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Catcher Race Riot of 1923

The December 28, 1923, assault and murder of a white woman in the Catcher community in Crawford County quickly ignited a firestorm of racial hatred that, within the span of a few days, exploded into the murder of an innocent black man, charges of night riding being leveled against eleven African Americans, and the exodus of all black families from Catcher, numbering at least forty. Two African-American men were sentenced to death and executed in relation to the murder, while a third was given life in prison, following trials that included dubious evidence offered by the prosecution.

From the days of slavery, the township in which Catcher is situated, four miles southeast of Van Buren (Crawford County) in cotton-producing river bottomland, was inhabited by a larger percentage of African Americans than whites. On December 28, 1923, Effie Latimer (age twenty-five) was, as reported in the newspapers the following day, raped, shot in the back with a shotgun, and clubbed over the head with the same gun. The news was quickly broadcast when a friend discovered the victim in mid-afternoon. A doctor was summoned, and he reported that Latimer regained consciousness long enough to name the shooter as "Son [William or Will] Bettis, but that she did not know the other two colored men." Before nightfall, newly elected Sheriff Albert D. Maxey arrested Bettis, who denied the charge and calmly went to the Van Buren jail. Interestingly, Latimer's husband of six years, Robert (age thirty-eight), was reported in the *Arkansas Gazette* as having not been heard from since he "left home a week ago taking a dozen chickens and half of the provisions in the house."

Later that evening, due to the sudden gathering of angry white citizens at the jail and reported threats of violence against the prisoner, Bettis was moved across the Arkansas River to the Fort Smith (Sebastian County) jail. The next day, two more African Americans, Charles Spurgeon Rucks (age twenty-six) and John Henry Clay (age fourteen), were also arrested for the murder. After his arrest, Rucks was taken into the woods by Deputy Sheriff W. A. Bushmaier Jr. and "questioned" about the murder. Bushmaier promptly reported to the newspapers, and later testified in courtroom, that "Rucks had confessed to the crime in his presence." According to the case files, however, Rucks never confessed. Clay was retained in the Van Buren jail, but Rucks was transported to the Fort Smith jail.

By the evening of Saturday, December 29, an angry white mob of more than 500 white citizens surrounded the jail at Fort Smith, demanding that the prisoners be handed over to them. Many others were running the Catcher roads threatening black residents, smashing tombstones in the black cemetery, and digging up remains of the deceased and burning them. At the Fort Smith jail, the sheriffs secretly removed the prisoners to

the railroad station in Mansfield (Sebastian County), where they were whisked away to a Little Rock (Pulaski County) jail to await trial.

For several days afterward, emotionally charged and locally deputized citizen law enforcement officers remained in Catcher, joining in the mob activity in harassing the black citizens in their every movement. On December 30, Special Deputy Sheriff Frederick Creekmore shot and killed the sixty-five-year-old father of Rucks, an action described in the newspaper as an “unfortunate accident.”

That same day, eleven black citizens were arrested and charged with night riding. They were holed up in a log cabin, and local officials contacted the governor to send in the National Guard to “blast” these black men out. Governor Thomas McRae allowed a few men to take a machine gun from an Ozark (Franklin County) company to the Catcher area. Once there, local law enforcement deputized the men. Contrary to legal documentation, the newspapers reported that, upon learning of the machine gun in the area, the African Americans surrendered. According to the case files, only two of them carried shotguns for self-defense, and they had almost no ammunition. Nonetheless, they were charged under Act 112 of 1909, which was directed toward two or more individuals united, confederated, or banded together for the purpose of committing an unlawful act, while wearing any masks, white caps, or robes, or being otherwise disguised.

The legal counsel for the men arrested for night riding filed a motion requesting a change of venue, and they appeared before a jury in Paris (Logan County), though with the same presiding judge. They were sentenced to one year in jail; however, they appealed their conviction, and in October 1924 the Arkansas Supreme Court ruled that “the State has wholly failed to sustain the charge of nightriding.”

