They sought a public lynching and would not be satisfied with any compromise on the issue. While Maxey had prophetically moved the men out of the county, a 300-person mob descended on the Crawford County jail and demanded the men be turned over to them. Importantly, this occurred after they had relinquished the men back to the police only minutes before.⁴²² They wanted the act to be a public spectacle and they wanted it to show that the police were working for the white community members and only in their interest. Sheriff Maxey attempted to hold off this mob but knew that violence was likely unless he granted further concessions. He allowed three men to tour the jail – simply hoping they would not lynch the young boy cowering inside.

Unsatisfied with this lack of a public lynching, the white mob took to the highways when they heard rumors the men might be in Sebastian County.⁴²³ Met by Sheriff Shaw’s show of force, the community members were outraged. It appeared the channels of law and order were now working against them. Even in this case, though, Sheriff Shaw was constantly looking for areas of compromise short of turning the men over to the crowd. The 500-person mob was so emboldened that they considered seizing the jail and overpowering the sheriff and his officers. They had inside knowledge of where the prisoners were and used that to try to overtake them on the highway when they were spirited away that night.⁴²⁴ At every turn the white mob was looking for ways to express their power over the situation.

When the incident seemed to have finally concluded and the men were safely in Little Rock, the white mob was outraged. It felt as though they had lost. Their idea of justice would not

⁴²¹ “Bettis and Rucks to Hang” *The Chicago Defender*, June 28, 1924, p. 1.

⁴²² “Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching,” p. 1.

⁴²³ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

⁴²⁴ “Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners,” p. 1.

be achieved that night. They turned, only then, to the last outlet of power they had – the court system. If the men could not be lynched, they would have to be executed by the state. White citizens pressured prominent men of the town to have the judge move the trial date up. Judge Cochran, feeling this same pressure, finally conceded – going back on a date he had set only hours prior. The moving up of these court dates would lead to a legalized lynching of the men. It would be impossible for them mount a proper defense in such a short amount of time and without the trial being moved to a more neutral location. Especially considering the amount of evidence that would be allowed from members of the mob itself.

The narrative that would win the day, however, was that the local sheriff, police, lawyers, and judges had pushed back on these calls for extrajudicial justice and preserved the authority of the United States justice system.⁴²⁵ By stopping the lynching of the three men, officers like Maxey, Bushmiaer, Whitlock, and Shaw had upheld law and order.⁴²⁶ Lawyers and judges - like Neal, Thompson, Matlock, and Cochran – had used common sense and swift justice to keep ‘illegitimate’ violence from occurring.⁴²⁷ Examining what actually occurred in the first twenty-four hours after Effie Latimer’s death proves this to be false. A small segment of the white population had directed the actions of these officials from beginning to end. They forced the hand of those in positions of power and gained concessions at every turn. Even when they were prevented from lynching the three accused, they would gain a similar outcome only days later by going through the court system instead. Still, the outrage over the lack of a public lynching

⁴²⁵ “Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching,” p. 1.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ By illegitimate violence, the author means violence committed by citizens without the authority of the state. The term is put in quotations because, as will be shown, citizens would use the court to attain the same outcomes of death against the men. Whether legitimate or not, the outcomes were the same.

would ultimately cause an even smaller portion of this white community to turn against the remaining Black community members – proving ‘illegitimate’ violence would win the day.

Chapter Four - The Racial Cleansing of Catcher

Officials in Crawford County likely thought the worst of the backlash to Effie Latimer's murder had passed. Judge Cochran had agreed to move the trial date for Bettis, Clay, and Rucks up to Wednesday, January 2, the soonest possible date after the New Year holiday. The three men would soon be sentenced to death and that would be the end of the matter. With Bettis and Rucks reaching safety in Little Rock around 11:00 a.m. that Sunday morning, authorities hoped calm would ensue in the town.⁴²⁸ They failed to grasp, however, how deep the anger of some community members ran at the lack of a public lynching of the men. A small group of white citizens began to take more aggressive and violent actions against the Black community of Catcher. The dangers of living alongside these Black members of the community had been reinforced in their minds and they had no legal recourse to fix these underlying problems. Punishing the three men through the court system would allow these other Black men to continue living near their wives and children. Not being able to publicly punish the accused suggested that similar crimes might be tolerated. The *Van Buren Press Argus* was only further inflaming tensions, writing that the three men might not even be punished by the courts:

The 'Colony' of Catcher was "a lawless community, as far as the Blacks were concerned, and the records in circuit court teem with stories of law violations in that community. It has been almost impossible to convict a negro from that community and this has been a smoldering fire" that must be corrected.⁴²⁹

The newspapers in Van Buren and Fort Smith had rarely reported on the Black community living in the town other than to report on the crimes of its Black citizens. In the thirty years preceding the murder of Effie Latimer, many reports of petty crime from Catcher were

⁴²⁸ Bettis and Ruck had been transported to Little Rock with Sheriff Maxey. A detailed look into their movements is found here. "Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching," p. 1.

⁴²⁹ "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

reported in detail.⁴³⁰ Most infamously, the shocking murder and maiming of two constables investigating a murder in Van Buren in July 1896. Constable Jones and Perry had entered the Black community of Catcher to investigate a murder when they, themselves, were killed and injured. Seven members of the Black community were brought on trial for the murder. *Ten years later*, two of them – Henry Bell and Bob Richardson were found guilty of the crime.⁴³¹ Gus Richardson, Tandy Coggs, and Tandy Ferguson were some of these men to be found innocent. This huge trial would leave lasting impacts on the county for both the Black and white community. For Blacks, it would likely signify the awful legal conditions they could be put through even if found innocent of a crime. For whites, the case was an example of how Black citizens could walk away without punishment.⁴³²

Several other murders were reported as coming out of Catcher – with most having Black citizens charged with the crime.⁴³³ The most famous was probably the killing of Allen Bobo by J. B. Cox. As mentioned earlier, Bobo had been found with a fractured skull and reports early on suggested that the killing had been motivated over jealous regarding a local girl. Cox was arrested for the crime but managed to escape. After five days on the run, Cox was found and brought back to stand trial – he was given five years but was given a pardon by Governor George Hays.⁴³⁴ Tacked onto the end of most of this reporting was the notion that Bobo and Cox may

⁴³⁰ The crimes most commonly reported from Catcher were for stealing, gambling, drunkenness, and counterfeiting. “Arrested for Bogus Coining,” *Fort Smith Elevator*, August 14, 1908, p. 8; “Negro’s Home Set on Fire,” *Southwest American*, June 28, 1913, p. 5; “Circuit Court,” *Southwest American*, October 11, 1914, p. 9; “Negro Held on Liquor Charges Claims to Be Amateur – Had Made Only Four Batches,” *Southwest American*, July 1, 1922, p. 12.

⁴³¹ It appears most of the men were able to post bail, but Bell and Richardson appear to have stayed in the prison for the entirety of the trial. “Negro Suspects Bound Over,” p. 8.

⁴³² *Ibid.*

⁴³³ Tom Ricks attempt to kill Lula Hulds. “Charge Assault to Kill,” *Southwest American*, March 1, 1913; “White Boy Playing with Gun Kills Negro,” *Southwest American*, October 23, 1913, p. 2; “Charge Murder to Five Negroes,” *Southwest American*, August 1, 1922, p. 12; For Matthew Coggs murder of Bowlin Ricks see “One Negro Killed Two Wounded When Picnickers Battle,” *Southwest American*, July 20, 1920, p. 5; For Henry Jackson killing Anderson Washington, see “Van Buren,” *Southwest American*, July 12, 1921, p. 3.

⁴³⁴ “Cox Pardoned; Convicted But Few Days Ago,” *Southwest American*, December 12, 1916; p. 10.

have actually had an economic dispute with one another over who owned a tract of land that the Clear Creek Oil and Gas Company wanted to lease for gas production.⁴³⁵ The company had placed a massive gas line on Cox's property, which Bobo believed to be his, yet "evidence in the murder hearing failed to develop a connection with the litigation over the leases."⁴³⁶

These stories of lawlessness and crime in the Black community of Catcher appeared every few months in the newspaper – almost no stories about the community besides through the lens of crime were written.⁴³⁷ Understanding this larger context of only reporting on the criminal nature of Blacks in the county, demonstrates why the newspaper would have had an easier time justifying the violence taken against the entire Black community in the aftermath of Latimer's murder. The newspaper argued that the three men had been able to rape and murder a young white woman of the community, and they stood a chance of getting away with the crime. Feeling helpless in the situation, a small group of white citizens of Catcher would instead turn their attention to punishing the remaining Black community members living in the town; men, women, and children who were undoubtedly innocent of any crime. If they could not exercise control over the three murderers themselves, they would fix the underlying problem by forcing these remaining Black citizens out of the town. The *Van Buren Press Argus* would summarize it succinctly, "there were some law-abiding, hardworking negroes living in that community and they have been made to suffer for the misdeeds of the law-breaking class of their race."⁴³⁸

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ One story that got a lot of coverage was an escaped convict who was said to be hiding inside Catcher. "Escaped Convicts at Large," *Southwest American*, December 11, 1915, p. 2; "Search for Negro Continues," *Southwest American*, December 12, 1915, p. 4.

⁴³⁸ "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

Driving the entire Black community out of the region was considered a necessary measure to keep white community members safe.⁴³⁹

In truth, the racial cleansing of Catcher was completed for reasons beyond just retribution for the murder of Effie Latimer. While many in the white community were undoubtedly influenced to support racialized violence against the Black community to right this wrong, economic factors likely played a role as well.⁴⁴⁰ As Guy Lancaster has written, “sometimes, what white vigilantes wanted (land or jobs) was just as important as what they did not want (the presence of African Americans).”⁴⁴¹ Removing the Black presence from the area could have helped white community members in several ways. Most importantly, it would push Black landowners off fertile agricultural land that might hold lucrative natural gas reserves beneath; land that Black citizens had owned for decades. The cleansing of the area would also remove competition for wage paying jobs in industries like farming and railroad work. Eliminating part of the workforce in these areas guaranteed jobs for white community members while also allowing them to demand higher wages.⁴⁴² Importantly, though, if the main purpose for driving out these Black citizens had been to take their jobs, white elites employing Black workers (and renting to them) would have been angered by the action of lower-class whites. Instead, very little action was taken by white community members against other whites to stop this violence from occurring.⁴⁴³

⁴³⁹ This claim that safety was a key reason behind the cleansing is reinforced by the public notices discussed below. “Motion for Change of Venue,” 16.

⁴⁴⁰ This support did not have to be actively participating in the violence. Standing aside and not acting showed a decision being made as well.

⁴⁴¹ Lancaster, *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas*, 10.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Even when whites did push back on the cleansing in the form of helping Blacks find jobs elsewhere or working as deputized citizens to stop mob violence, they did not take legal or extralegal actions against other whites.

This seems to suggest that a key factor in this cleansing, beyond removing Black criminality, was to provide new avenues to cheap land in the area. This is further supported by reviewing the 1920 census to see that almost double the number of Black families in Catcher owned their land rather than renting.⁴⁴⁴ Many of these families also worked on their own farm account – not working as wage laborers for white citizens of the community.⁴⁴⁵ This large percentage of Black landowners in the region – which had skyrocketed since 1910 – provided little downside for white community members to cleanse the area. At the very least, it would make a white backlash to such a cleansing (for moral reasons or otherwise) far more stifled. With few economic obstacles to cleansing the area and a pervasive belief in the inherent criminalistic nature of the Black community, it is easier to see how a small (but passionate) number of white citizens were able to forcefully expel the Black population living around them. Effie Latimer's murder may have provided the spark point and later rationalization for this racial cleansing, but it was not the sole reason it occurred.

The racial cleansing of Catcher was by no means an anomaly, though. This same process of intentionally driving Black citizens out of towns occurred across much of Arkansas and the Jim Crow south as many such towns were established from 1880 to 1940.⁴⁴⁶ The history of Catcher provides a very important case study in how a racial cleansing like this could occur, but the same story undoubtedly occurred throughout the rural south in this same period in less documented ways. Catcher is easier to substantiate for two reasons. First, Bettis, Clay, and Rucks were not lynched and had formal trials with existing records that provide a Black perspective of

⁴⁴⁴ See Appendix Item two. There were around seventy families living in Catcher in 1920. Around 25 rented. The rest owned their land. U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ 'Sundown Towns' are communities that intentionally drove out undesired minority groups through force, law, or custom. The term arose because of large signs placed at the entrance of all-white communities warning certain groups not to be there after sundown or else. Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 4-5.

the cleansing and verify its occurrence. Second, a group of Black landowners in Catcher were unwilling to leave without a fight. The deployment of state troops to quell this so-called ‘race riot’ and the death of Spurgeon Rucks’ father make it far easier to trace the men and women that lived there – giving them names and faces. This can be much more difficult in other areas of the south at the time as will be shown with the subsequent cleansing of the town of Shibley, north of Catcher, in this same incident. Towns with a Black presence reaching far into antebellum times would see Black population numbers plummet in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Forcing African Americans out of rural towns allowed white community members to acquire the land and wealth that these Black families had left behind. Southern Black landownership at the height of Jim Crow is often believed to have never occurred. This myth is disproven, however, when considering that there were 191 Black owned farms inside Crawford County in 1923.⁴⁴⁷ Inside Catcher, specifically, a majority of Black families owned their own land.⁴⁴⁸ They made good lives for themselves in the post-war years and did not want to leave their homes. They were forced out purposely, violently, and efficiently by white community members living alongside them.

A critical reason Catcher’s racial cleansing has been forgotten is because the narrative was intentionally whitewashed soon after it occurred. As will be shown in the final chapter, newspapers would issue a story that painted this exodus as voluntary by the Black community and good for all sides. The removal of Blacks from the town of Catcher, in this telling, was necessary and never forced through violent measures. To push back on this, it is essential to trace exactly how the town of Catcher (and to a lesser extent, Shibley to the north) was racially cleansed after the murder of Effie Latimer. The actions of a small group of this large white

⁴⁴⁷ “Crawford County Facts, 1923,” *The Heritage* 12, (1969): 38.

⁴⁴⁸ See Appendix for further details on the names of these citizens who owned land and their families.

community would lead this forced expulsion of some seventy Black families – over half of which were landowners - away from their homes and out of the town forever.⁴⁴⁹ Examining the distinct individual responses throughout both the white and Black community members to this violence will demonstrate that there was no monolithic motivation behind how and why a racial cleansing occurred. Likewise, the response by Black citizens could be equally multifaceted, with many leaving to avoid violence while others picked up weapons and fought back.

The lack of a lynching for William Bettis and Spurgeon Rucks caused immense outrage for those had been part of the mobs in Van Buren and Fort Smith. These men and women had gone to bed the night before after hours of chanting outside the Crawford County Jail assuming they had done their part to ensure the three men would find immediate retribution. Instead, they woke up to the news that Bettis and Rucks had been spirited away safely to Little Rock in the middle of the night. Men who had traveled to the Sebastian County Jail likely felt they had let their community down by allowing the men to escape on their watch. Wives had brought their children to the mob spectacle the night before and urged their husband not to let the men get away – to keep the family safe.⁴⁵⁰ They did not feel they provided this. So, while officials of Crawford County likely thought the worst of the incident was over, they were surprised when they had crowds at their door demanding clarification at first light. The mob mentality spilled over into Sunday, December 30 as a small group of these men – looking to regain control over the situation faced – forced Judge Cochran to move the sentencing date up to January 2. While they accomplished this quickly, they were still seeking alleviation over their anxieties of living

⁴⁴⁹ See Appendix for further details.

⁴⁵⁰ This article references that wives were asking their husbands to act against the men to keep their family safe. “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

alongside Black citizens. The white community wanted to prove it held control and waiting for the courts to adjourn would take far too long.

There was no conceivable way to seek vengeance on Bettis and Rucks themselves. Driving down to Little Rock and taking the men out of two different facilities was impossible.⁴⁵¹ Also, it wouldn't prove that white community members held the power in Van Buren. There may have been discussions over whether to pull the fourteen-year-old, John Henry Clay, out of his cell in the Crawford County Jail and lynch him, but this never occurred. That would have been counterproductive, anyway, as it would have taken away the critical witness in the capital murder case against Bettis and Rucks. Lynching the boy might have demonstrated some power but it would have also aided the other two men in their trials. With all this in mind, a segment of the white population decided the only way it could punish the two men was to go after their families and the community they were a part of.

They began placing anonymous notices at the entrances of at least two of the Black buildings in the town warning Black members to leave immediately.⁴⁵² Many members of the Black community would heed these warning as the *Arkansas Gazette* would report on December 31, "shortly after the shooting of Rucks, there was an exodus of negroes from the Catcher community."⁴⁵³ The *Van Buren Press Argus* would later try to push this timeline of notices back to after the alleged Black Nightriders incident occurred, the first week of January, as this would

⁴⁵¹ Bettis and Ruck were being held for trial in two different locations in Little Rock. "Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching," p. 1.

⁴⁵² There is some speculation over when and how many of these notices were placed. Newspapers of the time suggest that the notices were not produced until the first week of February. This does not explain why the eleven nightriders would band together that day, though. Someone must have told them that they needed to leave after the men were not lynched. This is echoed by many of the living descendants of the Black community who say the notices were produced immediately after Effie's death. "Negroes are Fleeing from Scene of Murder Near Van Buren, Ark" *Fayetteville Daily Democrat*, January 15, 1924, p. 1; The notice's exact wording can be found in "Motion for New Trial," 16.

⁴⁵³ "Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest," p. 1.

have looked better – essentially showing that the cleansing was necessary to keep white citizens safe. It is evident from trial documents and discussing with living descendants that the notices went up early that morning.⁴⁵⁴ The notices effectively gave Black citizens of the area an ultimatum, quietly leave or be met with certain violence. During a later motion for a change of venue in the trial of the eleven nightriders, Gus Richardson testified that the signs said:

It becomes necessary for the safety of the community to ask you to leave it. You will be given a few days to straighten out your affairs. If you are out of Crawford County in five days, you will not be bothered; otherwise, you will have to suffer the consequences.⁴⁵⁵

Richardson claimed that he had received a personal notice providing a similar ultimatum directly in his mailbox.⁴⁵⁶ Clay Perry - a landowner with wife, five children, and three grandchildren – likewise claimed to have had a notice delivered to his mailbox.⁴⁵⁷ That these notices were sent directly to some of the wealthiest Black citizens should have been no surprise. This helps reiterate the idea that the subsequent racial cleansing was about far more than keeping the community safe, as the posters had claimed. Instead, because it was also about land and capital, they were sent directly to the mailboxes of landowners and those in power in the Black community. The warnings were unsigned but nevertheless left an impression on the Black population living in the town.⁴⁵⁸ The last line, “otherwise you will have to suffer the consequences,” is disturbing to the modern reader but seems reasonable to the writer of the notice at the time. It seems difficult to argue, on one hand, that forcing out community members

⁴⁵⁴ “Catcher Negro is Wounded by Deputy Sheriff,” p. 1.

⁴⁵⁵ “Motion for Change of Venue,” 16.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Perry’s name is mentioned in the trial documents for Gus Richardson et. al. “Motion for Change of Venue,” 16; Perry and his family can be found in both appendix items as number 34 on the list of landowners and family 248 on the list of citizens of the town.

⁴⁵⁸ The notices were prepared on a typewriter and the author had a good grasp on spelling and punctuation. A journalist for the *Fort Smith Times* newspaper even saw a white man in the town putting up such a notice. The man apparently declined to state his name but said that he wanted Catcher to never again be home to a Black citizen. “Negroes Flee in Fear From Catcher Homes,” p. 1.

was necessary to keep the community safe, while also implying violence will occur if they did not. Toeing that line between being the victim yet still having the power to force others out is accomplished exquisitely by these notices. Readers of this sign, both Black and white, would have understood what this threat was implying. They also knew that it was a genuine warning.

Guy Lancaster, in a chapter for *Historicizing Fear*, argues that there was a natural progression of terror and racial cleansing in Arkansas.⁴⁵⁹ In the years directly after Reconstruction, whites often found it necessary to use actual violence against undesired Blacks. A threat alone likely would not be enough to force emboldened Black citizens out of the area after the Civil War. The early iterations of the Ku Klux Klan and other ‘nightriders’ helped regulate this by anonymously (under mask) perpetrating acts of violence against the Black and white community members they sought to control. It did not take long for this largely unrestrained violence to condition Black citizens to regard the threats made to them to as authentic. Because of this, “the threat of violence became the reality of violence...thus creating a new feedback loop between memory and anticipation that made it progressively easier to intimidate African American communities and thus carry out projects of racial cleansing.”⁴⁶⁰ Lancaster compares this to how an abused dog might flinch at the threat of the abuser’s hand. At first, the threat of violence (raising the hand) would not be enough to cause a reaction. After continual proof violence would in fact occur, the threat alone was enough to induce a response.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁹ Lancaster, “Terror and Racial Cleansing in Arkansas,” 95-97.

⁴⁶⁰ Lancaster, “...or Suffer the Consequences,” 90.

⁴⁶¹ In Chapter Six, nightriding will be looked at in closer detail. Many historians have written on this use of nightriding to dominate rural communities. Below are the works that helped provide the context for this work. Christopher Waldrep, *Night Riders: Defending Community in the Black Patch, 1890–1915* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Suzanne Marshall, *Violence in the Black Patch of Kentucky and Tennessee* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994); Jeannie M. Wayne, *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth-Century Arkansas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, 2002; Jeannie Wayne, *Delta Empire: Lee Wilson and the Transformation of*

By the Jim Crow era, this use of violence was so engrained in southern society that posting a threat could be enough to prompt Black community members to leave. Such notices allowed perpetrators to remain anonymous (free from legal penalty) while also preventing recipients from knowing the actual strength behind the warning.⁴⁶² There was little a Black citizen could do besides leave. They could not fight with force against the threat – at least not fairly. They had few allies in the legal system. Whether the threat of violence was genuine did not matter in these cases. The reality was that the threat of violence was, itself, real violence. In a similar case, Lancaster found that in Paragould in 1899 an incident occurred in which a sign told Blacks “to leave the city...bag and baggage, on or before next Saturday night, and never return again, for any purpose whatsoever, or suffer the consequences of staying.”⁴⁶³ This language was nearly identical to that found in Catcher twenty years later. The frequent violence that had occurred throughout the rest of the state and region since the end of Reconstruction laid the groundwork for the effectiveness of such a notice. The previous decades of violence bolstered the authenticity of these threats and played a role in why most of the Black community in Catcher decided to leave.⁴⁶⁴

Agriculture in the New South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011); Lancaster, *Racial Cleansing in Arkansas*, 2014; Jeannie M. Whayne, “What is the Mississippi Delta? A Historian’s Perspective,” in *Defining the Delta: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Lower Mississippi River Delta*, ed. Janelle Collins (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2015); Lancaster, *Bullets and Fire: Lynching and Authority in Arkansas, 1840-1950* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2017); Lancaster, *Elaine Massacre and Arkansas: A Century of Atrocity and Resistance, 1819-1919* (Little Rock: Butler Center Books, 2018); Lancaster, “...or Suffer the Consequences,” (2018); Lancaster, “Night Riding Must Not Be Tolerated in Arkansas,” (2020).

⁴⁶³ Lancaster, “...or Suffer the Consequences,” 91.

⁴⁶⁴ Importantly, this fear would again evolve over the next few decades into dread of even passing through the town that had been previously racially cleansed for fear of violence. Some of the living descendants of Catcher still are unwilling to return to the scene of where this all occurred. They were told the history of the incident and told to fear the region. For instance, William Bettis’s daughter was only willing to return to Fort Smith. She did not want to go across the river into where Catcher sat. She told her children to do the same. She was satisfied seeing pictures. Wanda Gray interview with Pecolia Bettis Freeman.

The same was true for the rural town of Shibley.⁴⁶⁵ Located just two miles north of Catcher, the town had around two dozen Black families.⁴⁶⁶ That same morning, “anonymous notices were posted around and near the town of Shibley, advising that no negroes would be tolerated in that community, and that all negroes there should not be found around that place, or to that effect.”⁴⁶⁷ The threat continued in these notices was enough to drive out all of the Black families from this town, many of whom went to live in Oklahoma in the coming years.⁴⁶⁸ Unlike the backlash that would occur in Catcher, many of these Black citizens saw little recourse. It appears they were majority renters and therefore may not have had the same permanent financial ties to the land.⁴⁶⁹ Either way, the racial cleansing of Shibley reinforces how effective a simple anonymous threat could be at driving out an entire subsection of the population. They considered the threats to be genuine and left immediately once they were posted. This small example also reiterates how difficult it can be to study and track a racial cleansing that has occurred. Shibley’s Black exodus is only verifiable because of trial documents from the court cases coming out of Catcher.⁴⁷⁰ Without these, it would be difficult to verify its occurrence. Black citizens living in the town quietly left when the notices were placed. There were no newspaper or governmental records of the Shibley cleansing.⁴⁷¹ Similarly, Black citizens would have been hesitant to talk about what had occurred to even their children – even less so with white researchers decades

⁴⁶⁵ The town of Shibley can be seen on the map in image one. Cram, *Map of Arkansas* (1898).

⁴⁶⁶ It is very difficult to say for sure how many Black families lived in Shibley at this time. The 1920 census does not differentiate the townships enough to say conclusively. It appears there were around two dozen. U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*.

⁴⁶⁷ This is stated in the trial documents for the eleven men charge with nightriding. Their defense attorneys would use this as evidence of widespread discrimination against Black citizens in Crawford County. “Motion for Change of Venue,” 17.

⁴⁶⁸ Tracking the families from Shibley is difficult, but the few that have been found in both the 1920 and 1930 census were living in Oklahoma in 1930. U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*; U.S. Census Bureau, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930 – Population Schedule*.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ “Motion for Change of Venue,” 17-20.

⁴⁷¹ Also, the census is very hard to use to track the movements of Black citizens as it is only taken every decade. Because of this, it is easy to argue these families may have left for financial (or other) reasons.

later. It could have easily been argued that the Black families left voluntarily without this critical context.

Back in Catcher, the family of John Henry Clay were the first to leave the town after notices were placed.⁴⁷² They moved in with friends in Van Buren although they seemed to expect that the move would only be temporary until the animosity against them died down.⁴⁷³ Interestingly, the family stated that they had already received multiple warnings to leave, but they had come from the friends and family of Bettis and Rucks. Allies of the two men had pleaded with Henry Clay to talk to his son and get him to admit his confession was false.⁴⁷⁴ The father had not been allowed to see his son, even if he had wanted to urge him to rethink his confession. As a result, the Black community turned against the Clay family and demanded they leave the town:

Immediately after the arrest of Johnny Clay, the negro boy who freely confessed to the part he was forced to take, his family was threatened by friends of Rucks and Bettis, the two older negroes he implicated. They also claimed that they had been threatened by the whites living in the community and theirs was the first family to leave, coming to Van Buren, where they remained a few days, and then took their departure.⁴⁷⁵

When the notices from the white community went up Sunday morning, the family had already left town. The mothers, wives, and siblings of Bettis and Rucks similarly relocated to Fort Smith but were planning on returning for the trial the following week.⁴⁷⁶ Fathers of both men, Andrew Bettis and Charles Rucks, refused to leave. They both planned to stay in Catcher until after the trials of their sons.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷² “Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites,” p. 1.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁶ William Bettis’ daughter mentions this in her interview with Wanda Gray. It is important to remember, however, that she was only four years old at the time and this timeline may not be accurate. Wanda Gray Interview with Pecolia Bettis Freeman.

⁴⁷⁷ Rucks clearly stayed behind as he was killed the next day. Andrew Bettis would go on to be a witness at his son’s trial.

Before the murder of Effie Latimer, around seventy Black families called Catcher home. The notices placed around the Black community forced them to make a tough decision over whether to leave and try to create a new home somewhere else or take their chances against an unknown enemy who threatened them with harm. The warnings had been placed in at least two places within the Black community – the log cabin schoolhouse and the general store.⁴⁷⁸ These were areas of power and safety for the Black members of Catcher. Placing the notices at the entrances to these places was a way to verify the threat and prove that the Black members would not be safe anywhere if they elected to stay. Black community members also had just witnessed the mob violence that could be quickly enacted against them outside the jail in Van Buren the night before. A crowd of at least 300 had participated in that. For these reasons, the anonymous threats were deemed credible by many in the Black community. The fear of violence at the hands of unknown assailants was too much for many of these Black families who immediately heeded such warnings and left the town. They had heard countless stories of similar violence perpetrated against Black members of society and realized the threats against them were genuine.⁴⁷⁹ They likely hoped they could leave for a short time and eventually come back some time in the future. Many went to nearby Van Buren and Fort Smith to wait until the furor surrounding the town died down. A few of the families were even “told by law enforcement that they could return in a year

⁴⁷⁸ Several interviewed descendants echo this point from family histories. It does not show up in the written record, however. It would follow patterns of similar racial violence that are documented. Author interview with M. C. Richardson; Author interview with Cory Richardson by phone (Descendant of Catcher Community), April 7, 2021; Author interview with Jerika Richardson Hunter by phone (Descendant of Catcher Community), April 11, 2021; Author interview with Greer Dorsey (Niece of Earnest Richardson). January 23, 2023.

⁴⁷⁹ The same stories would be taught to their children – even if Catcher was not referenced specifically. Author interview with M. C. Richardson; Author interview with Greer Dorsey.

or so.”⁴⁸⁰ Those who left Catcher that day fled with only what they could carry in hand. Very few would ever return.

While the unsigned notices avowed Blacks would not be bothered if they left within five days, this was quickly revealed to be untrue. White citizens of Catcher began riding in cars and on horseback up and down the two main roads of the town with guns in hand shouting at Black residents to leave the town immediately.⁴⁸¹ It appears that several whites were unhappy with the generous amount of time being given to Black members to leave the area. They wanted them gone as soon as possible. This timeline would be reconfigured in later newspaper accounts, which argued that the violence committed by white members – forcing Blacks out with weapons - occurred only after a Black uprising at the sight of notices. Black community members argued the white-led violence occurred first, forcing them to either leave or fight back that very day. Stories passed down by descendants of Black community members recall bands of angry white citizens on horseback with guns slung over their shoulder watching as they gathered what they could and moved out of the town.⁴⁸² Trial documents support this notion of violence being used against those who did not leave that very morning. Either way, the notices themselves were an act of violence. Whether or not actual guns were pulled on Black community, violence was implicit in the very wording on the pieces of paper.⁴⁸³

⁴⁸⁰ It is unclear where Gray got this information. She had several interview contacts of living descendants but did not cite them. Gray, “Catcher Race Riot of 1923.” In reviewing all of her notes, no interview transcripts state this.

⁴⁸¹ Several newspapers ran the story of the Black community’s expulsion in the next few weeks. These newspaper reports along with interviews from descendants would provide the narrative of the expulsion. “Negroes Leave Catcher After Warning Issued,” p. 1; “Negroes are Fleeing From Scene of Murder Near Van Buren,” p. 1; “Negroes Flee in Fear From Catcher Homes,” p. 1; “‘Colony’ Negroes Flee From Wraith of Whites,” p. 1. The interviews used are listed here. Author interview with M. C. Richardson; Author interview with Cory Richardson by phone; Author interview with Jerika Richardson Hunter by phone; Author interview with Greer Dorsey.

⁴⁸² Author interview with M. C. Richardson.

⁴⁸³ Guy Lancaster has reiterated in his work numerous times that anonymous notices claimed to be nonviolent. This is proven to be false because the reason they were effective was because of implied violence that had been historically implemented when minority groups did not heed such warnings. Lancaster, “...or Suffer the Consequences,” 91-94.

The group of Black citizens who left around noon that day without a fight were applauded by the *Van Buren Press Argus* who wrote, “as a rule, the more law-abiding negroes accepted the ultimatum without protest.”⁴⁸⁴ It is unclear how many Black families fled the town after notices were put up, but it seems clear that all women and children left the area.⁴⁸⁵ Many headed for the Riverside addition of Van Buren, waiting for word of when – and whether – they could safely return to their homes. Most of the men and women who were renters and sharecroppers were likely less willing to stay and risk their lives to fight for their right to remain in Catcher. Still, it is critical to remember that Catcher was their home – renting or not. They had lived in the town for many years, had children there, and had grown to enjoy the lives they carved out for themselves in the beautiful river bottomland. While some of these men and women did indeed ‘accept the ultimatum’ issued to them, it was not because they wanted to leave. The decision to not stay and fight was picked because it was the lesser of two evils. This was easier for some as they had fewer economic ties to the town – no land, less property – but was not a pleasant choice for anyone.⁴⁸⁶

The popular opinion amongst whites in 1920s American society was that Blacks should be subordinate in society. Equating, as the newspapers did, a law-abiding nature with a willingness to succumb to white demands without violence demonstrates this notion. It also reveals the inability of white members of society to place themselves in the mindset of Black Americans and empathize with the decisions they were making. There was little understanding or sympathy of how difficult it would be for Black citizens of Catcher to pick up their entire lives

⁴⁸⁴ “Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites,” p. 1.

⁴⁸⁵ This would be mentioned in Gus Richardson’s trial before the Arkansas Supreme Court. *Richardson v. Arkansas*, Supreme Court of Arkansas, No. 139, September 29, 1924, p. 929.

⁴⁸⁶ The full list of Black families who were renting in 1920 can be found in Appendix item two. There were around twenty-five total.

and move because someone else wanted them to. Instead, *The Van Buren Press Argus* painted it simply as Black citizens either being law-abiding or rule breaking. Those who elected to leave without trouble were good natured and followed the rules of society. It was a shame they had to leave; these were the type of Black citizens who white community members suggested they could live alongside safely. This group was made to pay, however, for the troublemakers of their race who could not be trusted. Those who stayed to fight proved this need for a racial cleansing of the entire race of the town. Because of them, it was argued, no Black Americans could live safely next to whites. Black Americans could not win in this mental exercise. Either they left without contest – therefore making them law-abiding and deserving to live amongst whites or they could stay and fight – making them rule-breaking and unworthy of such equality, the difference being whether they agreed to place themselves in a subordinate role in society. No matter what decision they made, though, they would ultimately be ushered out of the town and segregated away from white society.⁴⁸⁷

Black community members – much like the white community – had many ways of handling this ensuing violence. The decision of whether to leave or stay and fight was weighed heavily by those living in the Black community of Catcher. While the newspaper would write that “the rule-breaking class...were evidently anxious to start trouble” this makes little sense.⁴⁸⁸ Those who elected to stay would be risking their lives, especially if they decided to fight back. The chances of success were very low. They were outnumbered. They had little chance of the local, state, or federal government stepping in on their account to help. On top of that, they had to think of their wives and children who had left for Van Buren to await the outcome. Even if

⁴⁸⁷ These views expressed by the *Van Buren Press Argus* can be found here. “Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites,” p. 1.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

they were willing to risk bodily harm to fight, were they willing to risk the safety of those around them. They had to know it was possible that retribution against their families was likely after the dust settled. Also, if they were to die as a result of this, who would take care of their families? All of this had to be cycling through the minds of the leaders of the Black community as they began to form a plan of action to push back on this forced relocation. Some of the leaders of the Black community decided to stay and see if they could somehow salvage the situation. While it is impossible to know if they were already preparing to meet violence with violence, it is clear that they wanted to exert some semblance of power over a situation that felt largely out of their control.

One of the men who had made it clear his intention to stay was Charles Rucks, father of one of the accused murderers, Spurgeon Rucks. He knew the trial date for his son would be held later that week. He, along with Andrew Bettis – the father of William Bettis – had decided they would stay and prepare to give testimony on behalf of their sons. Both could provide alibis that pushed back on the narrative that they had killed Effie Latimer. Charlie, as his friends knew him, had been born a slave in South Carolina sometime between 1853 and 1857.⁴⁸⁹ His family stayed in that region working as sharecroppers immediately after the Civil War. In the late 1870s, Charlie went out on his own and relocated to Crawford County, Arkansas.⁴⁹⁰ He married Elizabeth Beachum in 1881 and the couple had eight children over the next two decades with Spurgeon being their fifth oldest. The family rented property up until the turn of the century, working as farm laborers and saving what they could. They bought property in Catcher sometime

⁴⁸⁹ The exact date of his birth is unknown. On the census he put 1853, 1855, and 1857 in subsequent decades. The local newspapers claimed he died at 65 as does his death certificate. This would have made 1857 the most likely. His death certificate was found at: Arkansas Department of Vital Records; Little Rock, Arkansas; *Death Certificates*; Year: 1923; Roll: 6.

⁴⁹⁰ This movement from South Carolina to Arkansas was not uncommon. Arkansas attracted the most Black migrants of any state after the Civil War – around 200,000. Matkin-Rawn, “The Great Negro State of the Country,” 1-4. Rucks movements were tracked using records from the 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910, and 1920 census.

around between 1900 and 1910 and found a peaceful life living alongside other Black landowning neighbors like the Coggs, Hancock, Richardson, and Ricks families.⁴⁹¹ His wife, Elizabeth, died in 1910 and Charlie remarried Ella Jackson in 1914. Charlie Rucks surely hoped to live out the rest of his days looking over his farm and passing on what he had made of his life to his eight children.

The arrest of his son for murder dramatically changed these plans. As could be expected, anyone with the last name Bettis, Clay, or Rucks were among the primary targets of racial violence after Effie's murder. Many in the Black community had already begun to flee for the Riverside addition of Van Buren, and it is likely that Charles Rucks told his wife to take the rest of the family there to await word of what to do next.⁴⁹² By this time, bands of white citizens were already roaming up and down the main road of Catcher to enforce the notices that had been posted earlier that morning. Sheriff Maxey was still in the process of transporting Bettis and Ruck to Little Rock for safekeeping when the situation began to spiral out of control. Officer George Gant had been assigned the task of keeping the peace until Maxey returned but was finding the assignment difficult.⁴⁹³ With limited resources he stood little chance of calming the tensions between the white and Black communities. As a small group of white citizens began resorting to violence, "a score of additional men were deputized as officers" by Gant.⁴⁹⁴ While the explicit purpose of this deputization would have been to help keep the peace and stop further

⁴⁹¹ Rucks is listed as renting on the 1880 and 1900 censuses. He is listed as a landowner in 1910 and 1920. He is listed in the appendix item one as number 52 on the list of landowners. His family is listed as number 19 in appendix item two.

⁴⁹² "Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites," p. 1.

⁴⁹³ Maxey, by this time, was helping to transport Bettis and Rucks to Little Rock. The January 14 edition of the *Fort Smith Times Record* mentions that sheriff George Gant was in charge when the notices went up. "Negroes Leave Catcher After Warning Issued," p. 1.

⁴⁹⁴ It is unclear how many citizens were deputized, but Maxey and Shaw had both used volunteers to keep control at the jails. This carried over into the next day as citizens were working directly with law enforcement to "Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites," p. 1.

violence from occurring, the opposite happened as deputized citizens began harassing Black community members.⁴⁹⁵

These deputized men began using their authority to intimidate Black citizens to leave the area. Anyone out of their house and not clearly preparing to relocate appear to have been interrogated by these men.⁴⁹⁶ Walking alongside these newly deputized volunteers were other white men of the community who wanted to express power themselves.⁴⁹⁷ Those hoping to gain vengeance on the Black community, had to feel more emboldened to see officers appearing to be on their side. They proceeded to act with more aggression. Jimmie Jones⁴⁹⁸, a fifty-seven-year-old Black man from Catcher, was walking down the main road of the town with a ‘choc beer’ in his hand.⁴⁹⁹ Deputies raised their guns at Jones and asked him to throw his hands in the air when they saw him on the road.⁵⁰⁰ Jones did so without question but was surely surprised. Living in the small town, he likely knew some or all of the men and would have recognized them as average citizens of the community – with no such authority to stop him. While it was true that this was during the Prohibition era and transport of alcohol was illegal, the reaction seemed disproportionate to the crime he was committing. Still, with weapons in his face he saw little reason to protest. Jones was searched for weapons and other illegal items. He was restrained for

⁴⁹⁵ The most egregious of these would be the killing of Charles Rucks by recently deputized Frederick Creekmore. “Catcher Negro is Wounded by Deputy Sheriff,” p. 1.

⁴⁹⁶ Charles Rucks and Jimmie Jones both had interactions with these officers in a very short time. Thus, leading the author to assume anyone out of their home was questioned. This is speculation, though.

⁴⁹⁷ “Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites,” p. 1.

⁴⁹⁸ Jimmie Jones is listed as landowner number 24 in the appendix. His family information can be found under family number 51.

⁴⁹⁹ A Choc Beer is short for Choctaw Beer. It is a mixed alcoholic drink that was popular during the Prohibition age is often associated with the Choctaw Indians of Eastern Oklahoma. Guy Logsdon, “Choc Beer,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*. <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=CH046>.

⁵⁰⁰ It is unclear which deputies were involved in this stop. It follows much the same actions as Frederick Creekmore’s interaction with Charles Rucks later. Creekmore was likely involved in this stop as well.

several minutes then taken to the Van Buren jail. He was given a \$500 bond and was released two weeks later.⁵⁰¹ Upon posting bail he left Catcher permanently.⁵⁰²

After placing Jones under arrest without incident, deputies continued to roam the area looking for Black citizens who were not preparing to leave. Frederick Creekmore (whose wife, Mary, had found the bloody dime at the crime scene) was volunteering as one of these ‘special officers.’ Creekmore came across Charles Rucks – father of Spurgeon Rucks and known throughout the community for his sizable gas well - just off the main road. Similar as to what had occurred with Jones, Creekmore pointed a rifle at Rucks and commanded him to raise his hands to be searched. Rucks refused to do so. After a few tense moments of Rucks rejecting this command, a bullet was sent into the lower right part of his jaw.⁵⁰³ Rucks hit the ground, bleeding profusely. Dr. Bennett was called – as he had been for Effie – to treat the gunshot wound but was unable to provide more than company for the man. The sixty-five-year-old managed to live through the night but died the next afternoon in an immense amount of pain, far away from his family.⁵⁰⁴ Unsurprisingly, the *Arkansas Gazette* ran the familiar headline “Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest,” the next morning.⁵⁰⁵

Frederick Creekmore was not indicted for Rucks’ death and therefore never had to explain the rationale behind why he shot him.⁵⁰⁶ Because he had been deputized hours earlier, it

⁵⁰¹ “Catcher Negro Released when Bond is Fixed,” *Van Buren Press Argus*, January 10, 1924, p. 3.

⁵⁰² Jones’ name was no longer on the land records for 1932. He is difficult to track in the census as his name is so common, but there were a few James Jones living in Fort Smith. “Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1932.”

⁵⁰³ “Negro is Dead Following Near Riot at Catcher,” *Southwest American*, January 1, 1924, p. 1.

⁵⁰⁴ The newspaper reports claim he was sixty-five when he died, but this is difficult to verify. It is clear he was around that age.

⁵⁰⁵ “Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest,” p. 1.

⁵⁰⁶ There are some indications that Tara Rucks – daughter of Charles – wrote to the NAACP to investigate this killing. Through their legal team, they are said in the local papers to have gotten a grand jury investigation into Rucks’ death. Governor McRae agreed to this to appease the NAACP. What came of this has yet to be found. “Arkansas Governor Promises Inquiry into Murder,” *The Richmond Planet*, March 29, 1924, p. 3.

was assumed he must have had good reason to shoot Rucks – resisting arrest was enough of a cause. Still, the newspaper reports help provide three explanations for the killing. First, Charles Rucks refused to put up his hands when told to do so by law enforcement.⁵⁰⁷ Second, he did not let the officer search him. Third, he refused to accompany the officer to the jail.⁵⁰⁸ A combination of all three of these provided the basis for why Creekmore thought it was necessary to shoot Rucks in the face.⁵⁰⁹ Still, resisting arrest alone would not warrant shooting the man unless Creekmore thought further violence was likely. None of these explanations demonstrate that Creekmore believed Rucks would do harm to him or anyone else. Proving that Rucks resisted arrest by Creekmore – who he would have known as only a fellow citizen – does not explain away his death. Instead, it suggests that Rucks’ refusal to submit to Creekmore’s authority was the true cause of his death.

The official version of how Charles Rucks died is, itself, problematic. Recently deputized citizens killing fellow community members requires further clarification. It is important to remember these accounts are coming primarily from the newspaper reports, which had been heavily sanitized before reaching the public. The version passed down through living descendants of the Black community paints a far more nefarious story of how Charles Rucks died. They argue that there was no reason for him to have been walking aimlessly outside of his home that day. While he had no intention of leaving the area, it would have been senseless to be walking around after the notices were put up. In this telling, Rucks was violently pulled out of his home by this group of deputized men after he refused to leave.⁵¹⁰ Irritated by this insolence

⁵⁰⁷ “One Negro Wounded and Eleven Arrested Following Murder of Women,” *Moberly Monitor Index* (Missouri), December 31, 1923, p. 1; “Catcher Negro is Wounded by Deputy Sheriff,” p. 1.

⁵⁰⁸ “Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest,” p. 1.

⁵⁰⁹ “Catcher Negro is Wounded by Deputy Sheriff,” p. 1.

⁵¹⁰ Pecolia Freeman and Dorothy Trambell echoed this point. They were told the story of the lynching as a warning to stay away from the area. Pecolia was still unwilling to return to Catcher as a result. Wanda Gray Interview with Pecolia Bettis Freeman; Wanda Gray Interview of Dorothy Jean Trambell.

and wanting to send a message to the rest of the Black community, Rucks was hanged from a large tree in the middle of the town.⁵¹¹ It is not difficult to explain why Charles Rucks would have been a target of such violence. Lynching him would have been the closest the white mob of Catcher could get to vengeance on Spurgeon Rucks. While they had not been able to lynch Spurgeon, killing his father would provide some revenge – righting the wrong of the previous night. Also, it would send a larger message to the rest of the community while removing a key alibi for Spurgeon Rucks at trial. Anyone unprepared to leave the community would be risking the same fate.

Importantly, this account is impossible to verify within the official documents. Newspaper and trial documents detail a similar story that Rucks was killed while resisting arrest from Creekmore. Still, it is important to remember how the Black community would have likely processed Rucks' murder, realizing that it was further evidence that violence would be used against them if they refused to leave. Moira Bryant notes in her study that an elderly woman she interviewed was even able to point to the exact tree where they hung Charles Rucks.⁵¹² Whispers of Rucks' lynching are common but are, so far, impossible to verify. Whether true or not, his murder changed how the Black community understood the threats being lobbed at them. This warning of violence went from being implicit to explicit with one gunshot.

Charles Rucks had grown up in the shackles of slavery, producing a life for himself where he owned land and was well respected inside his community.⁵¹³ The financial trajectory of his family into the modern era was severely altered when he was killed. His death forced the family to flee the county and leave their valuable property in the hands of white citizens. The

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² Bryant does not give the name of this woman, just saying an elderly woman living near Catcher. Bryant, "Healing Catcher," 55.

⁵¹³ Rucks movements were tracked using records from the 1870, 1880, 1900, 1910, and 1920 census.

slaying also sent a message to the remaining members of the Black community that they would be risking a similar fate if they did not leave immediately. For this reason, Rucks' death is difficult to categorize. As there was officially no mob, it was not a public spectacle, and because Creekmore was technically in a position of authority, this is not considered a lynching by those who best understand and define the term.⁵¹⁴ At the very least, though, this was a racially motivated murder. Creekmore shot Rucks in broad daylight in order to uphold white authority.

Rucks was killed because he did not obey what a white citizen told him to do. While newspaper reports would argue that Rucks was resisting arrest, he would have known Creekmore and assumed he was not in a position of actual authority.⁵¹⁵ With the confusion in the town, it could be hard to tell whether such a request came from a citizen or someone in authority. During this pogrom, vigilantism and law enforcement bled together in such close ways that it would have been impossible to quickly tell the difference because, in actuality, there was little difference. The murderer, Frederick Creekmore, was never investigated or tried (he and his wife were even star witnesses in the later trials). Guy Lancaster has before stated, "lynching did not result from a breakdown of, or a challenge to, law and order – it was law and order."⁵¹⁶ Whether considered a lynching or not, this murder has to be understood in much the same way. Creekmore killed Rucks to reinforce that the state and county government were led by and for white citizens. The slaying helped preserve white authority over minority groups and was broadcast in the newspapers for Black audiences as such.

⁵¹⁴ The Equal Justice Initiative has a memorial for all the victims of lynching in the United States. After sending documents concerning the killing of Charles Rucks, they have classified it as not a lynching. They are again reviewing this after more testimony has come to light and may soon add his name to their collection.

⁵¹⁵ Frederick Creekmore, who was thirty-three at the time, lived next door to the Clay family. He was part of the band that investigated Bettis, Clay, and Rucks. He was involved in this investigation from the start.

⁵¹⁶ Lancaster, *Bullets and Fire*, 13.

The violent murder of Charles Rucks was intended as a deliberate message to the remaining Black citizens of Catcher. Those who did not bend to white authority by leaving would be met with violence. While the notices had expressed this rhetorically, the death of Rucks confirmed it tangibly. Because the threat of violence alone had not been sufficient in motivating Black citizens to leave, the killing of Rucks was a required show of force to move the process along. The choice was now clearer than ever for Black community members. They would be risking their own safety by staying in the community any longer. The *Arkansas Gazette* documented that, “shortly after the shooting of Rucks, there was an exodus of negroes from the Catcher community.”⁵¹⁷ This newspaper account, written on December 31, provides critical evidence that the racial cleansing of Catcher started that morning, not weeks later as the *Van Buren Press Argus* would later argue. Black citizens understood that violence would be tolerated against their community and that law enforcement would not come to their aid. In fact, it was evident that local officials would use any power they held to further support the forced migration of Blacks from the town.

After the killing of Charles Rucks, a majority of the Black families still living in Catcher packed what they could easily move and began to leave in large numbers. While older women and children had already left for Riverside in Van Buren, many of the older men and remaining women began to join them. For those without mortgaged property, there was little motivation to stay and fight. They understood the pressure against them was now insurmountable. With law enforcement, population numbers, and the government stacked against them they stood nothing to gain by staying to fight. By midafternoon, a significant portion of the Black community of Catcher had fled, never to return.

⁵¹⁷ “Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest,” p. 1.

Still, there was a growing number of Black residents who were considering the notion of staying and fighting. Many of these men and their neighbors had owned land in the town for several decades. The strong relationships they had built with one another led them to believe they could mount an opposition and regain some control of the situation. They had built lives for their families off the land in Catcher and did not want to leave. Gus Richardson began gathering together his close family and friends and asked who would be willing to go find out what exactly was happening beyond rumors. Richardson “with his gun, two other negroes with their guns, and another negro who had no gun, started up the road towards Catcher to investigate the killing” of Rucks.⁵¹⁸ The fact that Richardson and others were responding to the murder of Rucks is notable. Newspaper reports would later argue that Charles Rucks was killed as part of the violent uprising by the Black community. Trial documents push back on this timeline, verifying that Rucks’ death motivated the Black community to investigate what happened with weapons.⁵¹⁹ After Rucks’ murder, they likely saw little chance of staying in their homes without meeting violence with violence.

Gus Richardson initially just wanted to get a clear explanation of what had happened to Charles Rucks. Richardson had owned land in Catcher since 1910 with his wife Pearlie.⁵²⁰ He knew most of the members of the Black community living around him, placing him in a natural position to lead this investigation.⁵²¹ He began asking his neighbors who would be willing to stay and help him look into this. Within the hour, ten other men had agreed: Tandy Ferguson,⁵²²

⁵¹⁸ Richardson’s description of what happened (along with the quote) can be found at. *Richardson v. Arkansas*, p. 929.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

⁵²⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910 – Population Schedule*.

⁵²¹ Listed in appendix item one as landowner number 43. His family is listed as number 18 in item two. *Richardson v. Arkansas*, p. 929.

⁵²² Listed in appendix item one as landowner number 15. His family is listed as number 38 in item two.

Charles Posey,⁵²³ Alfred Richardson,⁵²⁴ Dempsey Richardson,⁵²⁵ Earnest Richardson,⁵²⁶ Gideon Richardson,⁵²⁷ Ladell Richardson,⁵²⁸ Roosevelt Richardson,⁵²⁹ George Ricks,⁵³⁰ and Charley Shelton.⁵³¹ Five of the men, Tandy Ferguson, Charles Posey, Earnest Richardson, George Ricks, and Charles Shelton were themselves landowners. Most had owned land since 1910 with most renting in the town in the decades before that. Gid Richardson lived on the property of his older brother, Harrison. Gid and his seventeen-year-old son, Alfred, agreed to stay and fight to help keep the land in the family. Similarly, brothers Pleasant and Robert Richardson had owned land in Catcher since 1910. They were sixty-two and fifty-eight years old respectively. Being too old to help in this fight, they were replaced by their sons, Roosevelt, Ladell, and Dempsey who were all seventeen and eighteen years old when they agreed to stay and fight.⁵³²

The group of men decided their best chance of holding off the white community was to band together inside a single building.⁵³³ Gus Richardson would later testify that Charles Shelton told the men they could use his log cabin to do so.⁵³⁴ The men began gathering together all the weapons they could find. They ended up with six shotguns, three pistols, and little extra ammunition.⁵³⁵ The men assembled around 10:30 a.m. to fortify the Black community log cabin

⁵²³ Listed in appendix item one as landowner number 37. His family is listed as number 36 in item two.

⁵²⁴ Alfred Richardson was the son of Gideon Richardson (family number 37) who lived on his brother, Harrison Richardson's, property. Alfred does not show up on the census but must have been living with some family in Catcher.

⁵²⁵ Dempsey Richardson was son of Robert Richardson and lived with him (family number 13).

⁵²⁶ Listed in appendix item one as landowner number 45. His family is listed as number 30 in item two.

⁵²⁷ Gid Richardson lived with his brother Harrison (family number 37).

⁵²⁸ Ladell Richardson was son of Robert Richardson and lived with him (family number 13).

⁵²⁹ Roosevelt Richardson was son of Pleasant Richardson and lived with him (family number 10).

⁵³⁰ Listed in appendix item one as landowner number 50. His family is listed as number 4 in item two.

⁵³¹ Listed in appendix item one as landowner number 59. His family is listed as number 34 in item two.

⁵³² Roosevelt was the son of Pleasant. Ladell and Demp were sons of Robert. They were all cousins.

⁵³³ "Ten Arkansas Farmers Hold Off Mob," *Afro-American*, January 4, 1924, p. 1.

⁵³⁴ *Richardson v. Arkansas*, p. 929.

⁵³⁵ The newspapers would argue they were heavily armed and intimidating, thus the charge for nightriding. Court documents would reveal they had no extra ammo. *Richardson v. Arkansas*, p. 929.

schoolhouse.⁵³⁶ For the next thirty minutes they secured the building and talked about what they would do when white members inevitably arrived.⁵³⁷ Gus Richardson, at this point, may have lobbied for stopping any car that passed by and searching it.⁵³⁸ If so, this would have been for two reasons. First, the group needed more weapons if it wanted any chance of holding the building. It could take these from the cars that passed. Second, it would give them advanced notice if there was a group of white citizens coming to try to force them out of the building. Soon after, a truck with several white passengers was driving past the cabin. Richardson was reported to have stood in the road and pointed his pistol through the window at the driver.⁵³⁹ While he did not give the men specific demands but did search the vehicle for weapons.⁵⁴⁰ When no weapons were found, the group were allowed on their way.

Soon after the truck was allowed to leave, the occupants called the sheriff's office to inform him of this new development. The caller exaggerated the strength of the Black group, advocating that local police send all available deputies and police to the scene. The caller claimed that the Black community was arming and attempting to incite a race war.⁵⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, the mobilization of Black men garnered immediate attention from the white community. Within the hour, a large group of white citizens lead by W. E. Watson arrived at the

⁵³⁶ The building is referred to as a schoolhouse by many of the descendants I interviewed. Author interview with M. C. Richardson; Author interview with female descendant of Catcher community by phone (granddaughter one of the nightriders but preferred to stay anonymous), June 18, 2021; Author interview with Greer Dorsey.

⁵³⁷ Gus Richardson testified that the log cabin was owned by Charles Shelton. *Richardson v. Arkansas*, p. 929.

⁵³⁸ It is unclear if any cars were stopped. At trial, a truckful of men would say that Richardson stopped them at gunpoint. "Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest," p. 1; Richardson would never admit to such an interaction. *Richardson v. Arkansas*, p. 929.

⁵³⁹ "Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest," p. 1

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁴¹ The caller is mentioned in this piece. This also provides much of the timeline of when this occurred. See "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

schoolhouse alongside police and found that the eleven men had retreated inside the building.⁵⁴²

There were negotiations with the men, shouting from far away, and it was found that they refused to leave or surrender their weapons. At that point, there was no way of knowing how well armed the group of men truly were. The eleven men played on this, feigning strength when, in reality, had little extra ammo and not even as many guns as men. The local group of white men realized that it would be difficult to storm the position if all the men were indeed armed. The position was well barricaded and “would have resisted the officers for days” if further actions was not taken.⁵⁴³

Governor Thomas McRae was at his vacation home in Prescott, Arkansas, celebrating the holidays with his family when he received an urgent telegram informing him of a potential bloody insurrection occurring in southern Crawford County. The message urged him to send the National Guard in to “blast” the men out to help avoid a race war.⁵⁴⁴ McRae sent a telegram to Adjutant General James McAllister inside the Fort Smith National Guard post.⁵⁴⁵ In the order, McRae commanded McAllister to find a way to quell the insurrection without using the full force of the National Guard. It was important to McRae to not use the full power of the National Guard in this dispute.⁵⁴⁶ He would later state it was because he believed it was not serious enough to justify the order of state troops. This seems unlikely, however, considering he still sent a sizeable group of men with state weapons – just not under the official name of the state. More

⁵⁴² The list of men who were intimidated are listed in the trial records. It is unclear which of these were stopped in the truck and which showed up after the call was given. “Motion for Change of Venue,” 9-11.

⁵⁴³ This was an estimate by the paper but seems to be backed up by the actions taken by the men. “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

⁵⁴⁴ “Motion for Change of Venue,” 10-13.

⁵⁴⁵ “Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching,” p. 1.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

likely, he was anxious to send the state troops in because of the backlash he was still dealing with concerning both the Elaine Race Riot trials as well as the Lowery Lynching in 1921.⁵⁴⁷

General McAllister authorized an unofficial group of guards and military equipment to be transported to the local sheriff in Van Buren. General McAllister contacted Captain Otto Kayer of Ozark in neighboring Franklin County and ordered him to proceed to Catcher with a small detachment of troops – around twelve men.⁵⁴⁸ The men arrived in Van Buren three hours later, about two o'clock, and brought with them a large state-of-the-art machine gun and aimed it directly at the schoolhouse doors.⁵⁴⁹ The Ozark guardsmen were sworn in as special civilian officers and told to remedy the situation quickly. The *Arkansas Gazette* wrote that the presence of the national guard “had an excellent effect in causing several hundred whites to disperse and go to their homes.”⁵⁵⁰ More likely, it led to a huge crowd of observers to surround the building to see what was happening. Richardson stated there was around 200 armed white citizens surrounding the cabin.⁵⁵¹

Once the dozen guards and machine gun arrived, the tone of the situation changed. Outnumbered and outgunned, the eleven men now knew they had no chance to stand their ground. They likely had heard similar stories of the U.S. government assisting white communities in removing Black citizens in Elaine, Arkansas in 1919 as well as Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921. In both cases, state and federal troops backed white citizens in their fight against local

⁵⁴⁷ While Brough had been governor during the Elaine Riot in 1919, McRae had to deal with much of the political and legal backlash of this.

⁵⁴⁸ Certain newspapers with the original stories of this are difficult to locate. Fortunately, similar versions of the story appeared in other newspapers. This was found in a South Carolina Newspaper but appears to be referencing an article from *The Paris Express*. “Proceed to Scene of Riot,” *The Gaffney Ledger*, January 1, 1924. Found using newspapers.com.

⁵⁴⁹ “Catcher is Quiet After Race Riot Stirred Community. Machine Gun Trained on Log Cabin Caused Eleven Negroes to Surrender,” *St. Albans Daily Messenger*, December 31, 1923.

⁵⁵⁰ “Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest,” p. 1.

⁵⁵¹ *Richardson v. Arkansas*, p. 929.

Blacks and used military weapons to accomplish this. 500 troops had been sent to Elaine. Civilian planes may have even been used in Tulsa to drop dynamite on areas of the city.⁵⁵² These stories would have been told in the Black community and would have influenced the way they considered their situation. With the machine gun rolled up to their position and several guardsmen standing behind it, they knew their plan had failed. The two sides shouted further terms at one another. The only concession the Black men extracted is that no shots would be fired once the men walked out. Even this would have been difficult to trust. After several tense minutes, the eleven men threw down their weapons and surrendered.⁵⁵³ The men were taken to the Crawford County Jail in Van Buren to await trial. They were ironically booked under the charge of nightriding, a charge commonly reserved for anonymous attacks at night to intimidate and alarm fellow citizens.⁵⁵⁴

Studying these eleven men at Catcher helps underline that Black men and women had the ability to act in a variety of ways to any situation they were presented with. Many men and women heeded the warnings and left. Others, like Gus Richardson and his neighbors, were angry with the white community that had turned on them. They had lived alongside these men and women for decades and knew them as neighbors and business partners. When the notices were put up advocating for them to leave, they made a choice to stay and fight. As Ray Willis (a descendant of William Bettis) concluded in his article for the *Lincoln Echo*, Blacks had to band together “to seek mutual protection against crazed gunmen seeking frontier justice.”⁵⁵⁵ The

⁵⁵² Some historians even view this as the first use of airplanes as weapons on U.S. soil. Yuliya Parshina-Kottas, Anjali Singhvi, Audra D.S. Burch, Troy Griggs, Mika Gröndahl, Lingdong Huang, Tim Wallace, Jeremy White, and Josh Williams, “What the Tulsa Race Massacre Destroyed,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/05/24/us/tulsa-race-massacre.html>.

⁵⁵³ “Two Negroes to be Given Trial Friday,” p. 1.

⁵⁵⁴ The *Arkansas Gazette* and *Fort Smith Times Record* would both report on the men being charged with nightriding. “Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest,” p. 1; “Nightriders Bring on Riot,” p. 1.

⁵⁵⁵ Willis, “The Ray Willis Report.”

alternative was simply to leave and lose their property. Instead, they refused to leave their homes prepared for the backlash it would provoke. Placing the outcomes of this incident squarely on white citizens omits the actions taken by Blacks and removes a critical part of the history. The decisions made by these eleven Black men radically altered the path of this event. Although their actions were ultimately unable to save their homes, it forced the white community to use outright violence against them to demand them to leave. It also forced the state's hand in deciding who to back in this conflict. Without this brave stance, far less (if anything) would be known about this racial cleansing.