It was in the motion for change of venue for those charged with night riding that specific information about the exodus of African Americans from Catcher was provided. The motion stated that “anonymous notices were posted in public places and sent to certain individuals among the negro race, advising them to remove from the County of Crawford.” It also stated: “A notice was received through the United States mail by one of these defendants, to-wit, Gus Richardson, informing him, ‘if you get out of Crawford County in five days you will not be bothered; otherwise you have to suffer the consequences.’” Going on, it added that “all of the said defendants who were not confined in jail did remove from said community and from said County, and the families of these defendants who were in jail, did also remove, and the negroes generally from the settlement where these defendants resided.” The front page of the January 18, 1924, issue of the *Van Buren Press-Argus* blared, “COLONY NEGROES FLEE FROM WRATH OF WHITES.” A few families were told by law enforcement that they could return in a year or so, and a few did. However, the 1930 U.S. Census indicates a greatly reduced black population in the entire township.

Act 258 of 1909, enacted to prevent mob violence or lynching, provided for a speedy trial if mob violence became a threat. Judge James Cochran of Paris presided over a session of the Circuit Court in Van Buren on January 4–5, 1924. Bettis and Rucks were tried

separately for murder and sentenced to death by electrocution between the hours of sunrise and sunset on February 15, 1924. The strongest evidence against the two was the very detailed statement of the crime allegedly offered by Clay. According to Clay's account and trial records, Bettis and Rucks went to Clay's home on Friday morning to borrow his shotgun for rabbit hunting, and Clay decided to go along. They reportedly stopped by the Latimer home to buy a dozen eggs when the incident occurred. In court, led by the newly elected prosecutor Dave Partain, Clay testified that Bettis and Rucks entered the Latimer home and assaulted her; afterward, Bettis shot her, and Rucks struck her over the head with the gun. The doctor testified that it was the gunshot that caused the lethal wound.

Clay's name never appeared in school records; he could neither read nor write, and a prison file describes him as mentally very slow. However, his signed statement (which he later retracted when questioned by Scipio Jones) was explicit in every detail. Other evidence from the trial is equally spurious. Special Deputy Sheriff Creekmore's wife testified that she was a close neighbor though she lived several miles away, and her testimony could only have been based upon hearsay or rumor. One woman produced a dime she alleged was the dime used by Bettis to purchase some eggs, though there was no one present at this alleged transaction save the victim and her assailants. Nonetheless, Bettis and Rucks were both convicted and sentenced to death. Clay was not tried until the regular March 1924 term of court. Because his gun was used, Clay was sentenced to the state penitentiary and "confined at hard labor for the period of his natural life."

The *Van Buren Press-Argus* reported on February 15, 1924, that the noted black lawyer Scipio Jones had appealed to the Arkansas Supreme Court the death sentences of Bettis and Rucks. The appeal, based on legal technicalities, was lost, and on July 4, 1924, the same paper noted that Governor McRae refused to grant a stay of execution. Rucks and Bettis were electrocuted "in the death house of the penitentiary at Little Rock" on June 27, 1924. The newspaper further reported that "the condemned brutes spent their last night reading their Bible and praying for mercy" and that "they never at anytime admitted their guilt and went to the chair with a firm step and were apparently calm and self possessed."

Four years later, on August 16, 1928, Clay was found dead from exposure in a field near one of the prison camps at Cummins. His own death raises questions, as he was a farmhand accustomed to hard work in the fields in the August sun and, at the time, was a trusty given the relatively easy task of tending cattle in the field. His body was not found for two weeks and was badly decomposed.

For additional information:

Circuit Court of Crawford County, Arkansas Case No. 1587, *State of Arkansas vs. Spurgeon Rucks*. January 1, 1924.

Circuit Court of Crawford County, Arkansas Case No. 1587, *State of Arkansas vs. Will Bettis*. January 1, 1924.

Circuit Court of Crawford County, Arkansas Case No. 1596, *State of Arkansas vs. John Henry Clay*. March 11, 1924.

"Colony Negroes Flee from Wrath of Whites." *Van Buren Press-Argus*. January 18, 1924, p. 1.

"Mob Is Pursuing Negro Prisoners." *Arkansas Gazette*. December 30, 1923, p. 1.