White community members in Catcher immediately understood the actions of these men as acts of defiance. Taking up arms and, even more insultingly, stopping white citizens as they drove by at gunpoint was the ultimate sign that these Black men were not going to bend to white demands. Anger within the white community boiled over at this insolence. The small number of white citizens who had been riding up and down the main road of Catcher stopping Black citizens began resorting to violence. The number in these mob swelled to around 200 as well.⁵⁵⁶ Instead of supervising the evacuation of Black citizens, they began forcing the issue. Black residents still in their home heard knocks on the front door. When opened, guns were pointed at them. They were commanded to leave immediately or face violence. Those who did not open their doors heard shouts that their house would be set on fire if they did not leave. As they finally left their homes with anything they could carry, some of the houses were allegedly lit on fire – assuring no chance of ever returning to Catcher for these families.⁵⁵⁷

⁵⁵⁶ Richardson would claim there was 150 to 200 whites in this group. Will Brown would testify to “the assembling of 100 or 150 white men with their guns” at Richardson’s hearing. *Richardson v. Arkansas*, p. 929-930.

⁵⁵⁷ Whether houses were actually burned is a point of contention. Some descendants of the Black community I have interviewed with, such as M. C. Richardson (grandson of Pleasant Richardson), recall their family telling stories of houses being burned as they fled. Author interview with M. C. Richardson; There is no physical evidence to corroborate this. Many white members refuse to accept this ever occurred. Moira Bryant who I have

As this evacuation was occurring, other white community members began taking their anger out on anything left remaining of the Black community. St. Paul's Cemetery, the Black burial ground in Catcher that had been there since Doctor Beel provided land for it in 1880, became a target of this group.⁵⁵⁸ The entire cemetery was ransacked over the course of an hour. Tombstones throughout the cemetery were turned over and smashed. Lighter headstones were removed and thrown in a nearby pond. Not satisfied with this alone, the group began digging up some of the graves and burning the remains of the bodies unearthed.⁵⁵⁹ Other remains were alleged to have been dug up, transported a few miles south, and thrown in the Arkansas River.⁵⁶⁰ Today, the cemetery still provides a physical record of this vandalization as well as the thriving Black community that once resided there. Tucked away in rural Van Buren, in the Oak Grove community behind Daugherty Hill, the cemetery has become overgrown with weeds and vines. If you did not know where it was, you would never find it. Names on the surviving headstones relay a list of the leading families in the Black community of Catcher: Beel, Bettis, Clay, Coggs, Ferguson, Richardson, Ricks, Rucks, Sanders. Tombstones ranging from 1874 until February 1923 can still be found.⁵⁶¹ None after 1923 are present.

talked with in detail about this believes the stories are ahistorical. Author email correspondence with Moira Bryant, March 15, 2021.

⁵⁵⁸ This cemetery was named after the Black church of the same name that used to stand nearby and was built by Samuel White in 1880 on land owned by Beel. Holleman, "Samuel White: A Man About Town," 40-41. It is unclear when the church was torn down and whether it had anything to do with this incident.

⁵⁵⁹ This does not appear in any of the newspaper or trial documents but is commonly expressed in interviews with living descendants. Author interview with M. C. Richardson; Wanda Gray, likewise, found this to be the case in her interviews with descendants of the Bettis family. Wanda Gray Interview with Pecolia Bettis Freeman; Wanda Gray Interview of Dorothy Jean Trambell; Moira Bryant (descendant of white community member Thell Daugherty) who I have talked with in detail about this believes the stories of fire being used to be ahistorical. Her family owns land surrounding St. Paul's Cemetery, though, and she confirms that the graveyard was ransacked. Author email correspondence with Moira Bryant, March 15, 2021.

⁵⁶⁰ Wanda Gray and Tonia Holleman, in the above interviews in the early 2000s with living descendants, heard accounts referencing this. No one I have interviewed has stated the remains were ever moved.

⁵⁶¹ Tonia Holleman has done amazing work detailing all the cemeteries in Van Buren. She and others have compiled a list of all the known headstones in this cemetery. The list and pictures can be found at: <https://www.arkansasfreedmen.com/stpaul.html>.



Image Nine: A tombstone in St. Paul's Cemetery smashed during the white backlash – Courtesy of Guy Lancaster.

The practice of burning homes, smashing tombstones, and digging up buried bodies is emblematic of the larger racial cleansing that was swiftly occurring in this town. White community members not only wanted all Black citizens removed from Catcher, they wanted to eradicate their history from the area as well. The desecration of the Black graveyard sent the message that this racial cleansing was intended to be permanent. Erasing the history of this community was an essential piece of this process. White members understood that the best way to ensure the Black community never returned – beyond destroying their homes - was to erase any memory of its presence. Forcing Black citizens out violently, destroying their homes, and erasing the memory of its existence was the most efficient way to keep the area segregated into the present. This process of erasing history would continue over the next few months as newspapers and court documents would attempt to reclaim the narrative of what had just occurred and why.

Rain started to fall that midafternoon as the second exodus of Black citizens began.⁵⁶² The ransacking of the local graveyard would have been a final insult to this proud community. The remaining Black citizens of Catcher left their homes to meet up with their older relatives, wives, and children who had already relocated to Van Buren and Fort Smith. Most of the families moved that day to Midland Heights – a Black community in Fort Smith that some who worked in Catcher already lived in.⁵⁶³ The walk would be a long one, some seven miles from Catcher to Fort Smith – especially in the rain. *The Fort Smith Times Record* reported that “all day Sunday, wagons carrying the negro families and their belongings were seen along the roads from Catcher toward Van Buren.”⁵⁶⁴ It appears that few if any cars were used to help with the move. As they left the county, there was only one path for them to go. They had to pass by the cemetery near Daugherty Hill – likely seeing the destruction there - and head west to Fort Smith. At that time, the only bridge that linked Van Buren and Fort Smith over the Arkansas River was the Free Bridge. Built in 1912, the bridge was the preferred way to traverse between the two cities throughout the 1920s.⁵⁶⁵ As they headed that way, a group of white citizens patrolled behind them on horseback with guns.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶² A common memory many of the interview subjects recall is the fact it was raining that day. Moira Bryant states her father Cal Daugherty remembers this fact in her work. Bryant, “Healing Catcher,” 56.

⁵⁶³ Many Black citizens from Catcher moved to Fort Smith Willis calls the area in Fort Smith many moved to “Midland Heights” in his 2006 article. Willis, “The Ray Willis Report.”

⁵⁶⁴ “Negroes are Fleeing from Scene of Murder Near Van Buren, Ark,” p. 1.

⁵⁶⁵ Before the construction of this bridge, most people hoping to get across the Arkansas River had to take a ferry.

⁵⁶⁶ Bryant’s grandparents remembered the day and provided an overview of the expulsion. Bryant, “Healing Catcher,” 56.



Image Ten: The Fort Smith – Van Buren Free Bridge grand opening in 1912.⁵⁶⁷

Pecolia Bettis, daughter of Will Bettis, was four years old when this occurred, but all she could remember was “was a lot of horses going over a bridge.”⁵⁶⁸ It appears that once the line of Black men and women went across the bridge and over the Arkansas River into Fort Smith, the band of white men on horseback finally stopped patrolling behind them. Free from this escort, the Black community members kept walking another two miles until they arrived at Midland Heights – a wooded area just outside of Fort Smith where another Black community existed. Of the hundred Black families that once called Catcher home, only three families stayed through the night that Sunday. These remaining three had discussed their situation with local officials and promised to be out of town within the next few days.⁵⁶⁹ By Monday morning, it was clear that no Black families in Catcher would attempt to stay permanently.

With the death of Charles Rucks, the inability of the eleven men who stayed to gain and concessions, and the destruction of their community there was little recourse for Black families

⁵⁶⁷ The Free Bridge was opened in 1912 and had two airplanes there to dedicate the celebration of its opening. Ethan Nahte, “Free Bridge tied Fort Smith and Van Buren,” February 16, 2020. Picture and article found online at <https://www.swtimes.com/story/news/2020/02/17/free-bridge-tied-fort-smith/1695290007/>.

⁵⁶⁸ Wanda Gray Interview with Pecolia Bettis Freeman.

⁵⁶⁹ “Negroes Leave Catcher After Warning issued,” p. 1.

but to leave the area for good. To stay any longer would have been risking their lives with little chance of success. About half of these families “left their mortgaged property in the hands of their creditors, taking with them only what they could easily move.”⁵⁷⁰ As they entered the Midland Heights community, these families had to decide if they were going to start over from scratch or continue to move further west or north for new opportunities. Many of these families did indeed start placing roots in Fort Smith while others moved to live in Kansas City, Missouri and Muskogee, Oklahoma. By the early 1930s, though, the descendants of this tragedy were scattered all across the west and north – they can be found all across the country to this day.

The crucial question emerging after closely studying this racial cleansing is not whether it occurred – it undoubtedly did – it is why it occurred. The simple answer, and the one that the newspaper and court documents would provide, was that the rape and murder of the young, white, Effie Latimer caused an irrevocable divide between the white and Black communities in *Catcher*.⁵⁷¹ Stereotypes of Black criminality had been reinforced with her brutal murder and there was no recourse but to expel the populations in the area to ensure a similar situation did not occur. In this telling, the cleansing was unfortunate but necessary. This was understood by both the Black and white communities and a voluntary migration of the criminal population occurred. Overlooking the compulsory nature of this eviction allowed white families to see themselves as victims (as well as heroes) in the incident. The rape and murder of the woman made them feel unsafe and they therefore demanded a safer life in the form of a racially separated community. The anonymous notices would claim the same, saying the expulsion was necessary “for the safety of the community.”⁵⁷²

⁵⁷⁰ “Negroes Flee in Fear from *Catcher* Homes,” p. 1.

⁵⁷¹ *Van Buren Press Argus* would claim that “so intense has been the feeling between the two races that...a race war” might have precipitated. “Colony Negroes Flee From Wrath of Whites,” p. 1.

⁵⁷² “Motion for New Trial,” 17.

While Latimer's death did provide the spark point for this racial cleansing, it was not the only reason it occurred. Likewise, racist myths of the sexual Black predator help explain how this incident unraveled but do not, alone, fully answer why the entire Black community was forcefully removed. To understand why the racial cleansing of Catcher occurred, it is necessary to also include an economic discussion of how white citizens could stand to profit from such violence. As was mentioned earlier, there was potentially vast amounts of natural gas under the land of these families living in southcentral Van Buren. Speculation that the land under Black owned homes was valuable likely played a role in the outcome of this racial cleansing. The fact that this mineral discovery occurred just before the racial cleansing occurred is far too coincidental to overlook. A few white citizens may have realized they could take advantage of the subordinate nature of Black civilians in 1920s America to push them off this land before the true value was calculated. Once they had been run out of town, white civilians purchased the land at cheap prices over the next few years.

Perhaps most egregiously, David Creekmore increased his land holdings in the Catcher region from around 200 acres in 1923 to nearly 800 acres by 1932.⁵⁷³ His cousin, Frederick Creekmore had lived on some of his land as a next-door neighbor to the Clay family. During the 1923 cleansing, he was part of the group that coerced a confession from John Henry Clay, killed Charles Rucks as a special deputy, and his wife, Mary Creekmore, was a key witness at the trial to convict the men. Participating in the racial cleansing of the town financially benefited the Creekmore and many other white families like them.⁵⁷⁴ G. T. Cazort, likewise increased his land

⁵⁷³ A comparison of the land owned in 1923 to 1932 shows this. "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1923," p. 8-11; "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1932," p. 60-64.

⁵⁷⁴ The name Creekmore is throughout the book of records, listed as names like "Sue Jean Creekmore" and "Creekmore & Echols," in various places. "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County for the Year 1932."

area by nearly triple – buying the land from these Black families who could no longer use the land to live off of. Many other small purchases were completed by white civilians like B. E. Snead, H. J. Hollis, and W. M. Wright, to name a few.⁵⁷⁵

Sixty-three Black families had owned and paid taxes on land in Catcher in 1923.⁵⁷⁶ Men like Gus Richardson, Thomas Richardson, and Tandy Coggs had the most - around fifty acres each. Even the smallest Black landowners, though, typically held at least ten acres of land that they farmed. A vast majority of this land was left in the hands of creditors as families stopped paying taxes on it and fled the area with only their smallest belongings. Most had only bought the land in the preceding five years and still had much of the mortgage to still pay off. Leaving the area was a major loss for these families. Those that had the land paid off continued to pay taxes on the land for the next few years - even though they were not able to live on the land.⁵⁷⁷ Four men – Earnest Richardson, Thomas Richardson, Silas Ricks, and the family of Charles Rucks – kept the land until at least 1932.⁵⁷⁸ Whether this land was still used for farming or just kept to signify these families' unwillingness to fully concede is unclear. By the 1930 census, however, none of these families who had lived in Catcher listed the area as their residence.⁵⁷⁹ With these final sales of land, the town of Catcher completed the cleansing of these Black families from the area. With no Black citizens paying taxes, living in the area, or allowed to be there once the sun went down, it was easy to forget that there had once been a thriving Black community. The memory of the incident slowly faded.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁶ "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County for the Year 1923."

⁵⁷⁷ Around 15 men continued to hold onto their land in Catcher in 1925. Around this time, it appears many began to finally sell the land and by 1932 there were almost none. "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County for the Year 1925."

⁵⁷⁸ "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County for the Year 1932."

⁵⁷⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930 – Population Schedule*.

By New Year's Day 1924, Catcher, Arkansas was an all-white town. A small segment of the population had succeeded in expelling the entirety of the Black community. Black men, women, and children who called Catcher home were forced to leave and would never be able to return. Burning homes and smashing tombstones was a way to ensure these families would not return. This destruction of the Black cemetery in Catcher – whether intentional or not – would symbolically remove the Black history of the town. As will be shown in the final chapter, the last step to ensure this racial cleansing was a success was to cover up and shape the narrative of what had just occurred. Black citizens needed to be held accountable for the violence. Whites, conversely, needed to be the heroes of the incident, saving the day and ensuring a safer society for the remaining community.

While this account would become the primary narrative still put forward, it is essential that the true history of the cleansing be accurately documented.⁵⁸⁰ Black community members never wanted to leave Catcher. They fought desperately to stay and only left when it was hopeless to continue fighting. Even then, eleven men piled together any resources they could to try to reclaim some semblance of control over the situation. The power of the group against them made it impossible to win this fight and they were ultimately arrested. Their families and friends fled the area soon after with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Over three hundred Black citizens were forced to leave the town because of this violence. Most had to restart their lives completely as a result. Their children and future descendants would have their financial trajectories severely altered. Most would never know the true reason, assuming their family had always been poor and never owned land. Access to this land or the mineral rights under it would

⁵⁸⁰ This was the leading narrative until Wanda Gray's article in 2013. Only one article, in 1999, referenced the tragedy behind the Catcher incident, but it only focused on the racial injustice for Bettis, Clay, and Rucks at trial. It made no mention of the expulsion of the rest of the Black community. Gill "Stereotyping Colored Trials of Two CC Men."

have immensely changed their lives and provided them generational wealth. The incident in *Catcher* instead humiliated many of these families, confirming their powerlessness in American society. Because of this, many refused to tell their children or later researchers what happened over that two-day period in 1923 – to discuss it “made it real again.”⁵⁸¹

⁵⁸¹ This quote is from M. C. Richardson. The sentiment behind it, though, is present in many of the views of the descendants of this community. Author interview with M. C. Richardson; Dorothy Trambell stated about how embarrassing the incident was and how her family rarely discussed it. Wanda Gray interview with Dorothy Jean Trambell.

Chapter Five – Lynching by Another Name

Only days after expelling nearly three hundred Black citizens from the town, white citizens returned their attention to seeking retribution for those accused of murdering Effie Latimer. While the mobs from December 30 had failed at lynching William Bettis and Spurgeon Rucks, it was possible through use of the legal system to bring the men back to the county and try them using the full power of the state. Closely examining the capital murder trials of William Bettis, Spurgeon Rucks, and John Henry Clay will reveal how the court system in the U.S. South often became an extension of local white communities who used this power to maintain white authority throughout the region. The swiftness, scant evidence, and racist language associated with these trials demonstrates how legal measures could be a decisive tool for those hoping to wrench any remaining power away from Black citizens in the rural south. Even when local officials exercised their power to prevent extralegal measures like public lynchings and mob violence, they often provided alternatives for pursuing vengeance to recently scorned white citizens through the courts. Winning in the eyes of the law gave the veneer of credibility and fairness to this racially motivated violence. State officials would claim that the use of the legal system would stave off mob violence. In truth, the death penalty verdicts against Bettis and Rucks were ways to uphold white authority inside Crawford County without allowing citizens to enact the violence themselves – a legalized lynching.

The use of the courts to uphold white control occurred in various ways across much of the nation but was most egregious during capital murder cases in the Jim Crow south in the first half of the twentieth century. Michael Pfeifer in *The Roots of Rough Justice: Origins of American Lynching* has concluded that southern lawmakers throughout this period reshaped “the

death penalty...to make capital punishment more efficient and more racial.”⁵⁸² In many cases, the death penalty became a way for local communities to avoid public lynchings in favor of the more legitimate process of trial, sentencing, and execution.⁵⁸³ Southern states hoping to become destinations for migrant labor well understood the bad publicity that surrounded mob violence. For these reasons, “responsible officials begged would-be lynchers to ‘let the law take its course,’ thus tacitly promising that there would be a quick trial and the death penalty...such proceedings ‘retained the essence of mob murder, shedding only its outward forms.’”⁵⁸⁴ Moving from lynchings to state-held executions satiated the desires of the local community for quick vengeance while still allowing the state to publicly declare law and order.

whereas lynchings visibly marked the bodies of its victims as black and so reconsolidated the color line that was indispensable to the reproduction of racial subordination, key elements of capital punishment veil that line and so render its contribution to racial subordination more difficult to apprehend and so to contest.⁵⁸⁵

The use of capital punishment increased considerably in the United States from 1900-1949, hitting its highest usage rate around 1925.⁵⁸⁶ During the same period, public lynchings steadily declined from their highest levels in the mid-1890s.⁵⁸⁷ It would seem, at first glance, that these statistics point towards a more racially progressive society based around use of the legal

⁵⁸² Michael Pfeifer, *The Roots of Rough Justice: Origins of American Lynching* (University of Illinois Press, 2011), 88.

⁵⁸³ Steven B. Bright, “Discrimination, Death and Denial: The Tolerance of Racial Discrimination in Infliction of the Death Penalty,” *Santa Clara Law Review* 35 (1995): 439; Steven B. Bright, “Legalized Lynching: Race, the Death Penalty, and the United States Courts,” in *The International Sourcebook on Capital Punishment*, edited by William Schabas (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997); Selena Hargrove, “Capital Punishment: 21st Century Lynching,” *University of the District of Columbia Law Review* 33 (2001): 2.

⁵⁸⁴ Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1969), 115.

⁵⁸⁵ Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn, “Capital Punishment as Legal Lynching?” in *From Lynch Mobs to the Killing State: Race and the Death Penalty in America*, editors Austin Sarat and Charles Ogletree (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 23.

⁵⁸⁶ Watt Espy and John Ortiz Smykla, *Executions in the United States, 1608-2002: The ESPY File*, Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2016-07-20. <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR08451.v5>.

⁵⁸⁷ These results have been replicated in numerous studies but the most recent can be found at, Charles Sequin and David Rigby, “National Crimes: A New National Data Set of Lynchings in the United States from 1883 to 1941,” *Socius* Vol. 5 (May 2019).

system rather than mob violence. In truth, racism evolved in the early twentieth century to adopt ‘legitimate’ means - court cases and state executions - to keep minority groups in subordinate roles in society. As Stephen Bright, director for the Southern Center for Human Rights, puts it: “the death penalty is a direct descendant of lynching and other forms of racial violence and racial oppression in America.”⁵⁸⁸ Researchers have corroborated that the use of capital punishment against Black Americans occurred at the highest rates in areas where lynchings had historically been more prevalent.⁵⁸⁹ Understanding this evolution away from public lynchings towards state sanctioned capital punishment helps explain how mob violence and other extralegal endeavors became pushed aside in favor of the credibility afforded by the U.S. court system. The Equal Justice Initiative recently echoed these sentiments:

The decline of lynching in the studied states relied heavily on the increased use of capital punishment imposed by court order following an often-accelerated trial. That the death penalty’s roots are sunk deep in the legacy of lynching is evidenced by the fact that public executions to mollify the mob continued after the practice was legally banned.⁵⁹⁰

As the United States moved towards a more rigid racial hierarchy, it became less necessary to engage in outright extrajudicial violence to achieve white goals. Instead, as can be seen in Shibley, Arkansas (just north of Catcher), community pressure was often enough to get Blacks to act how whites desired. Public notices as well as private discussions were usually enough during the period of Jim Crow to force Blacks to bend to white authority. When Blacks did finally push back against this hierarchy, they were met with overwhelming force – both legally and extralegally. Because of this, Blacks in the south predictably stopped engaging in

⁵⁸⁸ Bright, “Discrimination, Death and Denial,” 439.

⁵⁸⁹ David Jacobs, Jason Carmichael, Stephanie Kent, “Vigilantism, Current Racial Threat, and Death Sentences,” *American Sociological Review* 70 (2005): 656-77; Margaret Vandiver, David Giacomassi, William Lofquist, “Slavey’s Enduring Legacy” *Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice* 4 (2007): 19-36; David Rigby, Charles Seguin, “Capital Punishment and the Legacies of Slavery and Lynching in the United States,” *American Academy of Political and Social Science* 694 (2021): 206-209.

⁵⁹⁰ “Introduction,” *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, Third Edition (Montgomery: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017).

protests and left the region for other areas of the country deemed less racist. This may have resulted in less overall lynchings in the south despite an increasingly prejudiced and racialized society.

With that said, extralegal tactics of pressuring Blacks to remain subordinate were still used by whites throughout the south. Most notably, the second iteration of the KKK reached its highest enrollment numbers in the 1920s and could drastically influence how local communities operated.⁵⁹¹ Still, these extrajudicial ways of keeping white control often used legitimate and lawful avenues to achieve their goals. The KKK, as an example, were active in local and national politics and achieved discriminatory goals through political power.⁵⁹² The same was true in the case of Catcher where local whites banded together to compel sheriffs to arrest the accused quickly and pressured judges to move up their trials. These were ways - outside the normal bounds of the law - to express white authority inside local communities. Importantly, though, these forms of extrajudicial protest pressured 'legitimate' forms of government – police, judges, lawyers, etc. – to act in favor of white community goals.⁵⁹³

For all these reasons, the federal and state court systems throughout the first half of the twentieth century became extremely discriminatory towards Black citizens, most explicitly in capital murder cases. Acting in the interest of white communities, courts often used the death penalty against Black men to avoid mob violence, particularly after rumors of a sexual assault. As one historian has noted, “of the 455 men executed between 1930 and 1967 on the basis of

⁵⁹¹ Barnes provides many examples of this in his chapter “Reaching Out,” in *The Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Arkansas*, 59-92.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

⁵⁹³ Investigators had been impacted by whites in Catcher who aided in arresting and interrogating Rucks and Clay, “State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge,” p. 1; Sheriff Maxey and Shaw decided to negotiate with white community members outside their jails, “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1; Lawyers worked with Judge Cochran to move up trial dates to stave off this violence, “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

rape convictions, 405 of them were Black.”⁵⁹⁴ The anxieties associated with sexual relationships across the color line, especially in the south, led to the harshest of penalties even with only rumors as evidence in a majority of cases. In the 1890s, these anxieties were much more likely to have been relieved in the form of extrajudicial public lynchings. From 1910-1950, it became necessary to shift towards more lawful means of retribution inside these communities. Governor Thomas McRae, as has been shown, was a leading voice in this belief. His experiences with the fallout from both the Lowery Lynching and the Elaine Massacre caused him to decry the use of vigilante justice in local communities.⁵⁹⁵ Using the court system provided credibility while still achieving the same results as outright violence. A win for local whites, the county, and state.

The capital rape and murder charges brought against William Bettis and Spurgeon Rucks in the immediate aftermath of Effie Latimer’s death offer an example of how southern courts could operate against Black defendants to uphold white authority in the region. Rumors of Black rapists enraged local white mobs who sought violence against the accused.⁵⁹⁶ With the inability of these lynch mobs to reach the two men, who were being held for safekeeping in Little Rock until their court date, it became necessary for the community to instead turn to the courts as a final recourse. The courts and local police, in preventing the public lynching of these two Black men, portrayed themselves as fair towards Black citizens, but ultimately were still pressured by the white mobs surrounding them to adjust trial dates to ensure that retribution would be carried out quickly.⁵⁹⁷ Examining the legal struggles of these two men makes it clear just how prejudicial this system could be towards Black citizens in the Jim Crow South.

⁵⁹⁴ Davis, “Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist,” 172.

⁵⁹⁵ This was discussed on pages 38-42. McRae became very outspoken against the use of vigilante justice. His transcript from “Governorirate at Lynching of Negro,” is perhaps most indicative of this.

⁵⁹⁶ “Two Negroes to be Given Trial Friday,” p. 1.

⁵⁹⁷ “Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching,” p. 1.

Arkansas law at the time typically required a minimum of fifteen days between the commitment of a crime and the trial against the accused. Judge James Cochran of the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit had initially selected January 17 as the date to hold arraignment proceedings against Bettis and Rucks. There was some pressure immediately after the two men were arrested (by Saturday, December 29) for the judge to move up the trial to the following Monday – giving the men only forty-eight hours to respond to the charges against them. Judge Cochran continually insisted the arraignment would not be held for another two weeks; however, so their lawyer would have time to subpoena witnesses and fully understand the charges being brought against them. The white mobs, who had just been stymied in their attempt to lynch Bettis and Rucks the night before, awoke to this news and responded with anger. The mob shifted its attention to the lawyers, judges, and mayor who had been brought forward by the sheriff to ease tensions the night before on the lawn of the Crawford County Jail.⁵⁹⁸ These prominent men of the community had promised the crowd that Bettis and Rucks would be held accountable in the court so there was no need for a lynching. The men soon called Judge Cochran to, once again, ask that he move up these trials.

Cochran, likely facing threats to his own safety, finally conceded to this pressure. He agreed to hold a special term of court the following Tuesday morning so that the arraignment proceedings could occur Wednesday, January 2. This was the earliest date possible considering the weekend and New Year holiday. Cochran then asked the men to disseminate this news to the sheriff and the local press.⁵⁹⁹ He likely assumed that broadcasting such an update would calm the members of Van Buren and bring about a return to order. This would not be the case, however,

⁵⁹⁸ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid.

as other members of the white community were already starting to violently cleanse the area of all the remaining Blacks still residing near Catcher.

Judge Cochran justified moving up the arraignment proceedings to January 3 by citing Act 258 of Arkansas law. This act, signed in 1909, allowed Arkansas courts to adjust minimum trial dates to quicken the process of sentencing in cases where mob violence was feared.⁶⁰⁰ Colloquially referred to as the ‘Toney Bill to Prevent Lynching,’ the law was often portrayed by Arkansas newspapers of the era as an anti-lynching law. In truth, the Act 258 was nothing of the sort.⁶⁰¹ The law stated that:

whenever the crime of rape, attempt to commit rape, murder or any other crime, calculated to arouse the passion of the people to an extent that the sheriff of the county believes the mob violence will be committed...a special term of court [will be allowed so] that the person or persons charged with the crime or crimes may be brought to immediate trials.⁶⁰²

Importantly, a group of seven or more citizens could demand the sheriff take these orders for a quickened trial to a judge. If the sheriff failed to do so, he could be fined up to \$1,000. Ironically, there was not a fine issued for a sheriff who allowed a prisoner to be taken by mob for the purposes of lynching. With no punishment imposed for those participating in mob violence, this was clearly no anti-lynching law.⁶⁰³

Instead, Act 258 was a way to reduce the practice of lynchings in Arkansas by guaranteeing speedy vengeance for white community members angry after a crime was suspected to have been committed by a Black citizen. Even at the time of its passage, there was some backlash as it seemed a poor practice to hold a trial while local tensions were at their most

⁶⁰⁰ Act 258. *Acts of Arkansas of the General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 1909*. Little Rock: General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 1909.

⁶⁰¹ Lancaster, *American Atrocity*, 43-44.

⁶⁰² *Public and Private Acts and Joint and Concurrent Resolutions and Memorials of the General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 1909* (Little Rock: Secretary of State, 1909), 778-780.

⁶⁰³ Lancaster, *American Atrocity*, 44-45.

volatile. Father John Lucey, who helped write the law, retorted however that a quick trial held by the state was far better than the alternative of letting mobs enact their own justice in mere hours.⁶⁰⁴ Lucey pointed to a case in Hampton, Arkansas in which brothers Henry and Wilson Pickett had been suspected to have shot and killed the county treasurer. After several hundred gathered around the county jail in El Dorado (where the men were being held to avoid a lynching), the trial was moved up.⁶⁰⁵ The trial, held later that week, sentenced the brothers to twenty-one years. For Lucey, this helped demonstrate the effectiveness of Act 258 in preventing mob violence.

As historians have pointed out, though, many of these early cases citing Act 258 demonstrated that the sheriff and local police had the means to prevent lynchings without the need for these expedited trials.⁶⁰⁶ This was certainly the case in *Catcher*, as there was little need to move up the trial dates to prevent violence. The men had already been held for safekeeping for several days and the remaining members of their community were ransacked and forced out. Moving the trial date up would have had no effect on this mob violence – it had already occurred. Instead, Act 258 was a way to use state power to quickly punish those that white mobs were unable to reach using extralegal means. Further, the act was used to prevent true anti-lynching bills from ever reaching the state legislature for voting. State officials could point to Act 258 and declare little need for further radical legislation to stop mob violence. Whites, whose passions were justified in such cases, needed to have quick access to the courts to legally gain retribution.

⁶⁰⁴ “Two-Day Bill Passed the Senate,” *Arkansas Gazette*, January 26, 1909, p. 3.

⁶⁰⁵ Lancaster, *American Atrocity*, 46-47; “Pickett Negroes Here,” *Arkansas Gazette*, January 23, 1909, p. 2; “Charged with Murder,” *Arkansas Gazette*, March 29, 1909, p. 1. “21 Years Given Pickett Negroes,” *Arkansas Gazette*, April 2, 1909, p. 1.

⁶⁰⁶ Lancaster, *American Atrocity*, 47.

The true purpose of Act 258, then, was to transform illegitimate violence, perpetrated by mobs of average citizens against other citizens, into legitimate violence performed by the state.⁶⁰⁷ In reality, there was little difference between mob-held public lynchings and the state held executions after these sham trials; the outcome was often the same. Nevertheless, such laws were portrayed as progressive legislation that removed the role of the public in violence, humanizing the entire process of capital punishment. The most ‘successful’ use of Act 258 occurred just after the mob violence in Catcher, Arkansas. Judge Cochran’s agreement to move arraignment proceedings up to January 3 allowed the state to argue that a fair trial would be given. If the three accused murderers were found not guilty, they would be free to go (although never back to their homes in Catcher). However, with the proceedings and trial held inside the Crawford County courthouse only days after the racial cleansing of the Black community, it was a forgone conclusion what the outcome would actually be.