"Motion for Change of Venue." Circuit Court of Crawford County, Arkansas, *State of Arkansas vs. Gus Richardson, et al.* March 19, 1924.

"Motion for New Trial." Logan County Circuit Court Northern District Case No. 131, *State of Arkansas vs. Gus Richardson, et al.* April 21, 1924.

"Negroes Are Fleeing from Murder Scene." *Southwest American*. January 15, 1924, p. 1.

"Negro Is Killed Resisting Arrest." *Arkansas Gazette*. December 31, 1923, p.1.

"Rucks and Bettis Meet Death in Electric Chair." *Van Buren Press-Argus*. July 4, 1924, p. 1.

"Woman Slain by Negro Assailant." *Arkansas Gazette*. December 29, 1923, p.1.

**Wanda M. Gray
Waldron, Arkansas**

Last Updated: 12/30/2013

IN THE CRAWFORD CIRCUIT COURT.

State of Arkansas,Plaintiff.

vs.

Gus Richardson, et al, Defendants.

MOTION FOR CHANGE OF VENUE.

Come the defendants and each of them, and
move the court for a change of venue, and for cause say:

1. They and each of them verily believes that
he can not obtain a fair and impartial trial in this case
in this County in which the same is pending, on account
of undue prejudice against them, and against their
defense in this County.

2. They represent and state to the Court that
the conditions surrounding this case are extremely unusual
and peculiar in their nature, in the following particulars,
to-wit:

(a). The defendants are all negroes, charged with uniting, confederating and banding together to intimidate and alarm white persons.

(b). The case grows out of the circumstance or occasion of the killing of a white woman, to-wit: Mrs. Latimer, in Crawford County, in the community of Catcher, on the _____ day of December, 1923, for whose murder Spurgin Rucks, Son Bettis, negroes, were, in January of this year, tried and convicted and sentenced to be executed and for whose murder a third negro, Son Clay, was, on Monday of this week, the 10th day of March, 1924, also tried and convicted of murder, and sentenced to life imprisonment in the penitentiary.

(c). The murder of the said Mrs. Latimer seems to have been a most horrible and unusual one, such that the occasion has outraged the community feeling and inflamed the minds of the individuals in 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 negroes.

(d). These defendants were residents of the vicinity near where the murder was committed, though in no way connected with it.

(e). On the 30th day of December, 1923, one Charley Rucks, father of the said Spurgin Rucks, was shot and killed.

(f). On the same day these defendants were arrested on the charge laid out against them in this case.

3. The feeling against the negroes became such that anonymous notices were posted in public places and sent to certain individuals among the negro race, advising them to remove from the County of Crawford. A Notice was received through the United States mail by one of these defendants, to-wit, Gus Richardson, which was in words and figures as follows:

"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."

that the anonymous notices generally gave a five day notice to the negroes to move from the community; that in response to said notices and their feeling 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 the settlement where these defendants resided. All such notices were given since the conviction of the said two defendants in January for the murder of the said Mrs. Latimer, so that all of the defendants are now residents outside of Crawford County, the defendant Gus Richardson being a resident of Fort Smith, Sebastian County, and the defendant Tandy Ferguson, of Sequoyah County, State of Oklahoma.

4. The defendants further state that within ten ^{19 March 1924} days before this date they are advised and believe that notices were posted in Crawford County upon the premises of a certain negro named Perry, advising him to leave the County, and within two weeks from this very date they are advised and believe that the 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.

5. And the defendants further state that after the arrest and before the trial and conviction of the said negroes, Spurgin Rucks, Son Bettis and Son Clay, it was found expedient by the officers of the law in Crawford

county, to remove them from the County of Crawford, from the danger of violence and lynching, so that they were taken to Fort Smith, in Sebastian County, for incarceration, and that large groups of people did congregate in and around the jail in Van Buren and did follow the said defendants to Fort Smith and did congregate around the jail house where they were confined in Fort Smith, showing violent feeling with reference to them.

6. These defendants proclaiming their innocence of any violation or offence, or intention at wrong doing in the facts leading to the charge laid against them herein, declare that they verily 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.