William Bettis and Spurgeon Rucks were indicted for the rape and murder of Effie Latimer on Tuesday, January 1. Judge Cochran held a special grand jury late that night to review these indictment charges and set the following morning (Wednesday, January 2) as the date for arraignment proceedings. This would indeed be a speedy trial. Bettis and Rucks were transported in the early morning hours Wednesday from Little Rock to the Crawford County courthouse in Van Buren by Sheriff Maxey. Arriving for court at 8:30 a.m., likely without sleep, the pair were taken directly from the backseat of Maxey’s car onto the courthouse lawn.⁶⁰⁸ On the lawn, the men must have passed the 1896 Van Buren Confederate Monument memorializing all the men who had died fighting to preserve slavery during the Civil War.⁶⁰⁹ The sheriff, after saving the

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid, 56.

⁶⁰⁸ The exact time of their arrival is noted in “Negro Trial is Scheduled Next Friday,” p. 1.

⁶⁰⁹ Mark K. Christ, “Van Buren Confederate Monument,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, January 14, 2022, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/van-buren-confederate-monument-13422/>.

men from vigilante justice only days prior, would take no chances with the men's safekeeping. As the men arrived, they were met by their defense attorney, W. H. Neal. Nearly one hundred white citizens from all around Crawford County attended the arraignment proceedings, misunderstanding that the trial itself would not be held until a later date. The crowd jeered once it was discovered that no sentencing (or execution) would occur that day.⁶¹⁰

Bettis and Rucks were read the charges against them for the rape and murder in the first-degree. Both men plead not guilty to the indictment. The men's lawyer asked that they be given the statutory forty-eight hours minimum to prepare their defense, which was granted by Judge Cochran.⁶¹¹ Next, W. H. Neal asked that Bettis and Rucks be tried separately. This was also granted. Unlike the later trial against the eleven nightriders, Bettis and Rucks never requested a change of venue for this highly publicized trial. Moving the trial out of the county may have helped get a less prejudiced jury pool but was still unlikely to change the outcome of the case. Whether unaware this was an option or unwilling to help the men to that degree, their attorney disregarded such a motion and began preparation for the trial that would occur just two days later. Judge Cochran set the murder trial against Rucks for Friday, January 4 at 8:30 a.m. Bettis would be tried immediately following Rucks' trial. The two men were quickly ushered out of the court with deputies on all sides and taken outside county lines for safekeeping to await their trials.⁶¹²

The same afternoon as the indictments were read, Sheriff Maxey served summons to seventy-five citizens across Crawford County to appear for jury pool questioning regarding the

⁶¹⁰ The narrative surrounding the day of this trial was compiled using several articles. "Negroes Are Indicted By Jury Tuesday," *Southwest American*, January 2, 1924, p. 1; "75 Are Summoned for Jury Duty in Trial of Negroes," *Fort Smith Times Record*, January 3, 1924, p. 1; "Negro Trial is Scheduled Next Friday," p. 1; "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

⁶¹¹ "Two Negroes to be Given Trial Friday," p. 1.

⁶¹² It is unclear where the men were taken for safekeeping. The most likely place seems the jail at Fort Smith again.

upcoming trial.⁶¹³ These potential jurors were told that it was necessary to arrive quickly to help stop the violence coming out of Van Buren. As Guy Lancaster has noted, “Arkansas jurists well understood that Act 258 was not intended to protect the rights of the accused but rather to facilitate an execution in order to stave off mob desire for immediate revenge.”⁶¹⁴ The seventy-five men arrived the next morning (Thursday, January 3) and were asked questions by the prosecution and defense to ascertain whether they would be qualified jurors. By the end of the day, twenty-six jurors were found fit to serve on the jury. The jury for Rucks’ trial ended up being composed of G.E. Arbuckle, B.D. Chitwood, J.B. Chitwood, J.N. Dyer, F.H. Hawkins, Joe Lawrence, J.F. Lee, Jake Porter, Jesse Porter, J.H. Simmons, H.M. Walker, and Grady Woffard.⁶¹⁵ The twelve jurors held residence in the towns of Dyer, Graphic, Mulberry, Mountainburg, and Rudy. Among them, there were three merchants, one gasoline supply dealer and eight farmers. As was standard in the early twentieth century, all were men, and all were white.

The morning of the trial (Friday, January 4), the large machine gun that had been used to force the eleven nightriders to surrender had been “parked in a conspicuous position on the courthouse lawn.”⁶¹⁶ It was unclear if the machine gun was to protect the men from would-be lynchers or to intimidate the accused arriving for trial. Either way, the machine reiterated to all present the high stakes of the trial. As Spurgeon Rucks arrived under heavy guard with Sheriff Maxey, he was likely again met with many citizens on the courthouse lawn as had been there the day prior. It is unclear whether Rucks, at that point, knew his father had been killed by a similar

⁶¹³ “75 Are Summoned For Jury Duty in Trial of Negroes,” p. 1.

⁶¹⁴ Guy Lancaster, “Act 258 of 1909,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, 2020.
<https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/act-258-of-1909-12572/>.

⁶¹⁵ “State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge,” p. 1.

⁶¹⁶ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

group only days prior. As the mob surrounded him and the officers, Rucks surely felt his life was in danger. Sheriff Maxey knew violence was possible. The *Arkansas Gazette* even reported it was the “alleged intention of certain Catcher settlement men to go to Van Buren and see the job done right” – hinting at an attempt to lynch the men before they ever made it into the building.⁶¹⁷ Inside, the courtroom was similarly rowdy. An estimated 700 to 800 people jammed inside the court room and even more spilled into the corridors and back rooms of the Crawford County courthouse.⁶¹⁸ Every seat in the room was filled, with dozens more electing to stand. Nearly fifty women were present as they sought to hear the brutal story of how Effie Latimer had died.⁶¹⁹

The trial against Spurgeon Rucks began at 8:30 that morning. The jury was empaneled for the first hour and a half of the day. The doors of the courtroom were then locked by Sheriff Maxey from 10:00 a.m. until recess at noon so that spectators outside could not enter or provoke violence.⁶²⁰ While full transcripts of the trial are not available, it is possible to piece together what occurred in the trial through some of the existing court documents and the close reporting that came from the Fort Smith and Van Buren newspapers.⁶²¹ After the jury had been sworn in, Prosecutor Dave Partain walked before them and gave his opening statement:

It has been intimated that the state would play on your passion and your sympathies, but such will not be for it is not necessary to embellish on the cold statement of facts as related by the witnesses on the stand. For there, stands the perpetrator of this most dastardly of deeds. In a little two-room cottage nestling there near Catcher in a mixed settlement, lived a young white woman—alone. She relied on the belief that notwithstanding this fact she was safe and secure in an American home in an American community. Down the road came “Son” Bettis and Spurgeon Rucks. One called her to the door of her home. She came unsuspecting that within those Black hides there was,

⁶¹⁷ “Trial of Negroes Will Open Today,” *Arkansas Gazette*, January 4, 1924, p. 1.

⁶¹⁸ “State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge,” p. 1.

⁶¹⁹ The article states “nearly half a hundred women” were present. *Ibid.*

⁶²⁰ A narrative of the day of the trial and the atmosphere surrounding it can be found here. “Negro Must Pay Penalty as Murderer,” *Fort Smith Times Record*, January 5, 1924, p. 1.

⁶²¹ *Arkansas v. Rucks*, Circuit Court of Crawford County, Arkansas Case No. 1587, January 4, 1924. This trial document provides a brief summary of the case against Rucks and the verdict at trial. A version of it was initially sent to me by Wanda Gray. Sharon Blount-Baker, a circuit clerk for Crawford County, was most helpful in finding and sending digital copies of the rest of these cases to me.

aroused, that passion of a Black man for a white woman. Seizing her, Bettis forced her back into her humble home and there was waged one of the most terrible struggles recorded in the history of Crawford County. Then, not satisfied with having defiled her, Bettis fired a charge from a shotgun into that quivering and outraged body, as the woman, bleeding, wounded and heartbroken, endeavored to crawl back into the room where she had struggled so desperately, though vainly. She sank to the floor, terribly wounded. Not content with the work of his co-murderer, Rucks snatched the gun from Bettis, clubbed it and struck the woman brutally over the head. The negroes went their way and the woman, mortally wounded, was left alone to suffer and die.⁶²²

It is astounding that the prosecution began their statement claiming not to need to rely on passion or racial sentiments while only sentences later claiming that “within those Black hides there was, aroused, that passion of a Black man for a white woman.”⁶²³ Still, the statement provided by Partain made an impact on the courtroom, so much so that it was transcribed fully in a Fort Smith newspaper report of the trial the next day.⁶²⁴ Interestingly, the state’s opening statement would hint heavily at rape being a primary motive in the crime even stating that Bettis ‘defiled’ her before killing her, but such a charge was never actually used against the two men. Instead, the rape charge was later dropped and only murder put in the sentencing paperwork.⁶²⁵ It was necessary to add a rape component to the trial for the prosecution to ensure an execution of the men and not just a life sentence. Partain understood that hearing of a sexual assault by a Black man against a white woman was far more likely to end in capital punishment than just a simple murder.

W.H. Neal, in the opening statement for the defense, asked that the jury consider all the testimony they would hear closely. He stated there was only one witness who would come before them that could accurately describe how Effie Latimer was murdered – John Henry Clay. With

⁶²² This is a complete transcript of Partain’s opening statement in the Bettis case. It was transcribed verbatim in the *Southwest American*. A similar opening statement was likely used in Rucks’ case. “Guilty Given as Verdict in Bettis Trial,” p. 1.

⁶²³ Ibid.

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

⁶²⁵ “Abatement of Rape Charges,” *Arkansas v. Bettis, Rucks*, Crawford Circuit Court, July 7, 1924.

this intimate knowledge of the crime scene and the murder weapon found inside his home, it was most likely that he was the actual murderer of the young woman, not Spurgeon Rucks who would be shown to have several alibis for his whereabouts that day. Every other witness would have to rely on secondhand accounts after the fact to provide testimony. Because of this, it was necessary to let Spurgeon Rucks go free.⁶²⁶

At 10:30 a.m., witness testimony against Rucks began.⁶²⁷ The state called upon ten witnesses to prove the guilt of Rucks in the murder of Effie Latimer. None would be more important to the state's case than its first witness, John Henry Clay. As someone who had observed the murder firsthand, his testimony would be essential to securing a guilty verdict against both Rucks and Bettis. It was assumed that by turning against Bettis and Rucks as a witness for the state, he would be able to secure a better deal in his own trial soon after. Prosecutor Dave Partain stepped before the young boy and asked him to provide his name and age. John Henry Clay stated his name and that he was only fourteen, not eighteen as the newspapers had been reporting the past few days. This revelation shocked the crowd but was a shrewd move by the prosecution in that it helped make it far less likely that Clay would have committed the rape and murder of the woman alone – as the defense had just argued in its opening statement. By reducing his age down to fourteen, it appeared to lend credibility to the notion that he was only a passive bystander to the horrific crimes perpetrated by Bettis and

⁶²⁶ Neal's belief that John Henry Clay was the real guilty party was found here. "Negro Must Pay Penalty as Murderer," p. 1.

⁶²⁷ The full transcripts of this trial have yet to be found. It is still possible, though, to cobble together an accurate depiction of the case from newspaper reports and the few court documents regarding the case that have been located.

Rucks. With that out of the way, Partain asked him to walk the jury through what had occurred the day of the murder.⁶²⁸

Clay testified that on the morning of Effie's death he had been on his way to pick cotton when he met Bettis and Rucks. One of them was riding on a mule and the other a horse. Clay was carrying his double-barrel shotgun over his shoulder. The two men told him he they should go rabbit hunting with his gun instead. Clay agreed and the two took the gun from him to inspect. As the three men set off to hunt, Bettis decided they should stop for breakfast. The Latimer residence was on the way, so they stopped in to buy eggs from Effie for ten cents. Clay said Bettis called Effie to the backdoor under the guise of wanting to buy these eggs from her – even presenting a dime from his pocket when she asked for payment.⁶²⁹ When she came back to the door with the eggs, Bettis forced his way into the home. As Clay and Rucks stayed in the backyard, Bettis fought with her. Latimer was taken, screaming, into the back of the house where it was implied that she was raped by Bettis. Several minutes later, Bettis came out of the house and Effie was heard weeping. At that point, Rucks went inside the home and forced Effie to her feet. As she came to the backdoor, she cried out for Clay to get help. Latimer's hair and clothing was disheveled from the fight. Rucks threatened Clay to keep quiet. As Latimer went back into the home, she was shot in the back by Bettis. As she fell to her knees, Rucks grabbed the shotgun and struck her over the back of the head twice. With these hits, Effie finally fell prone to the floor, silent.⁶³⁰ With Effie dying on the floor, the three men climbed over the back fence of the

⁶²⁸ The testimony of Clay is repeated in several places. These provided most of the context for this narrative. "State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge," p. 1; "Negro Must Pay Penalty as Murderer," p. 1.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

⁶³⁰ "State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge," p. 1.

Latimer residence and fled to the local creek. At the water, they washed the blood stains from their bodies and used sand to “scour” any remaining evidence off the shotgun.⁶³¹

Hearing Clay’s testimony angered the crowd, and it was clear the jury was affected by the statement. W.H. Neal tried several tactics to undermine Clay’s credibility on cross-examination. He began by asking if Clay had been coerced at any point into providing this confession for the state. Clay shook his head no, but Neal pointed out several scars on his body that looked fresh. The young boy remarked that they were previous injuries and had not occurred from officers or the crowds who took him from his home days prior.⁶³² It was obvious, even to biased observers, that the boy had several scars on his face and hands and that he was extremely frightened of the situation he was in. The *Chicago Defender* would report on the case, stating it was clear that the boy had gone through a rough “third-degree method” to ensure he would memorize his testimony and not repudiate it under any circumstances.⁶³³ Unable to get Clay to admit he had been coerced at any point into lying during his confession, Neal began imagining Clay as the killer of Effie. He was able to get Clay to admit the gun was his and that he had kept it under his bed after the murder and that he was the only one in court that day that would confess to being at Effie’s home when she died. Even with these concessions, though, it was clear Clay’s testimony had the impact on the jury that the state had hoped.⁶³⁴

The next witness called was Florence Johnson, the neighbor who first found Effie after she had been shot. Johnson claimed that her morning was like any other until her father asked her to deliver a letter to Effie from her recently estranged husband, Robert Latimer. Johnson stated

⁶³¹ “Negro Must Pay Penalty as Murderer,” p. 1.

⁶³² Clay was described as having large marks across his face. Black Newspapers theorized he was beaten several times to make sure he confessed. Hopkins, “Mob is Pacified When Death Verdict is Given,” p. 1.

⁶³³ Ibid.

⁶³⁴ “Negro Must Pay Penalty as Murderer,” p. 1; “State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge,” p. 1.

that she arrived at the Latimer residence (about a mile away) at 2:30 p.m. to deliver this letter to her. Once there, she found the door to the home ajar. When she pushed open the door, she found Effie lying in her pool of blood in between the two rooms. Effie was still breathing and even came to consciousness and asked Florence to pray for her. Effie told Florence she was dying and that she had been shot by a negro. At that point, Florence left to go seek medical help. While the cross-examination from the defense is not recorded for the rest of these witnesses, one would assume that Rucks' attorney must have asked about this mystery letter from Robert. No such letter was ever admitted into evidence even though it would have helped corroborate the story as well as provide some sort of alibi for Effie's husband.⁶³⁵

The third witness for the state was Dr. B. L. Bennett, the attending doctor who helped aid Effie and stayed with her until her death that night. Dr. Bennett stated that he arrived as soon as he could and that he was shocked by the brutality of the scene. He found that Effie's fingernails had been torn from their root in self-defense and that it was clear she put up quite a struggle for her life. Like Johnson, Bennett claimed that Effie came to consciousness while he was there and told him that Son Bettis had shot her.⁶³⁶

The final seven witnesses for the state were less influential, and of course, all white community members, but their testimonies further supported the state's case. One of these witnesses was Jim Johnson, who testified that Rucks had fully confessed to Effie's murder in the face of a mob who succeeded in wrenching Rucks away from the deputy after Rucks' arrest. Another witness, M. Stallings, said he searched the Latimer home for clues after the murder and found shoeprints from rubber boots. The next witness, Henry Johnson, had ransacked Rucks' home after hearing about the shoeprints Stallings found, and recovered a pair of boots alleged to

⁶³⁵ Johnson's testimony can be found at "State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge," p. 1.

⁶³⁶ Bennett's testimony is right below Johnson's. Ibid.

match the prints that also matched the boots Rucks was wearing in the courtroom that day. Gasps rang out from the crowd as if the murder had been proven. These testimonies demonstrated both the incompetence of investigators after the crime as well as the inability of the defense to criticize the details of this account. With that in mind, it is highly likely that the prints all around the scene could have come from these vigilante investigators – not necessarily the murderer. Not to mention that, if the two men had ransacked every home in Catcher, they would have likely found several shoes that fit these prints. Unfortunately, Neal chose not to cross-examine Stallings or Johnson after this testimony even though it could have easily been refuted.⁶³⁷

Next up, Mary Creekmore, the wife of Frederick Creekmore (who had just killed Spurgeon Rucks' father), testified for the state how she had found a blood-smeared dime inside the Latimer home when she too entered to look for clues after Effie's murder.⁶³⁸ Partain showed this dime to the jury in support of Clay's testimony that Bettis and Rucks had gained entry to the home under the guise of buying a dime's worth of eggs. The last witness for the state was John Mitchell, Effie's seventy-year-old half-brother. Mitchell testified that he knew Rucks was the killer because of the scratch marks on his neck and arms, which he personally observed as part of the mob who confronted Rucks after his arrest. Along with Jim Johnson, he pulled Rucks to the side and heard his confession to the murder. On cross, Neal asked exactly what had coerced Rucks' confession to the mob. Mitchell stated:

Mitchell: "We asked Rucks to come clean and tell us the truth"

Neal: "And you did not intend that he should be returned to the officer if he did not?"

Mitchell: "We had no such notion. He was not threatened."⁶³⁹

⁶³⁷ Jim Johnson, M. Stallings, and Henry Johnson's testimony is below Bennett's. Ibid.

⁶³⁸ Creekmore's testimony is next up in this article. Ibid.

⁶³⁹ Mitchell's testimony ends the article. Ibid.

With Mitchell's testimony complete, the state rested its case against Rucks at 1:42 p.m. Then, the defense called upon thirteen witnesses with testimony supporting Rucks' innocence. Unfortunately, this testimony has been forgotten to memory and was not preserved by local newspaper coverage. It is known that Rucks took the stand in his own defense and testified that he had been far away from the Latimer home at the time of the murder. He only confessed to Johnson, Mitchell, and the rest of the mob at his home because they threatened to kill him if he did not.⁶⁴⁰

In closing, Dave Partain complimented the citizens of Crawford County in not resorting to violence and allowing the matter to be disposed of through the proper channels despite the brutal nature of the crime. Partain, newspapers reported, "stressed the necessity of protecting the womanhood of the community by dealing with criminals."⁶⁴¹ With that in mind, he asked that the jury return with a verdict of guilty to set an example of how violent criminals would be dealt with in this community. The "blood-soaked dress" of Effie Latimer with several large gun-shot holes in the back was paraded before the jury as a final exclamation point by the prosecution.⁶⁴²

With the closing arguments finished, the jury returned to their room to deliberate the case at 5:18 p.m. After deliberating for less than ten minutes, they announced they had reached their verdict at 5:28 p.m. Led back into the courtroom, the jury announced its verdict to the courtroom to huge cheers at 5:35 p.m. As the *Fort Smith Times Record* put it, "the hour when foreman, Jake Porter, of the jury announced the verdict of guilty with penalty of death, was just one week and

⁶⁴⁰ Rucks' defense does not get much attention in the newspapers. The narrative from this paragraph was found in "Negro Must Pay Penalty as Murderer," p. 1.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid.

⁶⁴² Ibid.

35 minutes after Mrs. Latimer died of her wounds.”⁶⁴³ The speedy trial had been a success for the community. Rucks had been found guilty and would soon be put to death.

After this verdict, Judge Cochran announced that the case for William Bettis would be held the following morning at 8:30 a.m.⁶⁴⁴ Boos rang out in the courtroom as many believed that Bettis would be held accountable that day as well. The next day (Saturday, January 5), William Bettis’ trial was held for the murder of Effie. The jury consisted of eleven white male farmers, and the trial against Bettis was essentially a carbon copy of the trial against Rucks. The prosecution called the exact same witnesses and had the same testimony in roughly the same amount of time.⁶⁴⁵

For Bettis’ defense, eleven witnesses were called to testify. Again, there is not a full transcript of this testimony, but there is, fortunately, a list of those that provided testimony. Robert Gooding, a well-known and respected white man from Catcher testified that he saw Bettis that morning one and a half miles away riding a horse.⁶⁴⁶ Similar statements were provided by Gus Brunt and Herman Denning (also white farmers) who worked alongside Bettis. Interestingly, even a white woman, Callie Jones, came to his support with a similar alibi that he was in a field near her home at the time of the murder and could not have committed the crime. Andy Bettis, his father, came to the stand and claimed that he had eaten breakfast and lunch at his home that day. Lastly, Will Brown, Stanley Cox, Netta Hunt, George Phillips, Becky Rucks, Flavius Rucks (Black farmers and friends) all testified that they saw Bettis on the morning of the murder, at different places around a mile away from the Latimer residence. According to the local

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁴ As with the case of Rucks, there are no full trial transcripts from William Bettis’ case. There are small summary notes of the case, but not much else. The narrative of Bettis’ trial is put together using the brief outline of these records and newspaper articles from the period. *The State of Arkansas v. Bettis*, Circuit Court of Crawford County, Arkansas Case No. 1587, January 5, 1924.

⁶⁴⁵ “Guilty Given as Verdict in Bettis Trial,” p. 1.

⁶⁴⁶ The witnesses in the defense of Bettis were all found in this article. Ibid.

newspapers, though, these testimonies always ended the same way – with Bettis riding – “in the general direction of the Latimer home.”⁶⁴⁷

The trial for Bettis took around two hours less than Rucks’. The jury retired to their room at 2:52 p.m. to deliberate. At 3:03 p.m., the jury reached their verdict. Led back into the courtroom, the jury presented Judge Cochran with their verdict of guilty of murder and sentenced to death. Cheers rang through the courtroom as the cases of the two men had finally reached their end. Bettis and Rucks were brought back into the courtroom late that Saturday night at 9:07 p.m. where they were read the sentences of death passed upon them by Judge Cochran. The two would be killed by electric chair between sunrise and sunset on February 15. Handcuffed to one another, the men showed little emotion. After the passing of the sentence, the condemned men were taken back to the Fort Smith Jail for safekeeping to await their execution.⁶⁴⁸

With the trials over, an ideological fight over how this legal drama would be remembered began. The local papers, most notably the *Van Buren Press Argus*, argued that the trial had presented overwhelming evidence proving the men had committed the crime.⁶⁴⁹ Allowing the state to punish the three men rather than mob violence had showed the conservative and peaceful nature of local whites in the face of unimaginable brutality. More importantly, the newspaper pressed how race had little to do with the trial from beginning to end. In an article entitled “Negro Fiends Will Die in Electric Chair,” the newspaper wrote, “Prosecuting Attorney Dave Partain particularly avoided appealing to the emotions of the jury, neither did he attempt to arouse in the minds of the jury or the audience the least semblance of race prejudice.”⁶⁵⁰ As has been shown, though, he continually referenced how the passions of the Black men forced

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸ The timeline and narrative of the sentencing of Bettis and Rucks was found here. Ibid.

⁶⁴⁹ “Negro Fiends Will Die In Electric Chair,” p. 1.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid.

something innately within them to attack and rape the young white woman – a clearly racist sentiment the whole case was built upon. *The Chicago Defender* provided a different summary of the trials:

A mob of Arkansas ruffians, bent on lynching, practically dictated the death penalty [for the two men] ... The jury deliberated only ten minutes – just enough time to sign their names to the “guilty document”- and returned to the courtroom amid wild cheers... The electric chair is the only logical thing to expect in this section when the characteristic “southern quick trial” is held. This is the justice Arkansas always resorts to when public sentiment clamors for blood.⁶⁵¹

The coverage of this trial in the *Chicago Defender* helped get the NAACP’s focus on aiding in the defense of the men. Tara Rucks, Spurgeon Rucks’ sister, also wrote several letters to the association asking that they review what had occurred in Catcher in late 1923 as they had in Elaine and Tulsa – specifically the possible lynching of her father, Charles Rucks.⁶⁵² Because of this, the association became involved in helping Bettis and Rucks in their appeals and began writing letters pressuring Governor McRae to further investigate the murder of Charles Rucks.

By coincidence, Scipio Jones, the famed Black lawyer from Little Rock, happened to be in Chicago at the time this article released in the *Defender* and immediately sent word by telegraph to the NAACP that he would be available to work on the appeal for the two men.⁶⁵³ Jones, who was still working on winning freedom for six of the men involved in the *Moore v. Dempsey* case after the 1919 Elaine Massacre, agreed to take on the case provided the association pay the legal costs.⁶⁵⁴ As Sheriff Maxey was in the process of transporting Bettis and

⁶⁵¹ Hopkins, “Mob is Pacified When Death Verdict is Given,” p. 1.

⁶⁵² There are some indications that Tara Rucks – daughter of Charles – wrote to the NAACP to investigate this killing. This was not reported by any Arkansas newspapers, though. Through their legal team, they are said in the local papers to have gotten a grand jury investigation into Rucks’ death. What came of this, if anything, has yet to be found. “Arkansas Governor Promises Inquiry into Murder,” p. 3.

⁶⁵³ Jones being in Chicago when he was retained to work for the men in reported here. “Negroes are Given Stay of Execution,” *Southwest American*, February 15, 1924, p. 1.

⁶⁵⁴ The *Moore v. Dempsey* decision altered due process under the Fourteenth Amendment. The ruling allowed courts to finally hear evidence in criminal cases that defendants had not received due process. The decision came after the violence in Elaine where men had not received full protection by the law. It would take until 1925 for

Rucks to the state penitentiary in Little Rock later that week, Jones began collecting files to take their case before the Supreme Court. With the men set for execution February 15, the lawyer had only three weeks to put together a formal appeal for the men. Most important to this were full transcripts of the trials for both men. Without these transcripts, it would be impossible to ask for a stay of execution from the Arkansas Supreme Court. Jones asked for these crucial records to be sent to his law office in Little Rock but was surprised when he arrived back in the state in early February to find they were not there. As Jones looked all around the office for the transcripts that should have been there, he was shocked to find they could not be located.⁶⁵⁵

Jones sent several of his assistants to the Little Rock post office to determine what had happened to the mail. It was discovered at the post office that the important package had been mysteriously sent to the Mosaic Temple in Little Rock rather than Scipio Jones' law office.⁶⁵⁶ It was explained that this address was provided by Arthur Logan, an assistant for Jones, and therefore the post office was not at fault. Gathering the documents late in the afternoon on February 14, Jones and his men were barely able to reach the Arkansas Supreme Court to ask for a stay of execution before their offices closed for the day at 5:00 p.m. With all the documents in place, Jones hand delivered a formal stay of execution letter from the Arkansas Supreme Court to Warden Clifton E. Evans of Little Rock penitentiary at 6:00 p.m. the night before the men were to be executed.⁶⁵⁷ If the transcript at the post office had not been located, or if Jones had been unable to reach the prison before daybreak on Friday morning, "the two men would have

Scipio Jones to get all the men associated with the trial out of jail. William H. Pruden III. "Cracking Open the Door: Moore v. Dempsey and the Fight for Justice," in *The Elaine Massacre and Arkansas*, ed. Guy Lancaster (Little Rock: Butler Center Books, 2018).

⁶⁵⁵ The complete narrative of how Scipio Jones lost this paperwork can be found here. "Negroes are Given Stay of Execution," p. 1.

⁶⁵⁶ It is unclear whether this was a genuine mistake or a nefarious plot to have the men murdered without an appeal. Jones seemed to believe the latter.

⁶⁵⁷ "Death Penalty Postponed for Negro Slayers," *Fort Smith Times Record*, February 14, 1924, p. 3.

undoubtedly gone to the electric chair without an appeal.”⁶⁵⁸ Warden Evans appeared disappointed that Jones reached him in time, telling reporters, “I was all set and ready for the double execution...we’d finished working on the chair Thursday afternoon.”⁶⁵⁹ It was reported that Bettis had even had the crown of his head shaved in preparation for the electric chair.⁶⁶⁰ With this stay of execution, Scipio Jones was allowed twenty days to prepare a brief for the attorney general.

News that the men had their executions pushed back angered local whites. Reports of a possible demonstration of this anger at the Fort Smith jail were written by newspapers but nothing came of it.⁶⁶¹ The day after, the *Van Buren Press Argus* reported:

Had there been a shadow of doubt either one of these negroes having assaulted Mrs. Latimer, or the least doubt that either one or both of them did not participate in her brutal murder, then there would have been a moral as well as legal excuse for seeking a new hearing for them. But there was no doubt, nor can there ever be any doubt of their guilt. There is not a citizen in Crawford county, including our law-abiding colored people, what will tell your that these two negroes are as guilty as it is possible for one to be and every delay in the date of their execution only fans race hatreds and resentment against the methods and practices under which the worst criminals may escape.⁶⁶²



Image Eleven: ‘Mug Shot’ of Will Bettis Days Before His Execution.⁶⁶³

⁶⁵⁸ “Negroes are Given Stay of Execution,” p. 1.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁰ “Condemned Negroes Stood in Shadow of Death Chair,” *Van Buren Press Argus*, February 22, 1924, p. 1.

⁶⁶¹ “Negro Rapists Secure Stay of Death Sentence,” *Van Buren Press Argus*, February 15, 1924, p. 1.

⁶⁶² “Condemned Black Denied Rehearing By Supreme Court,” *Van Buren Press Argus*, May 9, 1924, p. 1.

⁶⁶³ Lucius Jewel Acklin Scrapbook (Electrocution Records), box 1, folder 2, MC 1182, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

Bettis and Rucks had their appeals heard by the Supreme Court in early May of 1924.⁶⁶⁴ Scipio Jones argued before the court that Act 258, which allowed for a quick trial, had not been applicable since Sheriff Maxey had not asked for Judge Cochran to intervene to stop mob violence. With the court overruling this notion, Jones turned to arguing that he had met privately with John Henry Clay and the boy had agreed to testify that he had been coerced into testifying. As this testimony was the primary evidence against the two men, it was necessary for a new trial that did not include this falsified testimony. The Arkansas court did not accept this either and with that, set a final execution date for the men on June 27, 1924. Their only legal recourse at that point was to ask for a stay of execution by order of the governor, which was quickly dismissed by McRae. For the two men, there was little hope left. They remained in the Little Rock jail for the next month waiting for the hour they would be executed. The night before their executions, Bettis and Rucks were said to have not left their cells, preferring to read their bibles and pray for mercy. In the early hours of the next morning, the pair were led to the electric chair. Before twelve witnesses and prison officials, the men had their death sentence carried out. When asked if they had any final words, neither said anything - both maintained innocence until the end.⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶⁴ "Negro Rapists Denied New Trial By Supreme Court," p. 1.

⁶⁶⁵ A narrative of the last few days of the men's lives are provided here. "Bettis and Rucks Meet Death in Electric Chair," *Van Buren Press Argus*, July 4, 1924, p. 1.

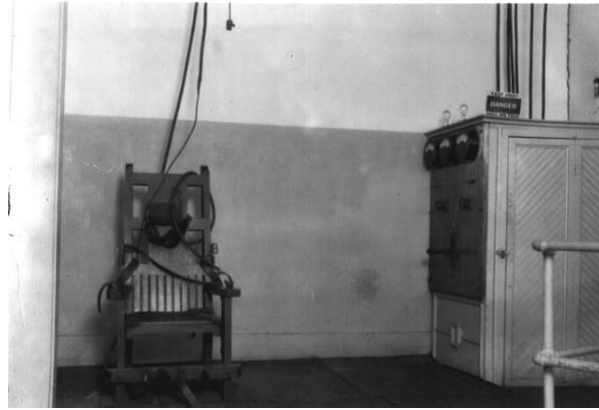


Image Twelve: The Electric Chair used in Little Rock from 1913 to 1964. It was said to have been made from the same wood of the hanging gallows it replaced.⁶⁶⁶

John Henry Clay, the fourteen-year-old-boy who had been the star witness against Bettis and Rucks, had been held in the Crawford County Jail since his arrest on December 30.⁶⁶⁷ As he was not able to afford legal representation, C.M. Wofford was appointed as his defense counsel for the case.⁶⁶⁸ Clay, despite his young age, was still up for possible execution due to the severity of the crime. Considering he had testified as the state's star witness against Bettis and Rucks, was so young, and had not committed any of the violence himself it was assumed by newspaper reports that he would be dealt with far more leniently. This would not prove to be the case, however, as his lawyer extended a plea deal to the state that was quickly turned down. Clay had agreed to plead guilty in return for only a second-degree murder charge – hoping to skip trial completely. The state refused to work with him on such a plea if it did not include a minimum of first-degree murder. As those were the worst charges he could face even if found guilty, he had little choice but to plead not guilty and try his luck at trial.⁶⁶⁹

⁶⁶⁶ 104 executions in chair from 1923 to 1948. Image at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Old_Sparky.jpg.

⁶⁶⁷ "Johnnie Clay to be Tried Early in Present Term," *Southwest American*, March 11, 1924, p. 1.

⁶⁶⁸ "Life Imprisonment Given Johnnie Clay By Verdict of Crawford County Jury," p. 1.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

The day of the trial, court began at 8:30 a.m. Dave Partain, the same prosecutor who helped convict Bettis and Rucks, altered his opening statement only slightly to provide the incriminating details of how Clay had voluntarily aided the murder of Effie.⁶⁷⁰ He stated that the shotgun used in the murder was willingly provided by Clay for Bettis and Rucks to use in the crime. Clay could have at any point fled and called for help but chose not to. When the act had been committed, he further aided the men by not telling anyone and helping to hide the gun under his bed. Because of this, he deserved the death sentence. The defense essentially pleaded for the mercy of the jury – arguing that Clay had assisted in the act but was a remorseful boy who did not deserve a first-degree murder charge for his actions.⁶⁷¹

Around 1:30 p.m., the state began laying out its case which would rely on only four witnesses. The first three of these, Florence Johnson, Dr. B. L. Bennett, and Jim Johnson had been the same as in the trials for Bettis and Rucks.⁶⁷² They likely offered the same accounts of how Effie had been found and how Clay had confessed in the immediate aftermath. The fourth of these witnesses, Wes Parks, stated he had seen Clay on the road half a mile from the Latimer home just before noon the day of the killing.⁶⁷³ With these brief testimonies, the prosecution rested. All told, the evidence against Clay was minimal. Johnson and Bennett were only able to testify to Effie stating Bettis was the killer – Clay’s name was never mentioned by her. Johnson had elicited a confession from Clay, but only that Rucks had been involved and used his gun, not that he had committed any of the violence himself. Being near the house, alone, did not constitute enough evidence of his participation in the murder. The shotgun found under his bed,

⁶⁷⁰ As with the cases of Bettis and Rucks, no transcripts from this case have been found. A small summary providing the case number and some details can be found here. *Arkansas v. Clay*, Circuit Court of Crawford County, Arkansas Case No. 1596, March 11, 1924. This along with newspaper articles from the period provide the narrative of his trial.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² “Life Imprisonment Given Johnnie Clay,” p. 1.

⁶⁷³ Ibid.

linked to the case because it had a similar missing piece as was found in the Latimer home, was the primary evidence of his involvement in the crime.⁶⁷⁴ With that said, it is unlikely that these examiners – who missed shoe prints and bloody dimes – could accurately determine where the splintered wood in the house had come from.

The case laid out by the state was severely lacking in tangible evidence and could have been picked apart by a seasoned defense attorney who wanted to exonerate their client. Woffard, however, preferred not to contest the state's case.⁶⁷⁵ He elected not to cross-examine any of these four witnesses and shocked the crowd in attendance by not calling on any witnesses for Clay – essentially not providing any defense at all for the fourteen-year-old. Around 3:30 p.m., the all-white and male jury returned to their room for deliberation. After thirty minutes, they returned with a verdict of guilty for first-degree murder, but with the *lenient* recommendation for only a life sentence.⁶⁷⁶

The fourteen-year-old was sent to the Cummins Unit at the Arkansas State Penitentiary on March 25, 1924, where he would be “confined at hard labor for the period of his natural life.”⁶⁷⁷ Sadly, Clay would not live much longer. He escaped on August 6, 1928, when he was nineteen years old.⁶⁷⁸ A reward of twenty-five dollars was issued in return for his capture. He

⁶⁷⁴ Notice how the newspaper intentionally changed Clay's age. Despite giving detailed updates on the trial where it had been clearly stated he was only fourteen. “Johnny Clay, 16-Year-Old Negro Sentenced for Life Prison Term,” *Van Buren Press Argus*, March 14, 1924, p. 1.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁶ The newspaper would claim that Johnny Clay was 16. Prosecutor Partain had made a point to have Clay tell his true age, fourteen, to the crowd at the trials of Bettis and Ruck to lend credence to the fact he had little to do with the actual murder beyond supplying the weapon. “Johnny Clay, 16-Year-Old Negro Sentenced for Life Prison Term,” p. 1.

⁶⁷⁷ “Penitentiary Commitment for John Henry Clay,” *Arkansas Department of Corrections*. All of the subsequent prison files on John Henry Clay were sent to me through email by Cindy Murphy of the Arkansas Department of Corrections on September 20, 2020.

⁶⁷⁸ In a letter from Warden T. C. Coghill to Captain S. L. Todhunter of Little Rock, Coghill commands Todhunter to keep an eye out for Clay who had recently escaped. The Warden mentioned “I think that he will try to beat his way back to Van Buren.” Letter from T. C. Coghill to S. L. Todhunter, August 2, 1928, *Arkansas Department of Corrections*.

was on the run for several days before he was caught.⁶⁷⁹ After being returned to the prison, Clay was given five lashes and his workload was to be closely supervised.⁶⁸⁰ Clay would later be found days later, on August 16, 1928, dead in the field, allegedly from being overworked. A letter was sent to his father at “Kecher, Ark” informing him of the news.⁶⁸¹

Prison officials claimed his body had not been found for several days and thus it was too damaged by the elements to ascertain how he had died. This seems unlikely; however, since Clay had recently escaped and was being kept under close watch. If he had been missing several days, they would have surely assumed he was attempting to escape again. Also, Clay had been assigned on cattle guard during the week of his death which was one of the easier tasks for a nineteen-year-old used to manual labor. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know exactly what happened to Clay. It seems three scenarios are possible: 1) he truly was overworked and died due to physical exhaustion; 2) he was purposefully killed as retribution for his escape attempt and left to rot in the field; or 3) he committed suicide as a final act of protest. Either way, the outcome for John Henry Clay, like William Bettis and Spurgeon Rucks before him, was one of death and despair.

Bettis, Rucks, and Clay had little chance of winning against the state in these speedy sham trials. With poor defense lawyers, racist language being admitted, and prejudiced jury pools, the lack of physical evidence mattered little in the final judgements. Act 258, although considered a rousing success by officials of this case, did little to keep any of the Black citizens of Catcher from experiencing mob violence. Instead, the law appeased white citizens of the

⁶⁷⁹ In a letter to various sheriffs around Arkansas, S. L. Todhunter gave a detailed description of Clay for others to be on the lookout for. He added “this subject is not bright, mentally, and likely has gone to his father, Henry Clay, at Catcher Arkansas, or in that vicinity.” Little did he know, the Clay family had left Catcher right after the incident his son would be put on trial for. Letter from S. L. Todhunter to Arkansas Sheriffs, August 2, 1928.

⁶⁸⁰ “Punishment Report of John Henry Clay,” *Arkansas Department of Corrections*, August 14, 1928.

⁶⁸¹ It is unclear whether Henry Clay ever received this letter about his son. It appears to have been sent back. Letter from Claude A. Brown to Henry Clay, August 16, 1928, *Arkansas Department of Corrections*.

county in their thirst for quick vengeance by carrying out swift death sentences but had no effect on inhibiting violence against Blacks in the area. The law was a way for the local communities to transform illegitimate lynchings into legitimized violence perpetrated by the state behind the veil of credibility and fairness. In reality, whether it had been a lynching or a speedy death sentence, the violence was still racially motivated, and the fate of death was inescapable for these men.

While state officials and newspaper editors would retroactively proclaim this case as a progressive win for Blacks (as theoretically they could have been found not guilty), it was always known what the actual outcome would be at these trials. There can be little doubt that if the men had been found innocent of killing Effie Latimer, they would have experienced mob violence once again aimed towards themselves and their families.⁶⁸² Realistically, though, these cases were predicated on long-standing racist sentiments and were just an extension of the mob violence already seen in prior lynching cases. Unfortunately for Bettis, Rucks, and Clay their names became associated with the murder of Effie Latimer and, as a result, they were made an example of by certain white community members of the town. By sentencing the men to death in just over seven days - with deliberations under ten minutes each - it was clear that white authority in the region was just as influential in the courtroom as it had been over homemade gallows.

⁶⁸² The eleven men charged with nightriding would experience this as well. The *Van Buren Press Argus* would note that if they were found innocent and tried to return to the town, they would likely face the “temper of their white neighbors.” “Colony Negroes Flee From Wrath of Whites,” p. 1.

Chapter Six – Act 112 and The Trial of the Eleven ‘Nightriders’

With the capital murder trials of Bettis, Rucks, and Clay completed by early March 1924, there was only one case from Catcher still left to be adjudicated – the trial of the eleven nightriders. These Black men (Tandy Ferguson, Charles Posey, Alfred Richardson, Dempsey Richardson, Earnest Richardson, Gideon Richardson, Gus Richardson, Ladell Richardson, Roosevelt Richardson, George Ricks, and Charley Shelton) had been held in the Crawford County jail since their arrest on December 30, 1923. Following the murder of Charles Rucks that morning, the group - led by Gus Richardson - had gathered weapons and fortified the Black log cabin owned by Charles Shelton. Understanding that local whites would violently force their families to leave the region, the men courageously stood their ground and only surrendered when a state-of-the-art machine gun from the national guard armory was wheeled in front of their position. Upon surrendering, the men were charged with Act 112 which looked to “suppress and punish nightriding” – the exact thing the men had been attempting to defend against.⁶⁸³ With no homes to return to in Crawford County and fear of white retribution if freed, a majority of the men decided against posting bail and waited out the remaining time before their trial inside the county jail in Van Buren.⁶⁸⁴

Examining the legal measures used against these eleven ‘nightriders’ helps, once again, reiterate how rural communities used state law to exercise white authority over minority groups they sought to intimidate when extralegal tactics failed. Act 112, the justification at trial for charging the eleven men, had been originally passed in 1909 by the Arkansas General Assembly

⁶⁸³ Acts of Arkansas of the General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 1909 (Little Rock: General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 1909), 315.

⁶⁸⁴ Two of the eleven posted bail two weeks after being jailed. It is unclear which of the men they were or where they went. It is possible that the other men were not allowed to post bail but newspapers state that could have. “Negroes Flee in Fear From Catcher Homes,” p. 1.

as a way to curb the practice of nightriding.⁶⁸⁵ Nightriding (or whitecapping) had been a problem since the Reconstruction era and was typically defined as extralegal acts of violence anonymously carried out at night.⁶⁸⁶ Most infamously, whites in the first iteration of the Ku Klux Klan used robes and masks to anonymously intimidate Blacks in the post-war south. Nightriding is difficult to comprehensively define, however, as any single explanation of the term often overlooks the complex intersection of race and labor in rural cases.⁶⁸⁷ Guy Lancaster has attempted to define nightriding, labeling it as “acts designed to intimidate others (from violent assaults carried out by vigilante groups to the simple posting of notices or transmission of threats through the mail), employed for a variety of motivations (from economic retaliation to moral regulation, or at least claims of such), and perpetrated by a range of people (from the landless and jobless to small farmers and much more prosperous members of the local community).”⁶⁸⁸ Clearly, nightriding is no easy term to pin down.

Nightriding was not a solely racialized phenomenon; however, as Jeannie Whayne has pointed out. In her study of the Mississippi Delta, she found that “the wrath of white nightriders was often directed at [white] planters.”⁶⁸⁹ Anonymous violence, in these cases, could be employed as a weapon to punch up as well as punch down for poor white community members looking to alleviate their economic and social problems.⁶⁹⁰ Lashing out against elite whites

⁶⁸⁵ “Night Riding Must Not Be Tolerated in Arkansas,” p. 4; “Stop Night Riders,” *Fort Smith Times*, January 17, 1909, p. 1; “Among the Law Makers,” *Arkansas Democrat*, January 21, 1909, p. 6; “Night Riding Bill a Law,” *Arkansas Democrat*, April 7, 1909, p. 6; “May Prosecute under New Act,” *Arkansas Gazette*, May 16, 1909, p. 1.

⁶⁸⁶ “Act 112 of 1909,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, 2022, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/act-112-of-1909-14368/>.

⁶⁸⁷ The same has been said of lynchings. Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, 182.

⁶⁸⁸ Lancaster, “Night Riding Must Not Be Tolerated in Arkansas,” 29-30.

⁶⁸⁹ Jeannie M. Whayne, “What is the Mississippi Delta? A Historian’s Perspective,” in *Defining the Delta: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on the Lower Mississippi River Delta*, ed. Janelle Collins (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2015), 128.

⁶⁹⁰ Christopher Waldrep, *Night Riders: Defending Community in the Black Patch, 1890–1915* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 7-10; Suzanne Marshall, *Violence in the Black Patch of Kentucky and Tennessee* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 98-100. White on white use of nightriding was not confined to

(under disguise) was a common tactic employed by poor whites in the rural south to force action from planters who otherwise would have been reluctant to address their concerns. These cases of white-on-white nightriding, which threatened to hurt planters' pocketbooks, provided the strongest rationale for why the legislature passed laws in the early twentieth century to attempt to curb the use of anonymous violence. On top of this, state officials understood that reports of such violence would circulate nationally as they had for the Black Patch region in Kentucky. As the *Arkansas Gazette* put it "[if Arkansas] wants desirable immigrants from other states and from Europe; it needs outside capital for the development of its resources, and it needs labor to gather its harvests. It can get none of these blessings if night riding and anonymous threatening letters and arson and violence prevail."⁶⁹¹ For largely economic reasons, Act 112 passed with little opposition.

A cursory reading of the 1909 act lends itself to the notion it was passed as a piece of progressive legislation to protect all Arkansas citizens from vigilante violence:

[Act 112 is] an act to suppress and punish nightriding and other riotous conspiracies... [such as] going forth armed and disguised for the purpose of intimidating or alarming any person... [the law also prevents the sending of any] letter, notice or other written or printed communication intended to, or which by its nature, contents or superscription would, naturally alarm or intimidate any person.⁶⁹²

Similar to Act 258, Act 112 was often interpreted in more nefarious ways as an instrument to uphold elite white authority against minorities. While the law would ultimately prosecute those intimidating white planters, it did little to stop the most infamous cases of nightriding against Black Americans. Violent intimidation against Blacks, by and large, endured

Arkansas. Waldrep and Marshall make a similar point about the class-based use of nightriding in their work on extralegal violence in the Black Patch region.

⁶⁹¹ "Night Riding Must Not Be Tolerated in Arkansas," p. 4.

⁶⁹² Acts of Arkansas of the General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 1909 (Little Rock: General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 1909), 315–17.

long after 1909 despite the *Arkansas Gazette*'s opinion that the new legislation would be "an effective deterrent to any future manifestations of the night rider spirit in Arkansas."⁶⁹³ In truth, the act was rather ineffective at stopping cases of anonymous violence.⁶⁹⁴ Soon after the law was passed, for instance, a group of three white men near Cabot transported a Black man into the woods where they whipped him and fired thirteen shots near his body.⁶⁹⁵ When the man escaped, the group turned their attention to threatening several other Black homes before the sheriff was called. The men were initially charged with Act 112 but were ultimately not convicted – setting a precedent that white-on-Black violence would rarely be prosecuted. Few other cases of white-on-Black nightriding were ever brought forward in the state's history.

Extralegal intimidation in rural areas where jobs or land were scarce continued well into the twentieth century, most notably in the Ozarks. Historians have often overlooked nightriding in these areas, preferring to focus on cases of more definable and explicit violence like lynchings in urban areas. As shown in earlier chapters, though, the posting of anonymous notices was a well-established (and successful) tactic used by white nightriders in the Ozarks hoping to intimidate Black citizens to flee rural communities and leave their valuable properties behind.⁶⁹⁶ The mere threat of violence, in these cases, was often enough to encourage relocation for Black citizens and must also be understood as a form of nightriding that was seldom prosecuted under Act 112. Similarly, in the Arkansas Delta, white tenant farmers often used anonymous violence against Black sharecroppers who were willing to accept lower wages and thereby threatened

⁶⁹³ "Among the Law Makers." *Arkansas Democrat*, January 21, 1909, p. 6.

⁶⁹⁴ Jeannie Wayne, *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth Century Arkansas* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 52.

⁶⁹⁵ "May Prosecute under New Act," *Arkansas Gazette*, May 16, 1909, p.1.

⁶⁹⁶ Morgan, *Black Hillbillies of the Arkansas Ozarks*; Froelich and Zimmerman, "Total Eclipse"; Lancaster, "Racial Cleansing in the Arkansas River Valley"; Harper, *White Man's Heaven*; Campney, "The Missouri Ozarks and Beyond, 1894-1930."

poor whites' economic interests.⁶⁹⁷ The legal system of the state was less concerned about prosecuting these anonymous threats lobbed at Black citizens, caring far more about cases of explicit class-based violence perpetrated against white planters that threatened the state's economy on a much larger scale.

While Act 112 was ineffective at preventing cases of white-on-Black nightriding, it was sometimes employed as a legal tool to keep African Americans subordinate in communities. This misuse came from the wording inside the act which called for charges to be brought upon any group found "intimidating or alarming" others in their community.⁶⁹⁸ This phrasing was problematic when considering whites in the south often found any action taken by a group of Blacks to be intimidating and a cause for alarm. Because of this, nightriding charges were at times leveled against the very victims of anonymous terrorism the law was touted to protect.⁶⁹⁹ Most infamously, as Grif Stockley has pointed out, after the Elaine Massacre of 1919, Phillips County charged 122 African Americans with "crimes ranging from murder to nightriding, a crime that had its own ironic implications, since in Phillips County it had been brought on behalf of planters against whites who tried to run off their Black labor."⁷⁰⁰ Likewise, Brian Mitchell recently uncovered the indictments from Phillips County, which formally charged these Black men with "unlawfully and feloniously confederating for the purpose of going forth at night armed to commit a felonious act" – a charge of nightriding that was only punishable under Act 112.⁷⁰¹

⁶⁹⁷ Jeannie Whayne, *Delta Empire: Lee Wilson and the Transformation of Agriculture in the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011), 121.

⁶⁹⁸ Acts of Arkansas of the General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 1909 (Little Rock: General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, 1909), 315.

⁶⁹⁹ Lancaster, "Night Riding Must Not Be Tolerated in Arkansas," 47.

⁷⁰⁰ Stockley, Mitchell, and Lancaster, *Blood in their Eyes*, 146.

⁷⁰¹ Brian K. Mitchell, "When the Depths Don't Give Up Their Dead: A Discussion on New Primary Sources and How They Are Reshaping Debate on the Elaine Massacre." In *Elaine Massacre and Arkansas: A Century of Atrocity and Resistance, 1819-1919*, ed. Guy Lancaster (Little Rock: Butler Center Books, 2018), 213.

The ironic use of nightriding charges against the Black citizens of Elaine helps reveal the true purpose of Act 112, which was to shield elite whites from unrest - whether economic or racial - that came from below.⁷⁰² Interestingly, however, in the case of Elaine, white planters saw these economic and racial concerns collide with one another – having lost a majority of their workforce right before the harvest when poor whites ran off their Black labor force. In cases where economic and racial goals misaligned, it was more prudent to use legal measures to keep Blacks in their lowest place in society rather than punish poor whites who had used anonymous violence to hurt these planters’ bottom line. While planters would voice their irritation with these white nightriders, they would not bring charges against them as they would with Black citizens.

Later uses of Act 112 demonstrate that the law could be loosely interpreted in a variety of ways to help protect the economic interests of the state. When Missouri and North Arkansas Railroad (M&NA) workers went on a strike near Harrison in 1921 to protest a new twenty percent wage cut, no one expected that the strike would last for two years.⁷⁰³ Locals understood the importance of the railroad in connecting their rural economy to the rest of the country and considered a long-term strike as potentially fatal. White citizens from Searcy and Harrison (many dues-paying members of the local KKK branch) formed protective leagues to guard the railroad from the vandalism of strikers. By 1923, white locals were so fed up with the actions of the railroad union that they formed a one-thousand-man force to violently break the strike.⁷⁰⁴ On January 16, the mob patrolled the streets of Harrison with guns in hand before turning their

⁷⁰² In the 1930s and 1940s members of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union would also be charged with nightriding when posting strike notices during the night. “Act 112 of 1909” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, May 9, 2022. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/act-112-of-1909-14368/#:~:text=Governor%20George%20Donaghey%20signed%20the,various%20prison%20terms%20and%20fines.>

⁷⁰³ Orville Thrasher Gooden, *The Missouri and North Arkansas Railroad Strike* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1926); Blevins, “The Strike and the Still,” 405–425; Barnes, *The Ku Klux Klan in 1920s Arkansas*, 79-85; “Harrison Railroad Riot,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, January 23, 2023. <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/harrison-railroad-riot-3700/>.

⁷⁰⁴ Blevins, “The Strike and the Still,” 405–425

attention to the homes of leaders of the strike. When the group arrived at the home of Ed Gregor, a white leader of the union, they were momentarily dispersed when he fired a shotgun in the air. While he made no attempt to injure the group, the mob returned and fired their own shots managing only to shoot one of their own. Gregor was, nevertheless, arrested for the incident and charged under Act 112 for causing alarm to others.⁷⁰⁵ In a sad irony, later that night three masked men pulled Gregor from his jail cell and hanged him under the large railroad bridge just outside the city. Other strikers were similarly pulled from their homes and beaten in retaliation. Most of the railroad strikers fled the next day and the bitter strike on the M&NA Railroad soon ended.

Samuel Gompers, the President of the American Federation of Labor, appealed to Governor McRae for a full investigation into the mob violence.⁷⁰⁶ The ordeal, it had to be said, was one of the more explicit examples of nightriding that Act 112 claimed to want to prevent - men in masks lynching a man at night without any oversight from the state. While McRae did concede and appoint a committee to investigate the violence, all seven members of the group were known to be members of the same KKK branch who had helped orchestrate the strike-breaking mob days prior.⁷⁰⁷ Unsurprisingly, the committee held no one accountable for the lynching and dismissed all charges - Governor McRae accepted the findings. No nightriding charges were ever brought against the masked lynchers but Act 112 was used to indict several of the strikers who had posted notices at night in the days prior, the justification being that the anonymous notices about the strike had caused the panic that ultimately led to the violent

⁷⁰⁵ "M. & N. A. Strikers Indicted at Searcy," *Arkansas Democrat*, January 16, 1923, p. 1.

⁷⁰⁶ Kenneth C. Barnes, "100 Years Ago in Arkansas, 1,000-Man Mob Crushed a Railroad Strike at Harrison," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, January 23, 2023. <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2023/jan/23/100-years-ago-in-arkansas-1000-angry-men-crushed/>

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid.

altercation.⁷⁰⁸ Even in cases of strictly white-on-white violence, Act 112 was primarily used as a legal tool to keep the status quo – ensuring the state economy ran smoothly for those in power.

Understanding how Act 112 had historically been implemented is useful when examining how it was ultimately used in *Catcher* against these eleven men. While the actions of local whites undeniably fell under the category of actions punishable by the act – anonymously posting threats, running Black citizens from their homes, and burning buildings – it is clear why these actions were never prosecuted. Act 112 was never written as a device to protect Black citizens at the bottom of the economic ladder against violence, because state and local officials saw little economic gain in protecting Black citizens. On the contrary, it was the white elite of Crawford County who would have the most to gain economically from running Black citizens out of *Catcher*. The area was becoming less reliant on Black labor in agriculture, and white citizens wanted wage paying farm jobs that were still needed. importantly, though, the large amounts of land owned by a small number of these Black citizens was extremely valuable and potentially held natural gas reserves beneath. Access to this land for cheap made it financially beneficial for some whites to support this use of anonymous violence against the town's Black community.

In this way, Act 112 was a malleable legal tool that had the potential to inhibit or encourage violence depending on whom such actions benefited. For Black Arkansans, cases of anonymous violence and nightriding endured long after its passage for a mixture of reasons involving race, labor, and economics. As shown in *Elaine* and *Harrison*, though, when group violence was used as a weapon of the lower class to upset the normal economic order, it was quickly prosecuted through the court system. For that reason, it should be no surprise that the

⁷⁰⁸ Kenneth C. Barnes is working on a new book with University of Arkansas Press about this incident entitled *A Railroad War in the Ozarks: The Missouri and North Arkansas Railway Strike, 1921-1923*. He graciously sent me some of his notes to help craft this insight into how Act 112 was used in this particular case.

nightriding act ended up being the justification for charging the eleven men in Catcher who had barricaded themselves with a small number of weapons to push back on the violent racial cleansing that was happening inside their community. Black advocates easily saw through this racialized use of the law. The *Chicago Defender* noted the irony:

No indictment has been drawn against the white men who shot and killed Charles Rucks, aged father of one of the condemned men. He was shot down by a mob when he refused to admit that his son committed the murder. The eleven men who barricaded themselves in a farmhouse and defied the mob until the militia arrived have been indicted under the 'night riding act,' a law that applies to every member of our Race who is considered disorderly after dark, but exempts the Ku Klux, who have a notorious record in this state.⁷⁰⁹

It mattered little that the Black citizens of Catcher had been the true targets of nightriding and anonymous violence. In cases like this, the precedent was clear that state law would always seek to protect the elite white authority and never Black citizens of the state.

It was difficult, though, to know how Act 112 would specifically be used at trial against the eleven men. After the men had been forced to surrender on December 30, prosecutors were unsure if they had enough evidence to win a nightriding case against the men. In the cases of Elaine and Harrison, shots had been fired and white citizens had died because of violence, but that was not the case in Catcher. Only Gus Richardson, the leader of the group, was purported to have even used his weapon in an aggressive way against other citizens of the community – pointing it at the driver of a truck that had stopped in front of the cabin. It was unclear what laws were broken by the other ten men who had been inside the Black-owned log cabin. The first indictment against the eleven men was brought forward on March 10, 1924. At the indictment hearing, ambiguous charges were brought forward against the men claiming they had intimidated and caused alarm to the white community. The three attorneys for the men, C. M. Wofford, W.

⁷⁰⁹ Hopkins, "Mob is Pacified When Death Verdict is Given," p. 1.

H. Neal, and G. C. Hardin, filed a demurrer claiming that the vagueness of the nightriding charges meant they could not be reasonably tried and thus the case needed to be thrown out completely.⁷¹⁰ Most notably, that it was unclear which white citizens were bringing forward the charges.⁷¹¹ Judge James Cochran (the same judge who had presided over Bettis, Clay, and Rucks' trials) took this under advisement. While he would overrule the motion that the case should be thrown out, Cochran agreed the indictments against the eleven men were faulty and elected a grand jury to investigate and re-indict the men on more concrete terms.⁷¹²

On March 13, a second round of arraignment proceedings began. The eleven men were re-indicted, more specifically this time, with violating Act 112 by using group violence to intimidate others in the community. By referencing the precedent of cases using Act 112, it was much easier for prosecutors to argue that a long prison sentence against all eleven men was justified. The charges leveled against the men were modified and made specifically about nightriding:

The Grand Jury of Crawford County, in the name and by the authority of the State of Arkansas, accuse [the eleven men], of the crime of night riding committed as follows: being more than two persons, did willfully, unlawfully, feloniously and knowingly unite, confederate and bind themselves together for the purpose of going forth armed for the purpose of willfully, unlawfully, and feloniously intimidating and alarming W. E. Watson, Robert Walker, Jake Ritchie, K. Putman, W.S. Rogers, Jim Wagoner, Cliff Howell, and C. F. Willman, and each of them, and other white citizens and people (whose names are to the Grand Jury unknown) in and about the community of Catcher in said County and State and against the peace and dignity of the State of Arkansas.⁷¹³

⁷¹⁰ "Demurrer," *Arkansas vs. Richardson, et al*, case 1589, Crawford County Circuit Court, March 14, 1924. These records were found in the Logan County Courthouse with the rest of the trial records concerning the eleven men charged with nightriding.

⁷¹¹ "New Indictment Against Negroes Held For Riot," *Southwest American*, March 14, 1924, p. 10.

⁷¹² The *Van Buren Press Argus* would cover this legal narrative at the same time it was covering Clay's trial. "Johnny Clay, 16-Year-Old Negro Sentenced For Life Prison Term," p. 1; "Demurrer," *Arkansas vs. Richardson, et al*.

⁷¹³ "Indictment," *Arkansas v. Richardson, et al.*, Circuit Court of Crawford County, Arkansas, March 19, 1924, 6.

Hearing these charges, attorneys for the men motioned for the eleven be tried separately. Judge Cochran agreed to this motion and the trial dates were set for the following month inside Crawford County. Despite the men requesting to seek separate trials, they would still combine their resources to keep the three attorneys in their united defense.⁷¹⁴

On March 19, the defense came before Judge Cochran to motion for a change of venue to somewhere else in the state that would be less prejudicial towards the eleven men. Defense attorneys argued that Effie Latimer's murder had "inflamed the minds of the individuals of the County to a very high degree, and since she was murdered by members of the negro race the feeling has run among white people against [the eleven men]."⁷¹⁵ This case was extremely well known throughout Crawford County and thus would impact a large amount of potential jurors in the immediate area – especially because white citizens of the county likely held all Black citizens of the town responsible after the murder.⁷¹⁶ Proof of this larger animosity towards the Black community of Catcher, attorneys stated, could be found in the anonymous notices posted outside Black buildings in the days following the incident. By asking community members to leave the town or "suffer the consequences," it was clear that all Black citizens in Catcher were being collectively blamed for the actions of Bettis, Clay, and Rucks. Gus Richardson, in particular, had been singled out with such a notice put inside his family's mailbox.⁷¹⁷ The defense reiterated that these threats were considered genuine, so much so that "in response to said notices and their feelings of unsafety to themselves, their families and their property, all of the said defendants who were not confined in jail did remove from said community and from said County, and the families of all these defendants who were in jail, did also remove, and the negroes generally from

⁷¹⁴ "Catcher Negroes Trial is Opened at Paris Monday," *Southwest American*, April 14, 1924, p. 1.