WHEREFORE, they respectfully pray that the Court grant them a change of venue in the case.

Ladell Richardson,
Alfred Richardson,
Geo Ricks,
Roosevelt Richardson,

Gus Richardson,
Bandy /Ferguson,
Chas Shelton,
Chas Posey,
Earnest Richardson,
Gid Richardson,
Demp Richardson,

Subscribed & sworn to before me this 19th

day of March 1924.

W. A. Bushmiaer, Circuit Clerk.

STATE OF ARKANSAS, }
COUNTY OF CRAWFORD, } SS.

I, C.M. Wofford, having first been sworn, state that I am a resident of Crawford County, Arkansas; that I have read the foregoing motion and that the facts and matters therein set forth are true and correct as I verily believe, and that the defendants cannot obtain a fair and impartial trial in this case in this County where the same is now pending, on account of the undue prejudice against the defendants and against their defense in the County.

C.M. Wofford,

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 19 day of March, 1924.

My Commission Expires: W.A. Bushmiaer, Notary Public

STATE OF ARKANSAS, }
COUNTY OF CRAWFORD, } SS.

I, W H Neal having first been sworn, state that I am a resident of Crawford County, Arkansas; that I have read the foregoing motion and that the facts and

matters therein set forth are true and correct as I
verily believe, and that the defendants cannot obtain
a fair and impartial trial in this case in this County
where the same is now pending, on account of the undue
prejudice against the defendants and against their defense
in the County.

W. H. Neal,

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 19 day of March, 1924.

W. A. Bushmiae, Notary Public

My Commission Expires:

Filed in Open Court Mar 19 1924.

W. A. Bushmiae, Clerk.

State of Arkansas,Plaintiff.

vs.

Gus Richardson, et al, Defendants.

On this 19th day of March 1924, this cause coming on to be heard on defendants motion for a change of venue the Court after hearing the evidence, the argument of council and being well and sufficiently advised, doth grant the petition. It is therefore by the Court ordered, adjudged and decreed that this cause be and the same is transferred to the Paris District of Logan County and set for trial Monday, April 14, 1924.

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25. The court erred in permitting the witness, W. E. Watson, to testify upon direct examination by the prosecuting attorney, that he had received information that negroes were arming themselves, said testimony being admitted over the objections of the defendant.

26. The court erred in permitting the witness, Cliff Howell, to testify over the objection of the defendant that it was not customary for people to go armed on Sunday morning in that community, and the court further erred in permitting the witness Cliff Howell to say that he had been in that community for many years and that was the first time he ever saw people going armed on Sunday morning.

27. The court erred in permitting the witness, J. H. Johnson, to testify over the objection of the defendant, that it was not customary for negroes to go down there to attend Sunday School with shot guns, high powered rifles and six shooters, to all of which testimony the defendant at the time saved his exceptions and requested that said testimony be withdrawn from the consideration of the jury, which request was denied by the court, and to which action of the court the defendant at the time saved his exceptions.

28. The court erred in permitting counsel for the State to ask and to assert in interrogating the witness Nathan Nance, "if three negroes in that community had not murdered and ravaged a white woman, to which testimony at the time the defendant saved his exception, and asked the court to withdraw it from the jury, which request was denied, to which action of the court the defendant at the time saved his exceptions.

29. The court erred in permitting the witness, Will

Brown to testify that somebody asked him something about a gun on that Sunday morning and that he could not say that this defendant heard the person make that request of him, and further, that he could not name the person who made the request. The defendant at the time requested the court to withdraw said testimony from the jury, which request was denied and the defendant at the time saved his exception to the admission of said testimony and to the refusal of the court to withdraw it from the jury.

30. The court erred in permitting Webb Covington, an attorney especially employed to assist in the prosecution to remark in the course of his opening argument to the jury: "We have never had as foul a murder in the City of Fort Smith, as happened in and about Cateher." Upon the making of which statement the counsel for the defendant objected and requested the court to reprimand the attorney and withdraw the statement from the jury, which request was denied by the court, and to which ruling the defendant at the time saved his exception.

31. The court erred in permitting the said Webb Covington to again say: "A poor, defenseless woman, who was murdered and slain by a crowd of four murderers." The defendant's counsel at the time objected to said statement being made in this case, and requested the court to admonish counsel and to reprimand him, and to advise the jury that such statements were not proper, which request was denied by the court and the defendant at the time saved his exception to the making of such statement and to the ruling of the court and to the remarks of the court with reference thereto. The court saying, especially: "I will not do that Mr. Hardin."

The defendant saved his exceptions at the time to the remark of the court.

32. The court erred in permitting said Webb Covington at another point in his argument, to say: "Some others would fall like Mrs. Latimer fell." The defendant at the time objecting to said remark and requesting the court to admonish the jury that said statement was improper and to reprimand counsel for making it. The court refused to grant the request of the defendant but permitted said statement to be made. The defendant at the time saved his exceptions to the ruling of the court, as well as to the statements of counsel.

33. The court erred in permitting Dave Partain, the regular prosecuting attorney, in his closing argument to say: "The people are to be commended that these three negroes are convicted; that the law is permitted to take its course". Said statement being made in connection with the very inflammatory speech, making frequent reference to the murder and ravagement of the white woman, Mrs. Latimer by other negroes previous to this offence. The defendant objected at the time and requested the court to admonish counsel not to make said statements and admonish the jury that the same were improper and reprimand counsel, to which request the court said: "I think, Mr. Hardin, you have a restricted idea of what counsel for the State has the right to do in this case", and overruled the defendant's objection, to which ruling of the court, as well as to such line of argument, the defendant saved his exceptions.

34. The court erred in his ruling upon the defendant's objection to the following statements by the said prosecuting

attorney, same being made after numerous interruptions and objections to the same character of argument on the part of the State, said objections being by the defendant, as follows: "I will say that the court has said that the white women and children of that community have the same right to be represented in the trial of this case as the brutish, black negroes like those who murdered Mrs. Letimer, have to be represented by counsel on the other side". The defendant at the time objected to such statement and requested the court to admonish the jury that such remarks were improper and reprimand counsel for making same. The court overruled the objection of the defendant and permitted said remark to stand, to which ruling of the court, as well as to which remark, the defendant at the time saved his exception.

35. This verdict is clearly the result of extreme passion and prejudice and not the result of a deliberate consideration of the case by the jury, for which reason the court in this case should vacate the verdict of the jury and the judgment in this case and grant this defendant a new trial.

Wherefore, this defendant prays that the court vacate the verdict of the jury and the judgment rendered, and grant him a new trial in this case.

W. H. Neal
C. M. Hafford
W. R. R. Hafford
G. C. Hardison
Attorneys for defendant.

MOB IS PACIFIED WHEN DEATH VERDICT IS GIVEN

Hopkins, Nathan

The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967); Jan 12, 1924;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender

pg. 3

MOB IS PACIFIED WHEN DEATH VERDICT IS GIVEN

By NATHAN HOPKINS.

Van Buren, Ark., Jan. 11.—A mob of Arkansas ruffians, bent on lynching, practically dictated the death penalty meted out to Spurgeon Ruck, a farm worker, on trial for the murder of Mrs. Bob Latimer, a white woman.

The jury deliberated only ten minutes—just time enough to sign their names to the "guilty document"—and returned to the courtroom amid wild cheers. Judge Cochran did not pronounce, but it is known that the electric chair is the only logical thing to expect in this section when the char-

always resorts to when public sentiment clamors for blood.

Ruck, handcuffed with Will Bettis, who also was indicted on a charge of murder and assault, was led before the bench to hear the verdict. Neither of the pair showed any emotion. The verdict came within one week after the Latimer woman was found dying in her farmhouse.

Many peculiar angles developed in the case, and common rumor has it that Ruck is only a "sacrifice" to hide the main parties to the slaying. Johnny Clay, age 15, an ignorant country boy, was used as the state's acteristic "southern quick trial" is held. This is the justice Arkansas

star witness against Ruck. 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. He was extremely frightened as if he might repudiate "his confession" and words were, at some intervals, put in his mouth. He also faces a charge of murder, but it is thought that he will be given an "immunity bath" for identifying Ruck as the slayer.