⁷¹⁵ "Motion for Change of Venue," 15.

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid*, 15-16.

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid*, 16.

the settlement where these defendants resided...so that all of the defendants are now residents outside of Crawford County.”⁷¹⁸

These anonymous notices, and the actions taken by Black community members to heed their warnings, demonstrated how impossible it would be for the men to gain a fair trial inside the county lines. The attorneys concluded their motion stating that the eleven men:

believe that the feeling in Crawford County at this time, growing out of such circumstances is so intense against them personally and against their defense in this case, that they cannot get a fair and impartial trial in the County, and that in the name of justice this case should be removed from this county to another one.⁷¹⁹

Judge Cochran was persuaded by this argument and the men procured a change of venue. The case was moved roughly forty miles southeast to Paris, Arkansas closer to the home of Judge Cochran. Because the hearing was moved to a fairer location and the men had time to prepare, the potential for a positive outcome was far better for these men than it had been for Bettis, Clay, or Rucks.

The trials for the eleven men began in Paris, Arkansas on April 14, 1924. The prosecution decided to try the case against Gus Richardson first, likely believing that he would be the easiest to convict on nightriding charges. Gaining a guilty verdict against the leader of the group could help potentially lead to plea deals for the rest of the men if he was given a harsh enough sentence. While no transcripts of these trials have been found, it is possible using later appeals documentation and newspaper reports to understand the narrative of that day from the eleven men’s point of view. Gus Richardson pled not guilty to the charges and had several Black community members come to his defense at trial: Tandy Coggs, Dora Ricks, Silas Ricks, and his wife, Katie Richardson. He even had one white community member, George Daugherty, provide

⁷¹⁸ Ibid, 17.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid, 18.

testimony in his defense.⁷²⁰ The prosecution's witnesses consisted, almost entirely, of the men that were stopped by Richardson on the road. Interestingly, it was revealed at trial that the truck (which had thirteen men and several boys in it) had been driving from Van Buren into Catcher to try to find out more about Bettis, Clay, and Rucks. They likely wanted to help ensure retribution against these men using tactics much more in line with the nightriding charges Richardson was currently facing.

The trial against Gus Richardson only took a few hours. He was allowed to put forward his narrative of the day, which reiterated how white community members had forced all Black men to assemble together at Stalling's store early that morning. Once there, they were intimidated and asked to come forward about anything they knew of Effie Latimer's murder.⁷²¹ Only after it became public that Bettis, Rucks, and Clay had confessed were the men allowed to leave. Upon arriving home, these Black community members heard news that Charlie Rucks had just been murdered. At that point, Gus Richardson, Charles Posey, Tandy Ferguson, and George Ricks decided to band together to gain some control over the situation and "investigate the killing" themselves.⁷²² With guns in hand, they had an exchange with the truckful of white citizens – driven by W. E. Watson - from Van Buren. The men, soon after, arrived at the log cabin house owned by Charley Shelton. Once there, they were joined by Shelton, Ernest Richardson, and Gid Richardson. The men sent away their wives and children for safety, but four teenagers, Alfred Richardson, Roosevelt Richardson, Ladell Richardson, and Demp Richardson wanted to stay and help. While the eleven men were discussing what to do next, a mob of around

⁷²⁰ The complete list of witnesses for the prosecution and defense can be found in the trial documents. *Arkansas v. Richardson et. al*, 22.

⁷²¹ While transcripts of this trial do not exist. The files from the later appeal to the state Supreme Court are likely very similar. *Richardson v. Arkansas*, p. 929.

⁷²² Ibid.

150 white citizens surrounded the building.⁷²³ Unbeknownst to Richardson and the other men, the truck they had previously stopped had just informed the sheriff that Black community members were about to incite a race war.⁷²⁴ With only six shotguns and three pistols, the men knew they had little chance to fight. White citizens informed them the national guard were also on the way. Hearing this, the men negotiated a surrender.

This narrative presented by the defense did little to impact the jury. The prosecution, on the other hand, provided explosive testimony that the men were indeed attempting to incite a race war in the town between all white and Black citizens. Race was at the forefront of the State's case, as demonstrated in the documents filed before trial which read, "the defendants are all negroes, charged with uniting, confederating, and banding together to intimidate and alarm white persons," essentially stating that nightriding charges were necessary because Black citizens had intimidated whites by banding together.⁷²⁵ Witnesses for the state testified to this belief that a larger race war was being planned. One witness stated that, "on the particular Sunday these negroes were arrested, the church bells rang at an unusually early hour," undoubtedly signaling to the men of the Black community what time they needed to assemble with weapons.⁷²⁶ Another witness, Will Brown, testified that he had been stopped along the road by the men and asked if he had any weapons on him. The men in the truck that was later stopped stated they felt very unsafe around this group of armed Black men as it was clear they were plotting something larger.⁷²⁷

⁷²³ This number ranged from 100 to 200 based on different testimonies. *Richardson v. Arkansas*, p. 929-930.

⁷²⁴ The caller, likely W. E. Watson or Cliff Howell, is mentioned in this piece. See "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

⁷²⁵ "Motion for Change of Venue," 15.

⁷²⁶ *Richardson v. Arkansas*, p. 929-930. This is from the later Supreme Court trial but used the same witnesses. It is likely that the same type of case was put forward by the defense.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid*, 930.

Despite the vagueness of this witness testimony, the jury deliberated only twenty minutes before returning a verdict of guilty against Gus Richardson for the crime of nightriding. Judge Cochran sentenced Richardson to one year in the state penitentiary in Little Rock.⁷²⁸ Immediately following Richardson's trial, Charles Posey was tried on the same charges. Posey pled not guilty to the charges before him and faced a similar case from the state. There was very little evidence against any of the men besides Richardson for committing a crime. The jury in Posey's case deliberated thirty-six hours but could not unanimously agree on a verdict. In light of the hung jury, Judge Cochran brought forward the prosecution and defense and asked them to reconsider a plea bargain. The *Arkansas Gazette* reported that the jury, at last vote, had been split nine to four in favor of conviction.⁷²⁹ At this point, the three defense lawyers likely advised Posey to plead guilty of the charges to get a reduced sentence. A plea bargain was worked out between the sides and Posey was given a four-month sentence in the state penitentiary.⁷³⁰ Tandy Ferguson and George Ricks (considered the last two "leaders of the gang") similarly agreed to a plea deal giving them four-month sentences each.⁷³¹ Without these plea deals, it is unclear what would have happened. The state would not have wanted the expense of retrying the case, but it is also possible the jurors would have finally come together and unanimously voted in favor to convict to one year since that was the majority opinion.⁷³²

The cases against the other seven men – Alfred Richardson, Demp Richardson, Earnest Richardson, Gid Richardson, Ladell Richardson, Roosevelt Richardson, and Charles Shelton –

⁷²⁸ The sentencing of the other men in the case besides Gus Richardson are only known because of the *Arkansas Gazette*. The other local newspapers did not report on this. "Catcher Negroes Sentenced to Pen: Leader Convicted and Three Others Plead Guilty at Paris," *Arkansas Gazette*, April 17, 1924, p. 18.

⁷²⁹ Ibid.

⁷³⁰ Ibid.

⁷³¹ Ibid.

⁷³² The expenses of the case became important news for those following the trials. "Negroes' Trial Costs Crawford County \$1,250," *Fort Smith Times Record*, p. 4.

were dismissed (*nolle prosequi*) later that day by the state without enough evidence to try them.⁷³³ It appears that the attorney for the eleven men added this into some sort of backroom deal with the prosecution after the trials for the first four as a way to help save time and money for the state. The prosecution had been able to get prison time for the four leaders of the plan and were willing to bypass the rest of the trials to get these first cases over and done with. As these last seven men were being brought forward to have their charges dismissed, Judge Cochran was said to have “warned that it would be best for them not to go back to the territory around Catcher.”⁷³⁴



*Image Thirteen: Richardson Family at Pleasant Richardson's funeral, August 1945 – Courtesy of Greer Dorsey.*⁷³⁵

The trials of these eleven men are difficult to evaluate without nuance. In some ways, the verdicts were a win from their perspective. Seven of the men had their charges dismissed and three of the men were given sentences far below what the state had been initially pursuing. Even Gus Richardson, for whom the state was seeking ten to fifteen years, could consider himself

⁷³³ “Catcher Negroes Sentenced to Pen” p. 18.

⁷³⁴ Ibid.

⁷³⁵ This picture was provided to me by Greer Dorsey, a living descendant of Earnest Richardson – one of the eleven men charged with this crime. Pleasant Richardson was father of Roosevelt Richardson as well. Dorsey believes Earnest and Roosevelt must be in the picture although it is difficult to conclusively say where.

fortunate to have been given a sentence of just one year after being found guilty. Likewise, the trial had been moved out of the county and the men had been given adequate time to defend themselves in front of a less prejudicial jury. In this way, the trial and legal process appeared legitimate and fair to the men. In other ways, though, the trial had been a sham from the very outset. The charges of nightriding were baseless and never should have been brought forward. The men never engaged in anonymous violence at night to intimidate others in the community. They were, themselves, the victims of nightriding and were trying to defend their property and family in any way possible. Gus Richardson was the only one of the men to have ever even been alleged to have acted violently against other citizens. The charges of nightriding were brought forward simply because Black men had congregated together to push back on white authority in their community. Act 112 became the perfect tool to prosecute these actions because white citizens could genuinely claim they felt alarmed and intimidated at this act of group self-defense. While the trial process would appear credible, fair, and legitimate it was always founded on the notion of white authority and Black subordination. Without these ideas undergirding the entire state legal system, there never would have been a case in the first place.

Fortunately, Gus Richardson had enough resources to continue with this legal fight. On September 29, 1924, Richardson appealed his case before the Supreme Court of Arkansas. Attorneys for Richardson argued that the use of Act 112 in the case was unfounded and thus he deserved to be immediately released. The Supreme Court of Arkansas ruled in favor of Richardson concluding that the State was:

Unable to prove that the appellant feloniously confederated with others to band themselves together to alarm and intimidate the persons named in this indictment...in the absence of any proof tending to show a conspiracy, or concerted action on the part of the appellant and the other defendants named with him...the state has wholly failed to sustain the charge of night riding.⁷³⁶

⁷³⁶ *Richardson v. Arkansas*, p. 929-930.

Richardson was immediately released after serving a little over four months in the state penitentiary – equaling the time by the other three men in the case. This legal win for Richardson and the other men (if considered that) would prove somewhat inconsequential, as the men and their families were still forced to flee the region permanently. The men had been beaten back with overwhelming extrajudicial force when they attempted to defend their homes, land, and community. They had sat in jail for three months awaiting their trials. Even when they were, in some ways, able to successfully lobby for their rights inside the court system, it was clear that the same outcome would still be achieved as none of the men would ever return to their homes inside the town.

A combination of both extralegal and legal measures ensured that these Black citizens would never again live in Catcher, Arkansas. Judge Cochran had warned, and the men well understood, that to return to the town would be risking their lives. The *Van Buren Press Argus* would reiterate this warning:

it is safe to presume that in the event of [the eleven men] being acquitted, none of them will return to their home in the “Colony,” for they know well the temper of their white neighbors and the danger they would expose themselves to by returning to their old haunts.⁷³⁷

These same newspapers would stop reporting on the trial after a majority of the men had their charges dismissed. Neither the *Van Buren Press Argus* nor the *Fort Smith Times Record* would run an article reporting the verdicts of the men besides Gus Richardson.⁷³⁸ They were suspiciously quiet after the ruling, likely attempting to hush up the memory of the incident that had occurred. Instead, the papers focused more heavily on the expense of the trial – finding that

⁷³⁷ “Colony Negroes Flee From Wrath of Whites,” p. 1.

⁷³⁸ Only the *Arkansas Gazette* would report on the verdicts besides Gus Richardson. “Catcher Negroes Sentenced to Pen,” p. 18.

it cost Crawford County \$1,250.25 to charge the men and \$700 to keep them all in jail before the trial.⁷³⁹ Similar to what occurred in Elaine and Tulsa, the incident was forgotten in future editions of these newspapers – almost as if it had never happened.⁷⁴⁰ The newspapers, though, had left their mark on how the trial of the eleven men would be remembered. By reporting on them as Black nightriders who had intimidated local whites and tried to incite a race war, the narrative stuck. It mattered little that the charges had been dropped in most of the cases.

While these eleven men had been unable to defend their homes either by force or through the court system, they still left a hugely important mark on the history of the incident. By taking up weapons and investigating the murder of Charles Rucks, the men forced local whites to respond violently to them. By doing this, they afforded far more documentation of the racial cleansing and extrajudicial violence they were experiencing. Without these trial records from their case and newspaper reports about their defense, much of what is known about the incident (and most of the Black perspective) would have been lost to history. The white narrative, which was already overwhelmingly accepted, would have been the only voice. Later researchers would never have known the exact wording that was used in the anonymous notices telling them to leave. Also, the Black population of Shibley – which endured a racial cleansing during this same period – would have been completely forgotten.

As was likely the case across the rural Jim Crow South in this period, when Blacks complied deferentially to white demands to leave, there was little violence and thus little documentation – making it seem as if no demands to leave had ever been issued. In this way, the eleven men who refused to bend to the will of white authority helped successfully expose the

⁷³⁹ “Negroes’ Trial Costs Crawford County \$1,250,” p. 4.

⁷⁴⁰ Only very recently have accurate articles from these newspapers been released. Thompson, “A 1923 race riot.”

broken, racist system they were having to operate within. A system that could turn to legal measures like Act 112 and Act 258, among many others, as a last resort to keep minority groups in subordinate roles in society when outright violence was ineffective. When Blacks in the South, like these eleven men, courageously banded together for the purposes of self-protection from violence or economic intimidation, they often failed. Crucially, though, they revealed to the rest of the country the systematic inequalities they were facing on a daily basis – even if it took decades for the nation to notice.

Chapter Seven - Rewriting the Narrative of What Just Occurred

With the physical violence in Catcher concluded and the trials still being adjudicated – an ideological struggle emerged over how to explain the racial violence that had just occurred in the town. With the murder of Charles Rucks, the attempted lynching of three men across two counties, the unofficial use of the national guard against the eleven ‘nightriders,’ and the violent expulsion of the Black community from their mortgaged homes, it was necessary for the white community to rationalize why this violence had been necessary. Black advocate groups like The NAACP and *Chicago Defender*, began taking notice of the events occurring near Van Buren and wanted explanations from the county and state over what had occurred. The NAACP, specifically, called on Governor McRae to launch a grand jury investigation into the murder of Charles Rucks.⁷⁴¹ Tara Rucks, the man’s daughter, contacted the NAACP in February of 1924 asking them to investigate her father’s murder as a potential lynching. McRae, knowing the pressure the association could place on him, publicly agreed to such an investigation to be held in March. It appears the investigation never took place but was discussed publicly by the Governor to avoid a backlash against the trials of the men.

The *Chicago Defender*, meanwhile, criticized the way Bettis, Clay, and Rucks were being treated before and during their trials. The Black newspaper suggested the trials were nothing more than ‘southern quick trials,’ or use of the court system to avoid lynchings in name only.⁷⁴² As a result of these public critiques, it became essential that the white community of Catcher seize the narrative and reimagine a history that painted Blacks as the villain and whites as the saviors of their community. While Black advocates would easily see past these fabrications, the

⁷⁴¹ The only mentions of this are from Black newspaper outlets in the north. There are several articles stating that McRae had agreed to a grand jury investigation. All of the stories are roughly the same. “Arkansas Governor Promises Inquiry into Murder,” p. 3.

⁷⁴² Hopkins, “Mob is Pacified When Death Verdict is Given,” p. 1.

white community would ultimately succeed at winning the narrative and leaving a lasting impact on how this ‘race riot’ has been remembered into the present.

Two newspapers near Catcher - *The Van Buren Press Argus* and *Fort Smith Times Record* – helped reconsider the racial violence that had just occurred. As newspapers were the predominant way that Americans received their news during this period, establishing the primary narrative in papers was the best way to win the ideological battle of how the incident would be remembered. The Van Buren newspaper used its influence to argue that the lawless actions of the Black community, in raping and murdering a white woman, had forced peaceful local whites of the community to act to prevent a race war.⁷⁴³ Violence against Blacks, in this telling, was used only as a last resort to keep the town safe from further Black criminality. These whitewashed narratives were sent out to other newspapers further increasing its credibility and reach. Examining these newspaper accounts closely, however, will reveal how five key pieces of the narrative were reimagined to establish that Black Arkansans living in Catcher were alone at fault for the incident.

First, it was important to verify that the three Black men undoubtedly committed the murder of Effie Latimer. While her husband, Robert, would be suspected of the crime in early newspaper accounts, this would be reconsidered after the racial cleansing. It was necessary for there to be no doubt that the three Black men were at fault for her rape and murder – even before the courts confirmed such. Second, it was important to establish that Blacks living in Catcher had been historically lawless long before this murder. The inherent criminal nature of their community was thereby reinforced by the murder, forcing white hands to act to keep other young women safe. Third, Blacks were argued to be responsible for inciting violence at every step.

⁷⁴³ “Colony Negroes Flee From Wrath of Whites,” p. 1.

Dates and timelines were intentionally altered to fit a narrative that whites were always responding to Black aggressions – never initiating hostilities. Fourth, local reports intentionally downplayed how many Black families were living in Catcher as well as how many left their land behind as a result. Altering the number of Blacks impacted by this incident softened the outcomes, reducing the number of Blacks affected from hundreds to dozens. Lastly, these reports determined that local whites, along with their officials, were heroes of the incident - justified in all their actions and lauded for avoiding violence at every turn. While Blacks had sought a race war, conservative whites had used their power for good to stave this off - avoiding violence whenever possible. The conclusion reached by the newspaper was that the ‘race riot’ in Catcher was regrettable but unavoidable for whites. Black criminality had been demonstrated and, as a result, a permanent separation of the white and Black communities was necessary going forward. Importantly, this separation of the races was claimed to be beneficial for both races – a model for other southern towns going forward.

Examining this misinformation campaign by these two newspapers will demonstrate how the violent racial cleansing of Catcher became quickly historicized as the Catcher Race Riot of 1923. Blacks became not only equally culpable for the violence, but the primary aggressors in the conflict due in large part to the narrative put forward by this newspaper over a three-week period. The power and reach of white media outlets, fueled by these accounts coming out of Van Buren and Fort Smith, spread this misinformation quickly and with a level of credibility not afforded to Black media outlets of the period. While Black newspapers like *The Chicago Defender*, *The Afro-American*, and *The Richmond Planet* would similarly report on the incident, their version of the event was overshadowed by these larger southern white outlets. Such a rewriting of history was extremely common after racial disputes in the Jim Crow South. A full

exploration into how newspapers purposefully misinformed the public after racial violence deserves its own dedicated manuscript, but three instances in Waco, Elaine, and Tulsa around this same time can be helpful to demonstrate that what occurred in Catcher in 1923 was by no mean anomalous.⁷⁴⁴

Using deliberately deceptive reporting to reach a predetermined conclusion, has been around in various forms since the beginning of reporting. The rise in power of the NAACP after the first world war, however, led to a stark increase in the need for such a tool when reporting on racial issues coming out of the south. The NAACP was quick to investigate racial concerns coming out of the region most notably throughout its anti-lynching campaign after the first world war where it attempted to document every instance of lynching. Interestingly, their close documentation of these events caused southern newspapers to stop printing detailed morbid accounts of lynchings – instead only giving quick sentences of what had occurred. When Jesse Washington, a seventeen-year-old, was brutally lynched in Waco, Texas in May 1916 after he allegedly raped and murdered a white woman, the *Waco Tribune* scarcely reported on the incident, despite the fact that 10,000 community members had attended the lynching and there were dozens of photographs of proud citizens next to Washington’s charred remains. The NAACP, hoping to document the lynching, sent reporters out to gain clarity on what had happened. One researcher, Walter White, met with a local judge but was rebuffed when he asked for records or photos of the incident. Interestingly, White later saw the judge on the street and

⁷⁴⁴ There have been numerous articles and books written on the whitewashing of textbooks on American History, but far less has been written about similar attempts to reconsider racial history by newspapers. Bruce Janu, “Race and the Whitewashing of History in our Textbooks,” *Medium*, June 5, 2020. <https://bdjanu.medium.com/race-and-the-whitewashing-of-history-in-our-textbooks-501a15ddb181>; Liz Mineo, “How Textbooks Taught White Supremacy,” *The Harvard Gazette*, September 4, 2020. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/09/harvard-historian-examines-how-textbooks-taught-white-supremacy/>; Olivia B. Waxman, “What Reading 220 History Textbooks Taught One Scholar About Racism in America,” *Time Magazine*, September 27, 2022. <https://time.com/6217162/teaching-white-supremacy-american-history/>; Donald Yacovone, *Teaching White Supremacy: America’s Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity* (New York: Pantheon, 2022).

with an improvised English accent and a fake beard pretended to be a sympathetic northern reporter who wanted to write on how the event had been misconstrued by the press. With the phony accent, the reporter fooled the judge and gained full access to all the records the county had on the lynching.⁷⁴⁵ What he found was that there was a complete history and timeline of what had occurred but that it had been intentionally kept from those outside the community looking to research the lynching.

The Crisis pressed the *Waco Tribune* on why it was not reporting on the incident and were told that “they were of the opinion that the best thing to do was to hush it up. They used it as a news item, and that finished it.”⁷⁴⁶ *The Crisis* published their findings complete with pictures in the July 1916 edition entitled “The Waco Horror.” Not only had they been able to verify the lynching had occurred, but they were also able to document the attempts to cover up the history for anyone attempting to research it outside the community. This was a far cry from the late nineteenth century when lynchings had been glorified by southern media outlets and were reported on in great depth. The brutal photography and depictions of lynchings coming out of the south were turning away many moderate whites who otherwise would have likely been sympathetic to southern views on racial issues.⁷⁴⁷ Also, the national push for a federal anti-lynching law was greatly helped by the documentation of these lynchings. Because of this, it became necessary for newspapers to underreport and reconsider lynchings as if they were not a public spectacle – only committed by a few members of society. If you were a white member of this community, however, you were easily able to document the lynching and even receive a postcard photograph of the event to remember it. The history, in this instance, was only changed

⁷⁴⁵ “The Waco Horror.” *The Crisis*, Vol. 12, no. 3, (July 1916): 6. A digitized copy can be found on the Yale University Library site: <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/10834021>.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁷ Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 14.

by the newspapers for other outlets reporting on it. For racist whites living in Waco, they had access to the true history and remembered it fondly.

The Crisis undermined this by providing the detailed analysis of what had actually occurred. The July 1916 edition released and was widely consumed across the United States. The lynching of Jesse Washington helped change the national narrative around racial violence and helped provide further backing to the NAACP and the anti-lynching campaign they had launched.⁷⁴⁸ Without the history of the incident being uncovered by *The Crisis* and NAACP, however, this narrative would have remained guided solely by southern reporters. The ability to “hush it up” was necessary when describing atrocities committed by whites against Blacks. Because of a near monopoly on news reporting in the region, the narrative was easily reconsidered when it was deemed necessary to do so – especially when considering racial issues less serious than lynchings that the NAACP would not investigate.

Hushing up a story was difficult to pull off. In Waco, reporters suggested that the event was not important enough to report on as it was a small spectacle and not indicative of the larger mindset of the community. In reality, they wanted to hush up the story and believed not discussing it was the best way to make that happen.⁷⁴⁹ The problem with such an approach is that the newspaper had committed to a certain story that could easily be proven untrue. When the paper said it was a small spectacle with little documentation and then multiple pictures were uncovered by NAACP investigators showing thousands were there – it was impossible for the

⁷⁴⁸ Patricia Bernstein, *The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 159-165.

⁷⁴⁹ The *Waco Tribune* told reports from the NAACP that “they were of the opinion that the best thing to do was to hush [the lynching] up “The Waco Horror,” p. 6.

Waco Tribune to backtrack on its statement without undermining its own credibility. As a result, the public began to reconsider the lynching of Washington and its reporting.⁷⁵⁰

Other newspapers in the south similarly hoped to hush up racial violence that was occurring inside their communities. Southern media outlets discovered that attempting to outright cover-up a story was difficult with Black investigators from the NAACP looking to expose the morbid details at every turn. Because of this, campaigns to reimagine racial violence became extremely common by certain southern media outlets when discussing incidents that had occurred inside their communities. Reporting, in these cases, often took the form of a fabricated conclusion based around a true story. The easiest (and most common) way to accomplish this was through the claim that Blacks were hoping to start a race war or that the violence had been sparked by the sexual assault of a white woman of the community. This invented rationale for the violence attempted to explain why the larger story of racial violence had been unavoidable for whites. Smaller facts behind these stories – names, dates, places, etc. - were reported accurately and were corroborated in the hope it would make the overall invented story appear true. While these benign facts were truthful, they neither confirmed nor denied the overall conclusion the paper was issuing that Blacks were the aggressor in these racial disputes. White control of the media made such claims impossible to dispute.

A prime example of how misinformation could be effectively used to alter the narrative surrounding racial violence can be seen in the aftermath of the Elaine Massacre in southeast Arkansas in late September 1919.⁷⁵¹ After the massacre was over, the fight over how to rationalize this violence began. A “Committee of Seven,” made up of prominent white men from

⁷⁵⁰ Bernstein, *The First Waco Horror*, 58-61; 159-165.

⁷⁵¹ The Elaine Massacre is described earlier in the work on pages 34 and 35. The numbers of the dead range from this incident range from 2-800. Depending on the number, the incident is possibly the deadliest racial dispute in American history.

inside the community, was formed to explain why the violence had transpired. This entirely white board was allowed to meet privately with Governor Brough to go over their findings. Without the Black side of the story, the committee reported only certain findings. Nevertheless, the governor accepted the authority of these seven men to accurately report on this incident. Brough outwardly claimed that allowing these men to investigate the incident was the best way to obtain all available facts.⁷⁵² In a press conference the next day, Brough maintained “The situation at Elaine has been well handled and is absolutely under control. There is no danger of any lynching.... the white citizens of the county deserve unstinting praise for their actions in preventing mob violence.”⁷⁵³ Even before the facts had been fully sorted out, it was clear who the hero of the story would be.

The anonymous committee, days later, released its conclusion that the Black residents of Elaine had been preparing to revolt against the white citizens of the town. Going off commands from a centralized Black power structure in Washington D.C., the Black citizens of Elaine had allegedly hoped to start a larger race war that would spread across the rest of the south. With Blacks outnumbering whites in the area ten to one, such a threat was deemed credible by this committee. With the plot uncovered prematurely, whites in the area were forced to use violence to avoid a larger race war. Even in this case, though, whites had used violence only as a last resort, killing very few Blacks and only when absolutely necessary.

Newspapers covering the incident quickly reinforced this narrative and spread it to readers across the south. The October 3 issue of the *Arkansas Gazette* ran the headline, “Negroes Plan to Kill All Whites” with a subtitle suggesting that the slaughter was to begin with twenty-

⁷⁵² Stockley, Mitchell, and Lancaster, *Blood in their Eyes*, 119.

⁷⁵³ Ibid.

one prominent white men as the first victims.⁷⁵⁴ The *Helena World* released the plan of action Blacks were supposed to follow to accomplish this goal. They secured through prisoner testimony that “all white people were to have been slain, and the Negroes were to have taken over the land.”⁷⁵⁵ In their October 7 edition, local planter E.M. Allen was quoted as stating “the present trouble with the Negroes in Phillips County is not a race riot. It is a deliberately planned insurrection of the Negroes against the whites directed by an organization known as the ‘Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America,’ established for the purpose of banding Negroes together for the killing of white people.”⁷⁵⁶ The credibility afforded to Governor Brough, the Committee of Seven, and local newspapers who reported on this incident meant that the white version of what occurred became the official version.⁷⁵⁷

The problem with these findings was that there was no actual evidence that such an insurrection had been planned. As Adrienne Jones has noted, “one week after the initial shooting in Hoop Spur, the Committee of Seven declared it had hard evidence for plans of an insurrection and white newspapers from San Francisco to Pittsburgh reprinted the same rumored insurrection plan. This hard evidence gathered from confessions and confiscated literature was, in reality, little more than a summation of the early, scattered rumors.”⁷⁵⁸ Definitive conclusions were reached in all this reporting, but nothing more than hearsay and rumors of a Black rebellion was ever produced. Much more likely was that the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America was no more than an economic coalition of sharecroppers hoping to get a fair price for their cotton at market. By banding together, they were pushing back on white supremacy in the

⁷⁵⁴ “Negroes Plan to Kill All Whites,” *Arkansas Gazette*, October 3, 1919, p. 1.

⁷⁵⁵ “Insurrection Planned to Be Begun Today,” *Helena World*, October 7, 1919, p. 1.

⁷⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵⁷ Stockley, Mitchell, and Lancaster, *Blood in their Eyes*, 115.

⁷⁵⁸ Adrienne Jones, “Clashing Headlines: Black vs. White Journalism,” *Elaine Race Massacre*, UALR Exhibit, 2019.

town. Secret meetings were arranged by this union with armed Black guards in place to keep curious white eyes from hearing their plan of action. This outraged local whites who used violent means to suppress this demonstration of Black economic power. Once the violence began, it spiraled out of control and became one of the bloodiest racial disputes in American history. While the evidence overwhelmingly suggested this was the true story, such a narrative would have painted whites in Arkansas as violent and racist. As a result, it was necessary to prove a larger race war had been planned by Blacks living in the region.

Black advocates, yet again, confronted southern media outlets by producing their own reports of what had occurred. Walter White, a civil rights activist from the NAACP, began to investigate the true causes of these racial disputes coming out of Elaine. Produced in December of 1919, White and the NAACP found that the origin of the riot was the dispute over a fair split of cotton profits after the harvest. The reason the incident turned deadly for Blacks was the “unwritten law of the cotton planter that his Negro tenants must not take the boss man to law.”⁷⁵⁹ When it became clear that Black farmers in the area would unionize and hire a lawyer to fight for their fair share, white farmers became nervous and used violent means to suppress this. The December edition of *The Crisis* argued that the cry of a ‘Negro uprising’ was used solely to allow troops and citizens to kill Blacks indiscriminately – the final way to ensure no union would survive in Elaine, Arkansas.⁷⁶⁰

After this goal was attained, it became necessary to blame Black citizens for the violence, so rumors of a race war plot were spread. Walter White, in a later piece for *The Nation* concluded, “a careful examination...does not reveal the dastardly plot which has been

⁷⁵⁹ “The Real Causes of Two Race Riots,” 57.

⁷⁶⁰ Ida Wells Barnett made this point immediately after the violence. Ida Wells Barnett, *The Arkansas Race Riot* (Chicago: Hume Job Print, 1920). <https://archive.org/details/TheArkansasRaceRiot>

charged...there is nothing which indicates any other motive than that of aspiring towards the securing of relief from exploitation.”⁷⁶¹ Governor Brough, after reading such accounts, was said to have issued a statement to the press that he intended to have the *Chicago Defender*, *The Crisis*, and *The Nation* censored for readers in Arkansas.⁷⁶² Brough argued that these Black publications were the underlying reason such a racial insurrection would take place – inflaming Blacks in the south with lies of racism which caused them to lash out.⁷⁶³ The leading government official in Arkansas was claiming not only that these Black media outlets lying, but also that they were the ultimate reason violence had occurred in Elaine.