Urges Lynching

There was never a question in the minds of the citizens here as to the fate that awaited Ruck and his associates at the trial. The entire town urged a lynching, some taking the stump on the street demanding mob action as the best punishment, whether the men were guilty or not. One speaker said: "We haven't had a good lynching here in years, now's our time. Let's see it done right."

Ruck said he knew nothing of the killing of the woman until an officer told him about it on way to the jail.

The trial of Bettis consumed less time than that of Ruck. A verdict was reached in nine minutes. Bettis denied taking any part in the murder.

No indictment has been drawn against the white men who shot and killed Charles Ruck, 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

DEFENDED HOME, THE CHARGE

Little Rock, Ark., June 27.—(Special)—Spurgeon Rocks and Will Retim, two of the 11 men of Crawford county who barricaded themselves in a log hut and repulsed a mob of more than 1,000 whites until troops arrived, have been sentenced to hang Friday morning for the death of Mrs. Effie Lattimore, a woman who was found murdered in her home last December.

Gus Richardson, who was tried with the condemned couple, has been granted a change of venue to Lonoke county, and a new trial. He had previously been sentenced to one year in prison on a charge of night riding. Johnie Clay, a schoolboy, who was associated with the men, and whose testimony was chiefly responsible for the other convictions, was given a life sentence.

At the time of the trouble in Crawford county the whole state was wrought up over the finding of the body of Mrs. Lattimore. Men 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. During the excitement, an officer of the law went to the home of Rocks and his father and murdered in cold blood the aged man because he could not say where his son was hiding.



NEGRO IS KILLED RESISTING ARREST

Eleven Others, Barricaded
Captured by Van Buren
Officers.

MACHINE GUNNERS CALLED

Reach Scene of Attack on White
Woman After Quiet Is Re-
stored, However.

Special to the Gazette.

Van Buren, Dec. 30.—With 11 negroes charged under the night-riding act, and another negro, Charles Ruck, aged 45, dead from a gunshot wound reported to have been inflicted by a special deputy early today when Ruck became insolent when asked to accompany the officer comparative quiet prevailed again in the Catcher settlement of Crawford county. It was officially reported early tonight by Prosecuting Attorney Dave

INDEX NUMBER FOR LAST WEEK WAS 151

Special to the Gazette.

New Haven, Conn., Dec. 30.—Last week's prices averaged 151 per cent of pre-war (1913) level. The purchasing power of the dollar was 66.3 pre-war cents. The average for December was 151 per cent and 66.4 pre-war cents. The average for the last quarter was 153 per cent and 65.4 pre-war cents. The average for 1923 was 153 per cent and 63.4 pre-war cents.

The index number for the preceding week was 150 and the purchasing power of the dollar was 66.5 pre-war cents.

The index number for May, 1920, was 247 and the relative purchasing power of the dollar was 40.5 cents.

Corresponding numbers for January, 1922, were 136 and 72.5 cents.

An index number showing the average movement of the wholesale prices of 200 representative commodities and of the purchasing power of the dollar compared with the pre-war year of 1913 is prepared for the Gazette each week by Irving Fisher, professor of political economy at Yale University.

CRAWFORD SHERIFF

insolent when asked to accompany the officer comparative quiet prevailed again in the Catcher settlement of Crawford county. It was officially reported early tonight by Prosecuting Attorney Dave Partain.

The report of quiet came after 36 hours of tension following the arrest of two negroes Saturday morning who are alleged to have confessed to outraging and killing Mrs. Effie Latimer, 35, at her home near Catcher Friday morning. The two negroes who were implicated by the alleged confession of a third negro, Johnnie Clay, aged 15, were spirited out of the Van Buren jail at 6 o'clock last night by Sheriff A. D. Maxey, and taken to Little Rock for safe-keeping.

The excitement which had its inception in the Catcher community Saturday morning following the arrest of Clay and another negro, Spurgeon Rock, whose alleged confessions implicated "Son" Bertie, already in custody, and moved to Fort Smith last night when a crowd of more than 500 persons congregated at the Sebastian county jail demanding that they be allowed to search the building for the two negroes and the sheriff of Crawford county, moved back to Crawford county this morning when Charles Rock, father of one of the accused negroes, was shot. The latter died at 4 o'clock this afternoon.

Following its failure to gain entrance to the Sebastian county jail last night and its dispersing shortly before midnight, the crowd congregated again at Catcher today and caused authorities to prepare for any emergency.

CRAWFORD SHERIFF PREVENTS LYNCHING

Saves Accused Negroes From Mob and Brings Them Here.

Sheer nerve, brains and cleverness saved Spurgeon Rocks and Will Bertie, negroes accused of the brutal assault and killing of Mrs. Robert Latimer of Catcher, from the hands of a mob, according to an authentic report of the maneuvers of Sheriff A. D. Maxey of Crawford county to prevent their lynching. For 24 hours sheriff Maxey and his deputy, N. R. Whitlock, matched their wits and energy against the crowd, and assisted by Sheriff Shaw, at Fort Smith, brought the prisoners safely through to Little Rock.

It was while the crowd was storming the Van Buren jail threatening an assault, that the sheriff succeeded in taking out his two men in a fast Packard motor car. A civilian guard was relieved to go to his supper, so that no hindling of the departure could get to the mob before a safe lead could be gained. As he snatched off the two negroes were spirited out through the inclement

Following its failure to gain entrance to the Sebastian county jail last night and its dispersing shortly before midnight, the crowd congregated again at Osark today and caused authorities to prepare for any emergency.

Guardsmen Are Called.

When 19 negroes, armed with shotguns and rifles, barricaded themselves in a log house, authorities prepared to storm the place. But it was found by officers that they did not possess enough firearms to warrant their advance on the log cabin, and officers sent a call to Capt. O. W. Kayer of the National Guard at Osark for assistance. He responded with a machine gun and 18 men to men it, and left at once in an auto. ~~When they arrived at the cabin, they found it empty. While waiting for the~~ guardsmen, authorities mustered their force and advanced on the cabin and the stronghold was taken without the firing of a shot.

The negroes surrendered and were disarmed and on their way to the county jail at Van Buren before the arrival of the guardsmen and the machine gun. The latter's assistance was not needed when they arrived, but their presence it was evident, had excellent effect in causing the several hundred whites to disperse and go to their homes. Authorities said that while Captain Kayer and his men were members of the National Guard, they did not come in the official capacity of guardsmen, but merely to furnish a machine gun and men to operate it as citizens assisting officers. However, there was no attempt made to intimidate the crowd by the

motor car. A civilian guard was relieved to go to his supper, so that no inkling of the departure could get to the mob before a safe lead could be gained. As he sauntered off the two negroes were spirited out through the basement of the jail and out the back, and a car furnished by a citizen who gave his services also, dashed toward Fort Smith.

In Jail All Night.

The two negroes were held in the Sebastian county jail at Fort Smith over night, while the mob milled and threatened, but still decided that the negroes were there. Back in the darkness of the doorway were Sheriff Maxey, Deputy Whitlock and others, heavily armed.

~~While they were being held in the jail, the blacks were covering inspector Shaw's throat. "Try and tear down my jail, and there will be some new widows in Crawford county and some new Crawford faces in hell," held back the mob.~~

At 3:30 o'clock yesterday morning the negroes were spirited away for the second time in a high-powered car, and taken to Mansfield, which they reached at 5:30 o'clock. A Rock Island train was boarded and Sheriff Maxey and his party reached Little Rock at 11:47 yesterday morning.

Ruck was taken to the penitentiary, and Bettis was placed in the Pulaski county jail, temporarily. Sheriff Maxey, it was said, wanted to keep the two separate until they go before the Grand Jury Wednesday. Bettis continued to protest his innocence, while Ruck was

show of arms. The whites began to dis-
perse and return to their homes late
this afternoon when Prosecuting Attor-
ney Partain publicly announced as
catcher that Judge James Cochran had
telephoned from Paris that he would
convene a special Grand Jury at Van
Buren Wednesday instead of the pre-
viously announced date on January 11,
to investigate the charges against the
negroes. The statement which indicated
that speedy action by the court would
be launched was followed almost imme-
diately by the dispersing movement.