The investigation of the NAACP gained the attention of those who read their findings. The problem was the timing and reach of these reports. To properly research this incident, without the help of officials in the region, took significant time. The findings of *The Crisis* and *Nation* were not published until December of 1919, long after white newspapers had issued their own opinions on the violence. Black media outlets also had far less reach than southern newspapers. Their ability to reach the public in these areas would have been nearly impossible when compared to local newspapers. Because of this, newspapers in Arkansas had already won the ideological battle of how the general public would remember this incident long before the NAACP findings were ever produced. On top of this, Governor Brough was making moves to have the reach of these outlets further suppressed.

There was little that could be done to win the ideological battle over how whites would remember the violence in Elaine. Convincing whites across the nation to believe Blacks were at fault for Elaine was not difficult because of preconceived notions and racism. Interestingly,

⁷⁶¹ White, “Massacring Whites’ in Arkansas,” 715. He would make similar arguments the following week in “The Race Conflict in Arkansas,” 233-234.

⁷⁶² “The Real Causes of Two Race Riots,” 60.

⁷⁶³ White, “Massacring Whites’ in Arkansas,” 715.

though, plantation owners near Elaine soon realized they needed Black workers to return to gather that season's harvest. Because of the overreliance on Black sharecroppers to complete this labor, they were left without their primary workforce. They needed these Black workers to return to their positions. This meant attempting to convince Black citizens, themselves, that what had occurred was not due to white racism towards them. The 'Committee of Seven' released a statement trying to coax Black workers to return to their previous positions as if nothing had occurred:

To The Negroes of Phillips County - The trouble at Elaine has been settled. Soldiers now here to preserve order will return to Little Rock within a short time. No innocent Negro has been arrested, and those of you who are at home and at work have no occasion to worry. All you have to do is remain at work just as if nothing happened. Phillips County has always been a peaceful, law-abiding community, and normal conditions must be restored right away. Stop Talking! Stay at home – Go to work – don't worry!⁷⁶⁴

By stating that 'no innocent Negro has been arrested,' the flyer suggested that Black workers would be safe if they returned to their jobs and acted as if nothing happened. This was bold considering that Black farmers in the town would have known the accused and realized they were never planning on inciting a race war. Southern officials were so convinced they could spin this narrative that they expected to even change the way Blacks considered the violence that had just transpired. Unsurprisingly, this attempt failed as only a small number of Black laborers returned to their previous positions in Phillips County.

The newspaper campaign after the Elaine Massacre was highly successful at rewriting the narrative of what had just occurred. Guided by the Committee of Seven and given further credibility by Governor Brough and Arkansas newspapers, the campaign influenced the way the

⁷⁶⁴ Circular distributed by Committee of Seven to try to ease tensions after the Elaine Massacre. October 7, 1919. "Elaine Massacre Flyer," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/media/elaine-race-riot-brochure-6376/>

incident was remembered.⁷⁶⁵ The murder of dozens of Blacks in Elaine became considered not as a massacre but as a race riot. Blacks became the villains by attempting to incite a race war and attempting to take land from whites in the region. Whites, uncovering these plots, were forced to act to keep further violence from occurring. While the incident had been regrettable, there was nothing to do but to keep going forward as if nothing had happened. Returning to status quo was the best way to move on in this telling.

The best documented newspaper campaign to cover up and reimagine racial violence transpired after the Tulsa Massacre in 1921. Dick Rowland, a nineteen-year-old shoeshiner, was arrested for sexually assaulting Sarah Page, a white seventeen-year elevator operator. Calls for the young man to be lynched spread after a newspaper account in the *Tulsa Tribune*. A group of around twenty-five Black men arrived at the jail to protect Rowland. A similarly sized group of white men soon reached the jail. As the two rival groups fought over what would happen to the young Black man, a gunshot went off and “all hell broke loose.”⁷⁶⁶ Within fifteen minutes, twelve people were dead – ten white and two Black. The group of Black men fled to Greenwood, where most of the Black community of Tulsa lived. A white backlash occurred later that night and into the next morning as white mobs ransacked the Black community, burning and looting as they went. The violence was so severe that the National Guard in Oklahoma had to enact martial law to gain back control of the city. Unsurprisingly, the state militia sided with white looters in this violence. Citizens in private airplanes flew over Black neighborhoods and dynamite was

⁷⁶⁵ Fortunately, there has been a recent push by historians to re-reconsider the Elaine incident as a massacre and not a race riot.

⁷⁶⁶ Tim Madigan, *The Burning: Massacre, Destruction, and the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 248.

dropped from overhead.⁷⁶⁷ The white backlash triggered staggering losses for Blacks in the Greenwood district of northeast Tulsa. 35 blocks were burned to the ground, 10,000 families were left without homes, the Black businesses inside Tulsa were left destroyed, and as many as 300 Black citizens were dead. After the massacre, many Blacks left the city permanently. Rumors of mass graves have persisted into the present, but none have yet to be unearthed. The full losses of this racial violence are still being calculated.⁷⁶⁸

Newspapers not only changed the way this incident was reconsidered after the fact – it fueled the racial violence from the very outset.⁷⁶⁹ The *Tulsa Tribune* ran the story of ‘Diamond Dick’ Rowland attacking the young white girl under the headline “Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in an Elevator.” In this account, Rowland had sexually assaulted Page “scratching her hands and face and tearing [at] her clothes.”⁷⁷⁰ Importantly, the story was not covered by the *Tulsa Tribune* until two days after the attack had occurred. The May 31st edition hit newspaper stands at 3:15 p.m. Within two hours, rumors of an impending lynching went out to the local community sparking the violence that occurred that night. The headline appeared to be a call to action and was likely interpreted as such by both Black and white readers of the paper – although for entirely different reasons.⁷⁷¹ The timing of when the paper ran, and the subsequent violence hours later seem far too coincidental to overlook.⁷⁷²

⁷⁶⁷ Some historians even view this as the first use of airplanes as weapons on U.S. soil. Yuliya Parshina-Kottas, Anjali Singhvi, Audra D.S. Burch, Troy Griggs, Mika Gröndahl, Lingdong Huang, Tim Wallace, Jeremy White, and Josh Williams, “What the Tulsa Race Massacre Destroyed,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2021.

⁷⁶⁸ The best overview of these calculations can be found in “Riot Property Loss,” in *The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, February 28, 2001, 143-152.

⁷⁶⁹ Scott Ellsworth, “The Tulsa Race Riot,” in *The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, February 28, 2001, 57-58.

⁷⁷⁰ Rowland would never be charged for this assault. “Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in an Elevator,” *Tulsa Tribune*, May 31, 1921, p. 1.

⁷⁷¹ Randy Krehbiel, *Tulsa 1921: Reporting a Massacre* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 32.

⁷⁷² Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1992), 48-50.

Later interviews with citizens of Tulsa who lived through the violence uncovered numerous memories of a back page editorial that ran the headline “To Lynch Negro Tonight,” and called more explicitly for racial violence that day towards the Black community of Greenwood in Tulsa.⁷⁷³ No copy of this is known to exist, but this was similarly the case for the “Nab Negro” story that had ran as a headline of the same May 31 edition. Interestingly, the front-page headline as well as the later editorial had both been mysteriously ripped out in copies for state archives that sought to microfilm editions of the *Tulsa Tribune*.⁷⁷⁴ Fortunately, an existing copy of the headline story was found and has since been reproduced in numerous places.⁷⁷⁵ While a copy of the editorial has yet to be uncovered, it appears to have also been a contributing factor in the violence that soon occurred in Greenwood.⁷⁷⁶ Within hours of this call to action from the *Tulsa Tribune*, Black and white supporters were on scene at the Tulsa County Courthouse where Rowland was being held. Violence ensued throughout the night until the National Guard gained some semblance of order.

The next morning, headlines from Tulsa’s major newspapers had skewed the cause of the violence – blaming Blacks for the damage. *The Tulsa World* reported on a “race war” that had raged on for hours after violence from ‘Little Africa’ spread to the rest of the city.⁷⁷⁷ *The Oklahoman* ran an editorial that concluded the Black power structure in Tulsa had attempted to

⁷⁷³ Krehbiel, *Tulsa 1921*, 65.

⁷⁷⁴ This can be seen on newspapers.com as well as any other site with microfilm copies of the *Tulsa Tribune* newspaper dated May 31, 1921.

⁷⁷⁵ The Library of Congress looked into this purposeful destruction of archival material after Tulsa. A copy of the “Nab Negro” newspaper cut out can be found here. Malea Walker, “Tulsa Race Massacre: Newspaper Complicity and Coverage,” <https://blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2021/05/#:~:text=The%20Tulsa%20Tribune%2C%20an%20afternoon,assault%20the%2017%2Dyear%2Dold>

⁷⁷⁶ Several citizens of Tulsa later recalled this editorial. That along with the fact that the known headline was purposefully removed lends credence to the fact that the missing pages later in the newspaper were also a call to action for racial violence.

⁷⁷⁷ “Two Whites Dead in Race Riot: Race War Rages for Hours After Outbreak at Courthouse,” *Tulsa World*, June 1, 1921, p. 1.

push back on white supremacy in this city. For this reason, it was necessary for whites to lash out violently as “strictly speaking, this is [still] a white man’s country.”⁷⁷⁸ *The Tulsa Tribune*, *The Tulsa World*, and *The Oklahoman* all embraced similar deceptive narratives that Blacks in Tulsa had been attempting to run out white locals for complete control of the city’s economy. By inciting the violence, Blacks in the city had forced whites to act to save themselves. As in Elaine, no evidence of Blacks being the aggressor in this violence was proven. Nevertheless, the rumors persisted through the three white newspapers and provided a sense of credibility to these otherwise unfounded claims. A grand jury investigation later that month further reinforced this narrative, concluding, “we find the recent race riot was the direct result of an effort on the part of a certain group of colored men...there was no mob spirit among the whites, no talk of lynching and no call to arms.”⁷⁷⁹ Unsurprisingly, the *Tulsa World* published the findings of the grand jury under the headline “Grand Jury Blames Negroes for Inciting Race Rioting: Whites Clearly Exonerated.”⁷⁸⁰ The 2001 Commission tasked with reinvestigating the Tulsa Race Riot found that the grand jury trial was whitewashed from the outset, undoubtedly influenced by reports coming out of the *Tulsa World* and *Tulsa Tribune*:

The grand jury’s most notable action is not the indictments that it returned but the whitewash it engaged in. Their report, which was published in its entirety in the *Tulsa World*...told a laughable story of Black culpability for the riot. The report is an amazing document, that demonstrates how evidence can be selectively interpreted. It is, quite simply, a classic case of interpreter’s extreme biases coloring their version of events.⁷⁸¹

There was, again, little that Black media outlets could do to push back on these whitewashed reports coming out of Tulsa. The city’s two Black newspaper, *The Tulsa Star* and

⁷⁷⁸ *The Oklahoman*, June 1, 1921, p. 1.

⁷⁷⁹ *Oklahoma v. Rowland*, Case No. 2239, Tulsa County District Court, 1921.

⁷⁸⁰ “Grand Jury Blames Negroes for Inciting Race Rioting: Whites Clearly Exonerated,” *The Tulsa World*, June 21, 1921, section A.

⁷⁸¹ “Assessing State and City Culpability: The Riot and the Law,” in *Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, February 28, 2001, 167.

Oklahoma Sun, were both early targets of the mob violence from the incident and were left too damaged to publish editions in the direct aftermath of the violence. *The Black Dispatch* writing out of Oklahoma City provided the only Black perspective from inside the state but was not able to research and report on the violence in Tulsa until June 11. When it finally ran its headline “Loot, Arson, Murder! Four Million Dollars Lost as Tulsa Yanks Land Away from Blacks with Fire Ordinance,” it had little impact or reach when compared to the white newspapers of Oklahoma.⁷⁸² The NAACP similarly investigated what had occurred in Tulsa and reached the conclusion that the incident was started primarily due to the attempted lynching of Rowland by white mobs in the city.⁷⁸³ None of these outlets had any significant chance of overriding the white narrative coming out of Tulsa.

The whitewashed reports coming out of Tulsa initially fueled belief that the large-scale damages and death were a result of Black criminality. Interestingly, Oklahoma newspapers later that summer stopped running stories about the violence altogether in an attempt to cover up the fact that anything had happened at all. For many white businessman and civic officials of Oklahoma, it was evident that the riot was a ‘public relations nightmare’ for a young state trying to increase its population, especially from minority groups. The 2001 commission to determine what happened in 1921 found that a ‘conspiracy of silence’ was undertaken to cover-up the riot as it was perceived to be “something best to be forgotten, something to be swept well beneath history’s carpet” by those in control of the news of the state.⁷⁸⁴ This helps explain the lack of attention given to the riot two weeks after the incident and throughout the rest of the twentieth

⁷⁸² “Loot, Arson, Murder! Four Million Dollars Lost, Sarah Page Not to be Found, Tulsa Yanks Land Away from Blacks with Fire Ordinance, *The Black Dispatch*, June 11, 1921, p. 1.

⁷⁸³ Walter White, “The Eruption of Tulsa,” *The Nation* 112 (June 29, 1921): 909-910; “More Than Two Hundred White and Colored Men, Women and Children Were Killed in the Bloody or Horrible Race Riots at Tulsa, Okla.,” *The Broad Ax*, June 18, 1921, p. 1.

⁷⁸⁴ John Hope Franklin and Scott Ellsworth, “History Knows No Fences: An Overview,” in *Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, February 28, 2001, 25.

century. Much like in Waco and Elaine, however, this historical amnesia did not occur among local whites in Tulsa. For years after the violence, “picture postcards of the victims in awful poses were sold on the streets.”⁷⁸⁵

For media outlets and public officials, though, the riot was not something that needed to be forgotten. The cover-up campaign after the Tulsa Massacre endured for much of the twentieth century. *The Tulsa Tribune* in its ‘fifteen years ago’ section for June 1, 1936, ignored the violence completely “as if the greatest catastrophe in the city’s history simply had not happened at all.”⁷⁸⁶ Ironically, the newspaper’s call for violence was undoubtedly a precipitating factor in the violence itself. As mentioned earlier, articles calling for violence towards Blacks in the May 31 edition of the *Tulsa Tribune* were mysteriously ripped out during the archival process of the newspaper, in a likely attempt to remove the history.⁷⁸⁷ Oklahoma history textbooks, likewise, never mentioned the riot in the subsequent decades. Students throughout Oklahoma were not taught the history of the riot and within thirty years it was all but forgotten by those who had not experienced the violence first-hand. Fortunately, the city of Tulsa has since reckoned with this hidden past and launched full-scale investigations into what actually occurred in 1921. The same cannot be said for most other cities that endured racial violence in the early twentieth century.⁷⁸⁸

The newspaper campaigns launched in Waco, Elaine, and Tulsa in the aftermath of racial violence demonstrate the power and reach held by local news outlets throughout the Jim Crow

⁷⁸⁵ “History Knows No Fences,” 26. The quote is attributed to Osborn Campbell, *Let Freedom Ring* (Tokyo: Inter-Nation Company, 1954), p. 175.

⁷⁸⁶ “History Knows No Fences,” 26; “Fifteen Years Ago,” *Tulsa Tribune*, June 1, 1936, p. 16.

⁷⁸⁷ Walker, “Tulsa Race Massacre: Newspaper Complicity and Coverage,” <https://blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2021/05/#:~:text=The%20Tulsa%20Tribune%2C%20an%20afternoon,assault%20the%2017%2Dyear%2Dold>

⁷⁸⁸ In 2001, the city of Tulsa launched a formal investigation using historians, economists, and other researchers to ascertain exactly what had happened in 1921. “The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921,” *A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, February 28, 2001. A full copy can be found here. <https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf>

South. As the primary way Americans received their news, these media outlets held tremendous influence in how racial violence unfolded and, more importantly, how it was historicized for later generations. These three examples of racial violence occurred in roughly the same time (1916, 1919, and 1921) and space (Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma) as what occurred in Catcher, Arkansas in 1923 and provide credibility that distorting the narrative was a common tactic used by local officials and those in power in towns across the south to win the battle for the memory of these incidents. These instances are some of the best documented and well-known cases of false reporting but are by no means anomalous. On the contrary, most racial incidents occurring in the south undoubtedly experienced similarly slanted, biased reporting that favored whites over minority groups because simply, white control of the region meant white control of the history.

After the violence in Catcher, Arkansas was over, a similar process of seizing the narrative was undertaken by those in power. Through use of two newspapers - the *Van Buren Press Argus* and *The Fort Smith Times Record* - the incident was reconsidered in a favorable light for whites. As had occurred in Waco, Elaine, and Tulsa, it was necessary to alter key facts concerning this violence to reach the predetermined conclusion that whites had been forced to act aggressively against Blacks inside their community. Whites in Van Buren, in this telling, were not racist, nor had they been looking to expel all Blacks from the region from the start. Instead, they were only acting in self-defense against belligerent Blacks who hoped to start a race war – sparked by the vicious rape and murder of a young white woman inside the community. Citizens living near Catcher, Black and white, would have heard the stories coming out of nearby Waco, Elaine, and Tulsa. These previous incidents of racial violence, along with others, likely played a role in how this incident unraveled after Effie’s death. Many whites would have probably believed these stories of larger conspiracies undertaken by Blacks to take land and power from

whites and consequently lashed out violently to avoid such a scenario from occurring inside their community. Others may have realized the accounts were skewed but went along with racially cleansing the area because they did not like living next to Black citizens – especially those on lucrative land that may have held valuable natural gas wells underneath.

Still, the white community of Van Buren was hesitant to appear outwardly discriminatory to Blacks, so it was necessary to make the Black community the undeniable villain of this story. The playbook for rewriting the narrative in this way was fairly simple and had been repeated in Tulsa as well as countless other instances across the country during this same period. Most importantly, it was essential to prove that the violence had been started by aggressive Blacks through the sexual assault of a white woman. Going beyond this, it was necessary to demonstrate a pervasive lawlessness across the entire Black community. So much so, that it was believable that the community might engage in a larger plot to win power and control in the town – a race war perpetrated by Blacks to kill and take from whites. Because of the violence committed by Blacks, the conclusion was simple – whites had no choice but to use their power to exterminate this threat. To avoid similar incidents, it was necessary to push out all remaining Blacks and segregate the races going forward. The *Van Buren Press Argus* and *Fort Smith Times Record* used their power and credibility to spread this skewed information about what had just occurred and were successful at having a lasting impact on how historians and the public have since viewed the racial violence that transpired inside Catoosa in late 1923. By closely examining the newspaper accounts coming out of Van Buren and Fort Smith, however, it becomes possible to identify five key instances where these reports were altered and how it impacted the way the county, state, and nation viewed this violence going forward.

The first thing that was necessary for local newspapers to dispel were rumors that Robert Latimer was a suspect of Effie Latimer's murder. Instead, it became essential that the paper be certain that William Bettis, Spurgeon Rucks, and John Henry Clay committed the murder *and rape* of the white woman. The killing of Effie Latimer in the early morning hours of December 28 shocked the small community of Catcher. The *Van Buren Press Argus*, as a weekly paper, only released new editions on the Fridays of each week. The newspaper had decided to not run an edition for Friday, December 28 because of the Christmas holiday, but even if they had they would have been unable to report on Effie's murder that occurred early that same morning. As a result, they ran a series of specials to the *Arkansas Gazette* in the following days after her death to report on the violence ensuing in the community. The first reports coming out of Van Buren seemed to remark on the peculiarity that Effie's husband, Robert, had left the home right before her death. In a December 31 special edition for the *Gazette*, it was stated that "Bob Latimer, husband of the woman, left home a week ago, taking a dozen chickens and half of the provisions of the house, has not been heard from [by] officers."⁷⁸⁹ By the time that special had been written, much of the racial violence had occurred, but local reporters were probably not considering the long term implications of her husband being a suspect. By the January 4 edition of the *Van Buren Press Argus*, the newspaper softened on this, instead focusing on the fact that "the couple had been married six years" before launching into all the evidence against the three Black men – most notably the dying testimony of Effie against Bettis.⁷⁹⁰

None of the later editions of the *Van Buren Press Argus* would again mention Robert Latimer or his acrimonious separation from Effie days before her murder. Instead, it became necessary for the paper to be confident in its assumption that Bettis, Rucks, and Clay alone

⁷⁸⁹ "Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest," p. 1.

⁷⁹⁰ "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

committed this murder. Going a step further, it was also necessary for this violent act against Effie to not just be a murder but a rape as well. In the early reports of her death, Effie was only assumed to have been shot and killed. Sexual assault does not enter the record until January 2 when it was reported that the state could potentially push for rape charges against the three men.⁷⁹¹ Importantly, these rape charges were dropped by the prosecution that summer and the men were only ever convicted of murdering Effie as there ended up being little evidence of a sexual assault.⁷⁹² Nevertheless, local newspapers ran wild with these suggestions of rape, knowing it would stir emotions in white community members living nearby. *The Fort Smith Times Record* lead its January 4 edition with the headline “Trial of Negro on Rape Charge,” relegating the murder of the woman to subordinate status.⁷⁹³ The rumors of Black men sexually assaulting a young white woman effectively agitated the anxieties of white men in the nation and was used as a precursor in a number of racial incidents all across the Jim Crow South. Newspapers, by the time of the trials, appeared to be convinced in their assertion that the three men were guilty of raping the young woman. Using their status and credibility they pushed these unfounded claims of rape and were a contributing factor in 800 locals jamming into the court room later that week to hear the evidence against the men. Because of this skewed telling, Robert Latimer had been all but forgotten. Rape hysteria would hover over the trials.

After the forty-eight hours of fighting ended in Catcher, it became necessary to place blame on the Black community for the entirety of the violence. The local newspapers used their power to alter a second key point concerning the incident – that Blacks had been historically lawless and were seeking to start a race war after Effie’s murder. Similar to as what had occurred

⁷⁹¹ “Two Negroes to be Given Trial Friday,” p. 1.

⁷⁹² “Abatement of Rape Charges,” *Arkansas v. Bettis, Rucks*, Crawford Circuit Court, July 7, 1924.

⁷⁹³ “State Rests in Trial of Negro on Rape Charge,” p. 1.

in Elaine and Tulsa, it was vital that local whites prove they were only acting defensively against a conspiratorial and aggressive Black community. In this telling, Blacks were habitual criminals who hoped to use violence to seize power and land away from whites in the region. *The Van Buren Press Argus* argued the lawlessness of the Black community stating:

Beginning with the ambushing and killing of Constable Jones one night more than 35 years ago, the “Colony” has been looked upon as a lawless community, as far as the Blacks were concerned, and the records in circuit court and the minor courts teem with stories of law violations in that community. It has been almost impossible to convict a negro from that community and this has been a smoldering fire that finally resulted in the driving of the negroes out of that community. There were some law abiding, hardworking negroes living in the community, and they have been made to suffer for the misdeeds of the law-breaking class of their race.⁷⁹⁴

The newspaper concluded that the inability of the white community to stop violence against them from the Black community finally boiled over and led to the forced separation of the two races. The paper blamed the court system for its inaction against Blacks – leaving the perception of the community being lawless. In this telling, the rape and murder of Effie Latimer was the final straw as whites felt they had to use violence themselves to stop further Black criminality. On top of this, the violence in Catcher came down to Blacks trying to use the violence against Effie as a spark point for a larger race war. The *Van Buren Press Argus* argued this point stating, “so intense has been the feeling between the two races there that serious trouble has been pending, and had it not been for the more conservative whites and the admonitions of Sheriff Maxey, a race war would have been precipitated.”⁷⁹⁵ Whites were the reason calm ultimately emerged. They were forced to act but did so only as a last resort in the face of a historically lawless Black community. So, at the same time whites forced out three hundred Black citizens through intimidation and extrajudicial violence, the narrative became that

⁷⁹⁴ “Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites,” p. 1.

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid.

the constant government protection of unlawful Blacks forced reasonable white hands to act to prevent a race war.

To further fix this blame of the Black community of Catcher, a third alteration of the narrative occurred as key times and dates were intentionally changed by local newspapers to reinforce Black citizens had thrown the first stone every time violence had broken out. In the larger summary article by the *Van Buren Press Argus* a week after the violence, the timeline of events had been changed to paint the actions of whites in a more defensible way.⁷⁹⁶ In this telling, Bettis, Clay, and Rucks violently raped and murdered Latimer. The Black community, hoping to use this as a spark point for a race war, banded together with weapons and ammo and forced peaceful whites in the town to use force to stop them.⁷⁹⁷ Charles Rucks, a part of this conspiracy, was later killed by an officer after refusing to show his hands. Only after these first aggressive actions by the Black community did the white community members begin pushing for the entire Black population of Catcher to be expelled. This was not a rash decision, as the process was said to have taken place weeks later after calm had emerged. A decision agreed upon by members of the community, white and Black.

This timeline is called into question, however, when looking at the earliest newspaper accounts coming out of Van Buren directly after Effie's murder. Multiple newspaper articles state that a 500-man white mob was circling between Van Buren and Fort Smith trying to lynch the three accused of the crime.⁷⁹⁸ The *Fort Smith Times Record* puts it best:

The excitement which prevailed in Van Buren Saturday following the gathering of several hundred citizens of Crawford county shortly after the negroes were arrested and the report that they had confessed to the killing shifted to Fort Smith Saturday when it

⁷⁹⁶ "Brutal Black Murderers," p. 1.

⁷⁹⁷ The use of the term 'race war' is used in the January 18 article. "Colony Negroes Flee From Wrath of Whites," p. 1.

⁷⁹⁸ "Mob is Pursuing Negro Prisoners," p. 1; "Catcher Negro is Wounded by Deputy Sheriff," p. 1; "Crawford Sheriff Prevents Lynching," p. 1.

was thought that the negroes were being held at the local jail, shifted back to Crawford County Sunday morning following the shooting of Charles Rucks, negro, father of Spurgeon Rucks, one of the accused negroes, by a special deputy sheriff.⁷⁹⁹

Considering the white citizens of Catcher to be peaceful and only reacting to Black aggression is clearly false. These mobs were continually moving, looking to instigate violence at every turn. When this mob was unable to slake their thirst in the form of a public lynching, they turned their attention to the Black community still peacefully living in the town and put-up notices telling them to leave or suffer the consequences of staying. As Blacks came together and were talking about how to respond to these white aggressions, Charles Rucks was killed in his altercation with recently deputized citizen, Frederick Creekmore. All of the newspaper reports from December 31 first mention Rucks' murder before discussing the eleven Black men who decided to band together to defend their homes. This chronology makes sense as the eleven Black men would have seen no other choice to stop violent white aggressions than banding together.⁸⁰⁰

By the January 4 summation of the violence in the *Van Buren Press Argus*, though, this timeline had been shifted. In this report, Black men “were arming and fortifying themselves ready for a battle” before noon with clear plans of their next actions.⁸⁰¹ The sheriff, realizing the potential for a race war, deputized as many white citizens as he could. The group surrounded the barricaded building and informed the governor of the trouble – waiting for word from him of what to do next. In the midst of this hysteria – caused by Black aggression – Charles Rucks was killed after he appeared to be part of this conspiracy to overthrow white control over the town. Placing Rucks' murder after the actions by the eleven Black men first occurs in this later *Van*

⁷⁹⁹ “Catcher Negro is Wounded by Deputy Sheriff,” p. 1.

⁸⁰⁰ This timeline of banding together after Charles Rucks' death is also reiterated by Gus Richardson in his state Supreme Court case the following year. *Richardson v. Arkansas*, p. 929.

⁸⁰¹ “Brutal Black Murderers,” p. 1.

Buren Press Argus article and allows the newspaper to argue more convincingly that the Black citizens of Catcher acted first in this dispute. Not only had members of their community raped and murdered a young woman, but they had also banded together to push out whites from the region using weapons. Because of this, whites were forced to act.⁸⁰²

The *Van Buren Press Argus* concluded that because of these actions by Blacks, “it was generally understood that the negroes in the ‘colony’ would have to go.”⁸⁰³ While whites wanted the Black population to leave, they were said by the newspaper to have waited until two weeks later to put up notices giving them an ultimatum to flee or suffer the consequences. This was not a rash decision, but one made after long thinking and with much regret by white citizens who saw no other choice but to push out the entire Black population to stop this unrelenting criminality from a few in their community, stating “there were some law-abiding, hardworking negroes living in that community and they have been made to suffer for the misdeeds of the law-breaking class of their race.”⁸⁰⁴ The problem, again, with this summation is that it overlooks earlier reports that clearly state that the Black community was forced out of Catcher almost immediately after Effie’s death. In the *Van Buren* special to the *Arkansas Gazette* on December 31, it states that “shortly after the shooting of Rucks, there was an exodus of negroes from the Catcher community.”⁸⁰⁵ While some may have returned, it was clear by the end of that weekend that to stay in Catcher would be risking harm. The three accused men had almost been lynched, Charles Rucks had been shot and killed for walking the streets, and the eleven Black men had been pulled out of the schoolhouse by the national guard and arrested on charges of nightriding. It was clear that the white community had begun making substantial moves to push the white

⁸⁰² “Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites,” p. 1.

⁸⁰³ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁵ “Negro is Killed Resisting Arrest,” p. 1.

population out of Catcher immediately after Effie's death. Attempting to push back this timeline to weeks later made the white population seem calmer and more considerate when, in reality, they were flying off the handle and deciding the future of this entire Black settlement in fits of rage after an unsuccessful lynching.

The fourth part of the narrative that was altered in the immediate aftermath of this violence was that white community members were heroic in their actions. After proving Blacks were the aggressive villain, it was only natural to then claim that whites had been the conservative hero – justified in all their actions by avoiding violence at every turn to stop a race war. Amazingly, the *Van Buren Press Argus* concluded “so far the whites have refrained from any acts of violence towards the negroes in that community” in an article running the headline “Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites.”⁸⁰⁶ The ability of this article, in particular, to recall all the violence that had just occurred and reconsider it in a positive light for whites is truly astounding. Even when discussing the 500-man white mob that attempted to lynch the three Black accused, the newspaper managed to spin the narrative:

if ever the mob spirit was justified, it would have been in this instance and the clamor for the lives of the Black brutes, was but a human cry for vengeance; a cry that has been heard from the beginning of time, therefore those advocating and in a hesitating way sought to lynch the negroes are not to be censored.⁸⁰⁷

The spirit of this lynch mob, according to the *Van Buren Press Argus*, was only a human reaction to the constant criminality perpetrated by Blacks in Catcher. The lawlessness of that community had forced otherwise peaceful whites to act in an aggressive way, but these actions were completely justified. Even lynching the men, in this case, would have been an acceptable response because of their actions.

⁸⁰⁶ “Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites,” p. 1.

⁸⁰⁷ “Negro Fiends Will Die in Electric Chair,” p. 1.

The last way local newspapers used their power to influence opinions about the racial violence was to downplay how many Black families had been impacted. Soon after the racial cleansing occurred, the *Van Buren Press Argus* wrote:

Evidently none of the negroes cared to ignore the warnings and invite the wrath of the outraged whites, consequently they at once made hasty arrangements for leaving and, out of the thirty or more negro families residing in the 'Colony,' none remain.⁸⁰⁸

The report uses an interesting phrasing when explaining how many Black families lived in Catcher saying "thirty or more." On first reading, it seems as if there must have been around thirty Black families living in Catcher at the time. Other local newspapers echo these sentiments. The *Fort Smith Times Record* states "all but three of the 35 or 40 families who have made their homes in Catcher had packed up their belongings and left for new homes."⁸⁰⁹ Future reports would all reiterate that only around forty Black families were forced to leave because of this racial violence. Such reporting lent credibility to itself and would become the predominant narrative surrounding the demographics of Catcher at the time. Historian Wanda Gray, in her *Encyclopedia of Arkansas* article on Catcher, even wrote that there were "at least forty" who were forced to leave.⁸¹⁰

Two problems emerge with describing the Black population of Catcher as around forty families. First, these Black families were often quite large. According to census records, most of these families had on average four to six children living in the home.⁸¹¹ Several had over ten. The newspaper reports intentionally used 'Black families' as its metric for counting rather than 'Black citizens' as that number would have seemed much higher. Using families as the numbering system lent itself to a lower overall number and therefore downplayed how many

⁸⁰⁸ "Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites," p. 1.