Authorities tonight said that they an-
ticipated no further show of feeling, but
that every precaution would be taken,
and thought that by the day of the
convening of the special Grand Jury, ev-
erybody would be willing to calmly
await action of the duly constituted au-
thorities.

One of the 11 negroes held in the
Crawford county jail who gave his
name as Gus Richardson, is responsible
for today's trouble, according to au-
thorities. Officers said that Richardson
stopped a truck loaded with whites and
went at a point between Cadott and
Hamilton early this morning and en-
gaged them with a gun and forced them
to stop.

Prosecuting Attorney Partain said
that he had received no report as to
any demands made by Richardson, but
had heard that the latter had fired
through the truck for firearms and
finding none, allowed the whites to
proceed. Richardson later was arrested
with 10 others at the big battle.

too frightened to talk, according to
trustees at the penitentiary.

Officers Worn Out.

Sheriff Maxey and Deputy Whitlock
refused to talk. They were seen leaving
on the Rainbow special and both looked
worn and tired. They received communi-
cations from Van Buren during the
day, and a last message, shortly before
they departed, informed them that the
mob spirit had died down and that the
town was quiet.

Both are said to have feared that
residents of their county might extend
their anger to them, but neither, it was
said, regrets fighting for a lawful
cause. Each believes this possible feel-
ing against them will die down when
the home folks regain their calm. Both
were anxious to return and "face the
music."

Deputies will come to Cadott Sat-
urday or Tuesday morning to return
the two negroes to appear before the
Grand Jury. By that time, it is be-
lieved, it will be relatively quiet in Van
Buren.

Mob's Action Frustrating.

The action of the mob, it is said,
was so chaotic that it has frustrated
many of the citizens' plans for the
negroes in custody, and coming from
Van Buren, the charges against the negroes
are being handled. For 10 minutes after the
negroes had been taken to jail, their
life was bright.

When the mob arrived at the pen-
itentiary, the sheriff's men, who
were on duty, the Grand Jury and the
allied military units, all the men
of the county were on duty.

them separate before they appeared at the grand jury.⁹⁸

The mob, prevented from lynching the prisoners, re-congregated in the Catcher community. Charles Ruck, the sixty-five-year-old father of one of the accused men, was shot during the violence, though reports differ on the circumstances of the murder. The *Arkansas Gazette* reported that Ruck was shot by a "special deputy" after Ruck "became insolent when asked to accompany the officer." (See figure 4.1.)⁹⁹ The *Southwest American* originally did not identify the shooter, only noting that Ruck "was shot through the cheek during a race disturbance." The paper amended this two days later, accusing Ruck of having "resisted a command to submit to a search of his person."¹⁰⁰ That same day, however, the *Van Buren Press-Argus* reported that Ruck "was met in the road by a citizen and that when Rucks [*sic*] was commanded to throw up his hands he insolently refused and when ordered to return to his home, again refused."¹⁰¹ The newspaper exhibits exquisite use of the passive voice when it next notes: "At this juncture, a shot was fired and Rucks [*sic*] received a bullet wound in the right jaw." Oral history collected by Moira Bryant holds that Ruck was hanged from a nearby tree and that he was shot in the face to cover up the nature of his death. Bryant also recorded stories of white mobs burning down black-owned homes and desecrating the local black cemetery.¹⁰²

According to one report, there was an "exodus of negroes from the Catcher community" following the shooting of Ruck, though most returned soon thereafter.¹⁰³

In order to protect themselves from the mob, eleven African Americans barricaded themselves in a log cabin, armed with shotguns and rifles. Local authorities, finding that they lacked the firepower to force the group out, placed a call to Captain O. W. Kayer of the National Guard at Ozark, located in neighboring Franklin County, who promptly brought a machine gun and ten men to Catcher. When the eleven men became aware that their persecutors possessed a machine gun, they surrendered and were promptly arrested. Interestingly, it was reported that, although Kayer and his men were members of the National Guard, "they did not come in the official capacity of