⁸⁰⁹ "Negroes Leave Catcher After Warning Issued," p. 1.

⁸¹⁰ Gray, "Catcher Race Riot of 1923."

⁸¹¹ See Appendix item two for a detailed look into the Black families living in Catcher in 1920.

Blacks in Catcher were affected by the violence. Second, and more importantly, there were far more than forty Black families living in Catcher at the time of Effie's murder. There were more Black landowners than that living in Catcher. Looking at all available records, the number of Black families – many with children – was closer to seventy.⁸¹² Taking all this into consideration, we get a much more accurate account of the demographics in Catcher at the time of the violence. More likely, there were around three hundred Black citizens present at the time of the murder. Reducing the number of Black citizens affected from hundreds down to dozens was a way for newspapers to begin hushing up the amount of damage done from this incident. It also allowed these reports to argue that the forced exodus of the Black population was best for both races as this small group of Blacks from Catcher would be much better off living outside the town.

The campaign to rewrite what had just occurred in the aftermath of Effie Latimer's murder was similar to what had previously occurred in Tulsa and Elaine. Unsubstantiated rumors of the sexual assault of a white woman and the potential for a war between the races provided justification that whites should use violence to keep Blacks in their place. Local newspapers, which brought news to these rural towns, enflamed their readers with these baseless claims in the hopes they would lash out against Blacks of the community. After the fact, newspapers would use their credibility and standing to reinforce that the violence was caused by the aggressive actions of Blacks. Whites, as heroes of the day, had no choice but to stand up to this violence to ensure it would not happen again. Dates, timelines, and even the number of Blacks in the community were intentionally altered to help reach these overall conclusions that had already been predetermined.

⁸¹² See Appendix items one and two for further clarification.

To make this larger narrative stick, several tactics were implemented by newspapers. They always reported on the incident as a ‘race riot.’ Doing so placed – at the very least – equal blame on Blacks in the community for the bloodshed. More often, the term ‘race riot’ was synonymous with minority aggression being stamped out by the white majority – placing more of the blame on Black citizens of the community. The term was used consistently across the Jim Crow era to signify a fight between the races that occurred when white supremacy was challenged.⁸¹³ In these cases, there was little a Black citizen could do. If white supremacy was never challenged, then in cases like Elaine, Tulsa, and Catcher Blacks would have had conceded all control over the property and assets. Anytime a white citizen decided they wanted something from a Black citizen, they would have no choice but to agree. If Blacks finally reached a line in the sand where they were no longer willing to concede to white demands – as happened in all these larger incidents of racial violence – they were met with overwhelming force by the white majority. Legal and extralegal means were used to win the initial physical fight then the history of the incident was, likewise, monopolized by white-led media outlets to cover-up what had occurred.

Fortunately, in many of the well-known cases of racial violence - such as Elaine and Tulsa – historians have begun to finally reclaim the terminology used to describe them. For both Elaine and Tulsa, using the term ‘massacre’ instead of ‘race riot’ has been a way for historians to put a more fitting label on the racial history of these communities. The same cannot be said for Catcher. Wanda Gray, the first historian to study the incident, labeled it a race riot in her summary of the violence. This needs to be reconsidered. Historians and researchers must be careful when labelling an event as a ‘race riot’ as it can reinforce previous forms of

⁸¹³ Kevin Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 1-15.

whitewashing that occurred in the early twentieth century without intent from the writer themselves. In the case of *Catcher*, newspapers classified this as a ‘race riot,’ providing equal culpability (or outright blame) to the Black community for the violence, thus impacting how this incident would be remembered.

The final step in this process of winning the battle over the history of this event was to censor and delete the Black narrative of what had just occurred. Media outlets that were sympathetic to the Black fight for rights like *The Chicago Defender*, *Crisis*, and *Nation* were all extremely difficult for readers in the deep south to get hold of. Even when associations like the NAACP investigated what had occurred in incidents like *Catcher*, they were often met with extreme vitriol by the entirety of the state – unable to get any help in their reporting. As seen after the massacre in Elaine, even the Governor of Arkansas publicly stated he would like to publicly ban all copies of these Black forms of media. This was further reinforced by Black citizens themselves. After many of these atrocities across the south, it became difficult to find Black citizens who would talk candidly about what had occurred. Many considered it humiliating that they had been unable to protect their family and property against white outsiders. When they were forced to leave, they did so begrudgingly but kept these emotions inside likely only talking in the privacy of their own homes about what it was like. Dorothy Jean Trambell (daughter of Will Bettis) echoed this when she stated, “we just did not talk about it...it was embarrassing.”⁸¹⁴ On top of this, it was likely terrifying for Black citizens who had just watched their neighbors being put on trial and killed in the street for standing up for their rights to attempt to verbalize their true feelings towards southern racism.

⁸¹⁴ Wanda Gray Interview of Dorothy Jean Trambell.

With the silencing of this Black narrative, the fight over how the history of *Catcher* would be remembered by the public was won by the white community. Using local newspapers and their standing in society, the white version of events became the only version. While Black advocates and members of the community would easily see past these fabrications, it had little impact on how the racial violence would be remembered into the modern age. Instead, the 'official' version became one of a race riot started due to Black rape, Black criminality, and Black aggression. White heroism had saved the day - and their community - by banishing Blacks out of their town. This separation of the races was beneficial for both groups and a model for how other towns could prevent future 'race riots' from occurring.

Conclusion

By the summer of 1924, Catcher, Arkansas was an all-white town. White citizens of the region had purposely and efficiently used the murder of Effie Latimer as justification for cleansing the area of all Black citizens. Using a mixture of extralegal and legal means, white community members forced these Black Arkansans to flee their homes, never to return. The motivations for this racial cleaning went far beyond just race, however, as Black land, mineral rights, and jobs were cynically seized by white community members looking to create quick avenues to wealth. Removing Black workers from the area would grant easier access to nearby railroad and farm labor jobs. Likewise, the removal of Blacks provided opportunities to buy up extremely lucrative land at bargain prices. Millions of dollars in mineral rights (adjusted for inflation) were pulled out of southern Crawford County each year from 1923 until the early 1970s when these natural gas wells were finally tapped. While economic and labor motivations are essential to understanding this larger narrative, the racism undergirding this entire system at the county, state, and federal level made such a racial cleansing feasible. White citizens faced few legal consequences in the Jim Crow South when forcefully pushing minority groups off land. For most white citizens in the Ozarks and River Valley, there became little downside to violently pushing Blacks out of the region that was quickly moving away from an economy that required Black bodies for labor. As local newspapers would argue, a separation of the races was becoming necessary in most southern towns – a notion supposedly accepted by even those within the Black community.

In truth, this broken, racist system offered few protections for Black citizens who never actually wanted to leave the town but saw little recourse. While nightriding laws were technically on the books to stop such anonymous violence, they did little to impact what Black

community members had been experiencing hourly since the murder of Effie. Public notices implying assured violence would have been too much for many of these families who ultimately packed up and left for somewhere safer. These implied threats of extralegal violence were an extremely effective tool used by white citizens of the period looking to remove unwanted minority groups from an area quickly – often without the need for outright violence. Black citizens, when met with notices telling them to leave or suffer the consequences, realized they had few alternatives and often fled without putting up much resistance that would be documentable for later researchers.

Even when Black citizens did pick up weapons and try to fight back - as in the cases of Elaine, Tulsa, and Catcher - they were often met with overwhelming force from local citizens who had the backing of the state's national guard. In the rare cases violence was not enough to demonstrate full authority over these Black citizens, such as whites being unable to lynch someone, the state's legal system was often turned to as last resort to uphold white supremacy in a region. Moving up trial dates, scant evidence, racist language, and quickened death sentences provided the foundation for these legal means and reinforced to Black citizens that to not bend to the will of white extralegal violence would ultimately be futile. Legislation like Act 112 and 258, which appeared written to protect these groups, was used nefariously to uphold white authority in the courts.

Because of the overwhelming success of this mixture of extralegal and legal means to uphold white supremacy, Blacks in the south understood that to push back against the status quo in the south would be impossible. As many as two million Blacks began to flee the clutches of the Jim Crow south from 1910 to 1930 and migrated to the northeast, midwest, and west looking for more hospitable places to reside. The classic justification for this 'Great Migration' often

focuses on the economic conditions between the world wars that necessitated such a movement – with Blacks able to garner better wages in urban areas that were losing many young white male workers to war. Historians have begun complicating this telling, adding in dimensions of discrimination and racial violence that were push factors in these decisions. In places like the Ozarks, where (unfree) Black labor was becoming less required, there was a huge migration of Black citizens away from these areas that was likely less voluntary and needs to be reconsidered as such. James Loewen concluded in his research that “more than half of all towns in...the Ozarks went all-white on purpose” during these years.⁸¹⁵ This establishment of these sundown towns throughout much of the Ozark region again complicates the telling of the Great Migration and exposes the anonymous violence that likely preceded many racial cleansings throughout this same period – most of which have gone undocumented, pushed aside for more comfortable narratives that Black citizens voluntarily left the region for access to better jobs.

The story of *Catcher* helps reveal one small case study of this larger hidden history of racial cleansings that have gone largely undocumented.⁸¹⁶ Similar to Elaine and Tulsa, it is only substantiated because of the explicit racial violence that occurred in its aftermath. In all three cases, Black citizens were unwilling to passively accept a subordinate status in society and were beaten back with overwhelming force as a result. This resistance is what allowed researchers and advocates of the time to take notice and document the causes of the violence. Throughout much of the Ozarks and River Valley, however, key factors would have made similar defiance improbable. Blacks in these rural areas were dwarfed in population numbers by whites and were no longer considered as necessary for the local economy to run smoothly. They could not fairly fight back using violence without fear that the state and local whites would overpower them. For

⁸¹⁵ Loewen, *Sundown Towns*, 4-5.

⁸¹⁶ Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters*.

these reasons, racial cleansings likely occurred with the simple posting of a notice in the middle of the Black community telling them to leave or suffer the consequences. Anonymous implied violence was an extremely successful tool for these predominately white communities that wanted to go fully sundown without resorting to outright violence. Such a process helps explain why some Ozark communities went all-white during the period documented cases of explicit violence between the races.

Coming out of the trial of the eleven men who refused to leave Catcher, there is a brief mention of this exact silent process happening to another nearby Black community. At the same time notices were going up in Catcher threatening Blacks to flee, similar notices were posted in the town of Shibley, just two miles north. With a population of around two dozen Black families, it was quietly cleansed and never mentioned again – remaining all-white into the present. Without the trial of these eleven men, however, the cause for the migration of Black citizens out of Shibley would have been forgotten. There would have been no documentation of the cleansing and Black citizens would have been unlikely to tell their descendants such stories for fear of embarrassment. The movement of Black citizens out of Shibley would have been reimagined as economically motivated. One hundred years later, it becomes very difficult to know how many similar stories of anonymous violence have gone undocumented. Still, historians have begun to slowly, case-by-case, reveal this hidden dimension of racial cleansings that are vital to understanding the modern demographics of the country into the present.

The intentional whitewashing of narratives coming out of these racial disputes has made it additionally difficult to recover this history. Newspapers of the period successfully rewrote the narrative in a majority of these cases and permeated the public thought of what had actually occurred. These constantly reinforced narratives of Black criminality, Black aggression, and

Black culpability made it much easier for whites to blame Blacks for the violence. On top of this, newspapers pushed a narrative that Blacks wanted to leave their homes and migrate north to self-segregate and look for better opportunities. This narrative has endured into the present. Catcher is an excellent case study to help reveal how such a cleansing could occur, be state-wide news, then be forgotten only a short time later. This historical amnesia was common in even the largest cases of racial violence as occurred in Elaine and Tulsa. Even these stories were swept under the rug, largely forgotten by subsequent generations until historians later wrote about them. It is considerably more difficult to find cases of anonymous violence that predated racial cleansings that did not have newspaper, legal, or prison records to prove they occurred.

The story of what happened in Catcher in 1923 and 1924 is not complete, though. Several documents, if unearthed, could provide crucial insight into how this incident transpired. Letters from Charles Rucks' daughter to the NAACP asking them to investigate the lynching of her father could radically change what we know about his death. Newspaper reports even mention a grand jury investigation into this lynching that Governor McRae agreed to, but no court records have, as of yet, been found. On top of this, inquiries from descendants of both Effie and the Black community of Catcher may also change the way the incident will be remembered. Most notably, Linda Griffith, a descendant of Effie Latimer, is attempting to have her remains exhumed and forensically studied by experts who could provide more insight into her death and possibly help acquit Bettis, Clay, and Rucks of the murder. Descendants of the Black community have, likewise, begun their own investigations into this history. Several family members have taken their findings to mineral rights lawyers in the hopes that some restitution could be provided for the loss of wealth that transpired from the violence that occurred to their family and the loss of land thereafter. Many of the family members had not heard of the incident until being told by

researchers. The Equal Justice Initiative have helped in both these endeavors and are likewise attempting to work with contemporary owners of land in Crawford County to place monuments at key places memorializing the event on its upcoming one-hundredth anniversary. One archaeologist has even been called upon to examine St. Paul's cemetery and attempt to uncover any more findings of the violence that occurred in the graveyard that day. All of these contemporary efforts to reveal more about the history of Catcher will undoubtedly provide more understanding of the incident itself.

While maps of Arkansas no longer include Catcher, the story that happened there should not be forgotten. As Black citizens were violently pushed out of their homes and the remaining land, jobs, and wealth they left behind were congregated into the hands of white families, it was easy to assume this was a singular incident, an anomaly. As Guy Lancaster has previously stated about the Elaine Massacre, however, "it is imperative [these incidents] not be taken out of its proper context – that is presented not singular, not as unique, not as an atrocity *sui generis*, without equal in the legacy of white supremacy in the United States, but rather as representing a continuum of history."⁸¹⁷ The same must be said of the racial cleansing of Catcher in 1924. While a large combination of disturbing things came together in this one instance, it was by no means out of the ordinary. Arkansas communities from 1890 to 1940, especially in the Ozarks and River Valley, made a concerted effort to reinforce white authority while also 'cleansing' communities of Black citizens. The playbook was fairly uniform in these cases. The use of extrajudicial violence and lynchings (that would never be prosecuted) have been the easiest to track and study for historians. This violence laid the groundwork for the second and less studied measure taken by local communities: intimidation and threats of violence. As early as the

⁸¹⁷ Guy Lancaster, "Introduction," in *The Elaine Massacre and Arkansas: A Century of Atrocity and Resistance, 1819-1919* (Little Rock: Butler Center Books, 2018), 11.

Reconstruction period, it was already well established that violence could and would be used against Black citizens without consequence. Citizens, Black and white, in these small towns understood this. For this reason, it was easy and routine for a simple notice to be placed and a community to be 'cleansed' without any major disturbance occurring. Only because eleven men bravely decided to push back against this authority did violence again become used to reinforce power in Catcher. By studying southern counties that experienced stark drops in Black population numbers similar to what occurred in Crawford County, historians need to begin demonstrating how and why this process took place. While bloodier cases of racial violence like Elaine, Tulsa, and Catcher are easier to document, cases of anonymous violence and nightriding need to be historicized as well.

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Appendix:

Item One: Black Landowners living in and around Catcher, Arkansas in 1923⁸¹⁸

- | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Nancy Agg ⁸¹⁹ | 12. Moses Cunningham |
| 2. Leonidus Appleby | 13. Kinchen Evans |
| 3. Georgia Arnold | 14. Timothy Evans |
| 4. Helen Bettis | 15. Tandy Ferguson |
| 5. James Brown | 16. Henry Green |
| 6. Martin Brown | 17. Girt Hancock |
| 7. Georgiana Bryant | 18. Tobe Hancock* |
| 8. Sopha Cannigan | 19. Moses Hunt*** |
| 9. James Clark | 20. Howard Jackson |
| 10. Tandy Coggs | 21. Merton Jackson |
| 11. Thomas Cornelius | 22. Frank Johnson |

⁸¹⁸ It is difficult to know exactly where the Black community of Catcher began and ended. This is especially true considering that Catcher lies directly in the middle of four different quadrants on STR (Section, Township, Range) maps: Section 1, Township 8, Range 31, Section 8, Township 8, Range, 30, Section 11, Township 8, Range 30, and Section 17, Township 8, Range 30. Black citizens with names closely related to the 1923 violence (Charles Rucks, William Bettis, John Henry Clay, the eleven nightriders) lived in all four of these ranges. The sixty-three names are all of the Black citizens who owned land inside these four STRs surrounding Catcher. When looking at the 1920 census (Appendix II), most of these names are living as neighbors of those known to be impacted by the violence. Even those that did not directly associate with the Catcher community no longer owned land in the area by 1932 with the exception of Moses Hunt, Thomas Richardson (who had sold most of his land by this point), Silas Ricks, and the family of Charles Rucks (who had been killed in the incident). Section 1, Township 8, Range 31; Section 8, Township 8, Range, 30; Section 11, Township 8, Range 30; Section 17, Township 8, Range 30. "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1923"; "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1925"; "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1929"; "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1932." The original book with these land records is held in the Crawford County Courthouse. There are also copies at the Van Buren Public Library. Scanned copies of these records were provided to me by Kristen Edwards, a court administrator for the Crawford County Circuit Clerk's Office.

⁸¹⁹ Those with a single asterisk still owned land in Catcher in 1925; "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1925"; Crawford County Courthouse Archive. Those with a double asterisk still owned land in Catcher in 1929, "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1929"; Those with a triple asterisk still owned land in Catcher in 1932, "Assessment of Real Property in Crawford County, Arkansas for the Year 1932."

23. James (Jimmie) Jones

24. James King

25. John Knight

26. Lula Lyons

27. John McFall

28. Peter Menefield

29. Charles Miller

30. Louis Miller

31. Joseph Morrison

32. James Nance**

33. Clay Perry

34. George Phillips

35. Cora Porter

36. Charles Posey

37. John Posey

38. William Posey

39. Zach Posey

40. William Reese

41. Matton Reeves

42. Earnest Richardson***

43. Gus Richardson**

44. Harrison Richardson*

45. Modest Richardson**

46. Pleasant Richardson

47. Robert Richardson*

48. Thomas Richardson***

49. Silas Ricks***

50. Thomas (George) Ricks*

51. Nolan Ricks**

52. Charles Rucks***

53. Frank Sanders*

54. William Shepherd

55. Sally Sloan

56. David Smith

57. Robert Smith

58. Middleton Stark

59. Charles Stoan

60. Charles Taran

61. Bertha Thompson

62. John Walker

63. Lewis White

Item Two: Black Citizens Living in Catcher, Arkansas in 1920⁸²⁰

Family Number	Number in Census	First Name	Last Name	Age	Owned/Rented
1	122	Nodden	Ricks	24	Rented
		Essie	Ricks	22	
		Maurice	Ricks	5	
		Sylvia	Ricks	3	
		Almeta	Ricks	1	
		Ellis	Ricks	0	
		Laura	Dudley	68	
2	123	Matthew	Powers	47	Rented
		Della	Powers	40	
		Laura	Powers	9	
		Lula	Lyons	70	Owned
		Ella	Rucks	50	
		Alfred	Jackson	50	
3	125	James	Nance	58	Owned
		Mattie	Nance	53	
4	127	Thomas	Ricks	39	Owned
		(George)			
		Lily	Ricks	37	
		Myrtle	Ricks	18	
		Frank	Ricks	16	
		Martha	Ricks	13	
		L	Ricks	11	
		Eola	Ricks	10	
		Henry	Ricks	8	
		Eddie	Ricks	2	
		Mary	Ricks	0	
5	129	Frank	Sanders	64	Owned

⁸²⁰ With Catcher not listed as its own township, it is difficult to know exactly where the 1920 census records for this Black community begins. The author tried to take few risks, only starting the table when families known to be impacted by the violence are listed in the records (starting with Ricks family). From there, the families are listed as they are shown by family number in the 1920 census. This ends with the Perry and Sanders families who were known to be part of the community. Perry is listed in the nightriders motion to gain a new trial location as someone who had a letter put on his property. "Motion for New Trial," *Arkansas v. Richardson, et al.*, Logan County Circuit Court Northern District Case No. 131, April 21, 1924; U.S. Census Bureau, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 – Population Schedule*. Digital copies found on ancestry.com. https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/2056925:6061?tid=&pid=&queryId=46f91cf0025db2509d0c7c3225cdb19d&_phsrc=GbO251&_phstart=successSource

		Johanna	Sanders	54	
		Elizabeth	Hess	22	
		Ray	Hess	24	
		Caroline	Ricks	20	
		Mary	Rucks	11	
6	130	Helen	Bettis	35	Owned
7	131	Cora	Porter	45	Owned
		John	Washington	67	
8	132	Alexander	Hopkins	64	Rented
9	133	Valintha	Ricks	18	Rented
		Jessie	Ricks	16	
		Javan	Ricks	0	
10	134	Pleasant	Richardson	60	Owned
		Katy	Richardson	49	
		Irene	Richardson	28	
		Lydia	Richardson	21	
		Milton	Richardson	20	
		Marella	Richardson	16	
		Roosevelt	Richardson	14	
		John	Richardson	12	
		Edna	Richardson	8	
		James	Richardson	6	
		Geneve	Richardson	5	
		Kitty	Richardson	3	
11	135	Lula	Hays	40	Rented
		Brunson	Hays	20	
		Sadie	Hays	18	
		Alpha	Hays	12	
		Fanny	Hays	5	
12	136	Thomas	Richardson	55	Owned
		Effie	Richardson	49	
		Lela	Richardson	32	
		Bertha	Thompson	28	
13	137	Robert	Richardson	55	Owned
		Leila	Richardson	44	
		Eva	Richardson	18	
		Ladell	Richardson	15	
		Dempsey	Richardson	14	
		Marietta	Richardson	13	
		Wyoma	Richardson	6	

		Cula	Richardson	3	
14	138	William	Shepherd	46	Owned
		Gertrude	Shepherd	46	
		Floyd	Shepherd	21	
		Owen	Shepherd	16	
		Hercules	Shepherd	14	
		Earl	Shepherd	11	
		Jerrold	Shepherd	8	
		Harold	Johnson	4	
15	139	Silas	Ricks	59	Owned
		Dora	Ricks	50	
		Ellis	Ricks	21	
		Jovan	Ricks	16	
16	140	Frank	Dudley	26	Rented
		Abbie	Douglass	28	
		Nathaniel	Douglass	8	
		Virginia	Douglass	6	
17	141	Tandy	Coggs	67	Owned
		Elisa	Coggs	55	
		Elizabeth	Coggs	26	
		Archie	Coggs	23	
		Julius	Coggs	7	
		Clarence	Coggs	5	
18	142	Gus	Richardson	41	Owned
		Pearlie	Richardson	34	
19	146	Charles	Rucks	63	Owned
		Nar	Rucks	34	
		Artis	Rucks	17	
		Cleo	Rucks	9	
		Callier	Bettis	11	
		Vernor	Bettis	5	
		Louise	Richardson	2	
20	147	Elzie	Taff	45	Rented
		Mary	Taff	24	
		Rosina	Taff	4	
		Charles	Taff	0	
21	148	Spurgeon	Rucks	26	Rented
		Lillian	Rucks	28	
22	149	King	Smyers	38	Rented
		Ellena	Smyers	33	

		Elverba	Smyers	14	
		Luella	Smyers	10	
		Shelton	Smyers	8	
		Silas	Smyers	6	
		Abelle	Smyers	4	
		Artilla	Smyers	2	
23	150	Tobe	Hancock	46	Owned
		Martha	Hancock	42	
		Margie	Hancock	18	
		George	Hancock	17	
		Josh	Hancock	15	
		Betie	Hancock	11	
		Ovel	Hancock	8	
		Pearlie	Hancock	4	
		Willis	Hancock	1	
		Rebecca	Ricks	66	
24	152	David	Smith	56	Owned
		Johnnie	Smith	47	
		Mckinney	Smith	16	
25	153	Earnest	Sanders	27	Rented
		Prudence	Sanders	24	
		Cletus	Sanders	0	
25	154	Aaron	Parker	22	Rented
		Thelma	Parker	18	
25	155	Matthew	Coggs	23	Rented
		Ophelia	Coggs	18	
		Mary	Coggs	1	
26	156	Callie	Coggs	47	Rented
		Levi	Miller	15	
		Clyde	Miller	12	
		Cassieanna	Miller	6	
27	157	Girt	Hancock	42	Owned
		Clara	Hancock	35	
		Suzie	Hancock	18	
		Earlie	Hancock	14	
28	158	Haywood	Shepherd	20	Rented
		Igora	Shepherd	17	
29	159	George	Phillips	43	Owned
		Edna	Phillips	40	
		Frances	Phillips	18	

		Elma	Phillips	14	
		Viola	Phillips	8	
		Henderson	Phillips	3	
30	160	Earnest	Richardson	30	Owned
		Ora	Richardson	30	
		Nathaniel	Richardson	10	
		Delbert	Richardson	8	
		Bernice	Richardson	6	
		Desmoines	Richardson	0	
		Justine	Phillips	2	
31	161	Modes	Richardson	23	Owned
		Bessie	Richardson	18	
		Harry	Morris	17	
32	162	Flavis	Rucks	33	Rented
		Lily	Rucks	32	
		Eunice	Rucks	7	
		Roberta	Rucks	6	
		Ural	Rucks	1	
33	163	Henry	Williams	28	Rented
		Mahaley	Williams	25	
		Eugene	Sanders	8	
34	164	Charles	Shelton	47	Owned
		Lulu	Shelton	36	
35	165	Georgianna	Bryant	65	Owned
		Burverd	Dadley	9	
36	166	Charles	Posey	42	Owned
		Celia	Posey	36	
37	167	Harrison	Richardson	66	Owned
		Maude	Richardson	51	
		Gideon	Richardson	47	
38	178	Tandy	Ferguson	47	Owned
		Melvenia	Ferguson	44	
		George	Ferguson	9	
		Otie	Ferguson	4	
		Delma	Richardson	7	
		James	Jones	36	
39	179	Lewis	White	72	Owned
		Emma	White	65	
		James	White	29	
		Beulah	White	27	

40	203	Ella	White	38	Rented
		Hershel	Shepherd	18	
		Homer	Shepherd	11	
		George	Shepherd	7	
41	204	Matton	Reaves	33	Owned
		Mary	Reaves	26	
		Elvis	Reaves	4	
42	205	John	Posey	40	Owned
		Mattie	Posey	38	
		Lenolia	Posey	11	
		Willy	Posey	9	
		John	Posey	8	
		Jesse	Posey	5	
		Katy	Posey	3	
		Artilla	Posey	0	
43	206	William	Bettis	32	Rented
		Cletha	Bettis	29	
		Carrie	Bettis	13	
		Thasla	Bettis	5	
		Crace	Bettis	3	
		Walter	Bettis	1	
44	208	Martin	Brown	45	Owned
		Rena	Brown	40	
		Herbert	Brown	21	
		Hazel	Brown	18	
		Iola	Brown	16	
		Zonie	Brown	14	
		Odessie	Brown	11	
		Australia	Brown	8	
		Lola	Brown	7	
		Harree	Brown	5	
		Izella	Brown	3	
45	209	James	Brown	65	Owned
		Lucy	Brown	56	
46	214	Fanny	Coggs	65	Rented
		Charles	Coggs	17	
47	215	James	Clark	25	Owned
		Mary	Clark	23	
48	217	Ada	Shepherd	35	Rented
		John	Hancock	10	

		Earnestine	White	7	
		Callie	White	3	
49	219	Charles	Miller	55	Owned
		Lizzie	Miller	50	
		Alexander	Hartgreaves	61	
		Janie	Hartgreaves	26	
		Jesse	Hartgreaves	4	
		Charley	Hartgreaves	1	
		Daisy	Morris	6	
50	221	Ballin	Ricks	33	Rented
		Bennette	Ricks	23	
		Curtis	Ricks	2	
51	223	James (Jimmie)	Jones	57	Owned
		Martha	Jones	53	
52	224	William	Posey	46	Owned
		Elnora	Posey	41	
		James	Posey	23	
		Fletcher	Posey	17	
		Beatrice	Posey	16	
		Ora	Posey	11	
53	225	Chauncey	Johnberger	20	Owned
		Marier	Johnberger	52	
54	226	John	Benson	52	Rented
		James	Benson	10	
55	227	Zach	Posey	37	Owned
		Lane	Posey	26	
		Shadrick	Posey	11	
		Sherman	Posey	8	
		Cornelius	Posey	5	
		Lethelbell	Posey	2	
		Zach	Posey	0	
56	228	Moses	Hunt	34	Owned
		Metter	Hunt	32	
		Tyrus	Hunt	12	
		Norman	Hunt	10	
		Bertha	Hunt	8	
		Nathaniel	Hunt	2	
		Ella	Hunt	1	
57	229	Howard	Jackson	23	Owned

		Clementine	Jackson	23	
		George	Jackson	0	
58	230	Merton	Jackson	33	Owned
		Mary	Jackson	29	
		Cyron	Jackson	7	
		Elrod	Jackson	5	
		Mildred	Jackson	3	
59	231	William	Mosely	45	Owned
		Addie	Mosely	25	
		Hannah	Mosely	16	
		William	Mosely	13	
		Lucile	Mosely	8	
		Charles	Mosely	4	
		James	Mosely	1	
60	232	Joseph	Morrison	70	Owned
		Alice	Morrison	60	
61	233	Peter	Menefield	56	Rented
		Nancy	Menefield	45	
		Many	Menefield	17	
		Peter	Menefield	15	
62	240	Kersey	Nance	33	Rented
		Amelia	Nance	31	
		Ocie	Nance	7	
		Necala	Nance	6	
		Daniel	Nance	4	
		Cecil	Nance	2	
		Luvenia	Nance	1	
63	244	Henry	Clay	50	Rented
		Emma	Clay	44	
		Ricie	Clay	19	
		Rosa	Clay	14	
		John Henry	Clay	11	
		Leola	Clay	5	
		Etolia	Clay	1	
64	246	Alfred	Sanders	34	Rented
		Maude	Sanders	30	
		Leola	Sanders	5	
		Toleta	Sanders	3	
		Delia	Sanders	2	
65	247	Lloyd	Sanders	56	Owned

		Odie	Sanders	52	
		Elnora	Sanders	30	
		Vertuce	Sanders	19	
		Sarah	Sanders	20	
		Elener	Mahones	4	
		Odie	Mahones	3	
66	248	Clay	Perry	43	Owned
		Frona	Perry	20	
		Cleo	Perry	17	
		Elmer	Perry	15	
		Harrison	Perry	12	
		Quinton	Perry	9	
		Carrie	Perry	6	
		Katy	Brown	5	
		Amos	Brown	3	
		Diva	Brown	1	
67	249	Edward	Sanders	24	Owned
		Maggie	Sanders	20	
		Earl	Sanders	4	
		Richie	Sanders	1	