LYNCHING GOES UNDERGROUND
A Report on a New Technique

"Your investigator has probed numerous lynchings. His acquaintance with lynchers and the lynched extends over a lifetime. It is his judgment that countless Negroes are lynched yearly, but their disappearance is shrouded in mystery, for they are dispatched quietly and without general knowledge. In some lonely swamp a small body of men do the job formerly done by a vast, howling blood-thirsty mob composed of men, women, and children. This is the new and dangerous method, devised by those who seek to rule by terror and intimidation."

January, 1940
The Author

The author of this report, who must remain anonymous, is a white native southerner who has lived all his life in the South and still lives there. He has made a number of investigations of lynchings.

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Lynching Goes Underground

WEDGED between the Delta and the Prairie sections of the State of Mississippi lies the little town of Canton. Half in and half out of the regions, it is a mixture of each.

Your investigator spent five days in Canton, Jackson, and vicinity and met numerous extraordinarily able and fine citizens in Canton. But on the whole, conditions existing among Negroes in Canton are not greatly different, if any at all, from those which universally prevail throughout the deep South.

Despite the burdensome physical and spiritual hardships to which Negroes are daily subjected, little deep-seated hatred for white people is in evidence. One is amazed to find men who live under such conditions possessing such breadth of social comprehension and understanding, tolerance and active good-will. At the time your investigator interviewed some of these citizens, the possibility of a European war was imminent. He found a genuine hatred for Hitler and Hitlerism, a broad sympathy for England and France, and a profound attachment and love for America. There was observable an intense devotion to democracy and an ardent hope that they might be permitted to participate in its realization and fulfillment.

Death of Joe Rodgers

IT WAS in this sort of atmosphere that Joe Rodgers lived. He came to Canton from a rural community nears Forest, Mississippi, in 1935 or '36. Early and easily he won for himself the respect and confidence of the Negro citizens of Canton. At Canton he became a member of Mount Zion Baptist church. Soon he was made a deacon in the church and elected president of the choir.

Joe Rodgers undoubtedly possessed many unusual and noble qualities of character for he was universally respected and esteemed by all those who knew him. He was apparently impressive to look at, weighing in the neighborhood of 185 or 190 pounds and strong of body and limb. He was active in community affairs and ever anxious to turn a hand for a friend whenever possible. As far as anyone knew Rodgers had never experienced any trouble of any sort in Canton with either the white or colored people and had never been approached by officers of the law for any cause whatsoever.

Joe Rodgers was unmarried and lived at the home of a friend in Canton where he had a private room and upon which he looked as his home. Here he was thoroughly satisfied and contented. He was generally known to be quiet, industrious and a hard worker.

Argument Over Rent

On Saturday, May 6, 1939, Rodgers was helping to install a turbine at the Dinkman Mill where he was employed. After the day's work had been completed he went for his pay. Upon receiving his envelope he noted that some money had been deducted for reasons which he did not understand. He inquired of the foreman the reason for the deduction from his pay and was told that the money had been deducted for rent on a house which was supposed to occupy while working for the company. He told the foreman that he had no reason to live at the mill since he was comfortably situated elsewhere. It is generally understood that Rodgers said no more about the matter and went home. (Your investigator was unable to ascertain whether this was a long-standing policy of the company or recently introduced or whether it was a general policy at all and/or whether it was a ruse on the part of the foreman to secure funds from the workers. The amount was thought to be around $4.50.)

On Sunday Rodgers attended church in Canton and in conversation with some friends mentioned the events of the preceding day to them. On Monday morning Rodgers in company with one “Sun” Ewing returned to his work at the mill. Some time during the early part of the morning Rodgers approached the foreman in charge of the work and expressed dissatisfaction over his week's pay. The foreman evidently resented Rodger's reference to the matter and struck him with his fist. Words undoubtedly passed between them and the foreman grabbed a spade with which to strike Rodgers. Rodgers, it is related, wrested the spade from the foreman and struck him with it. At this juncture “Sun” Ewing appeared on the scene and succeeded in separating the two men.

Whether Rodgers continued at his job or started to return home is not known but he was not seen by anyone outside of the mill grounds after he went to work. By noon of the same day the knowledge of his trouble at the mill and his subsequent disappearance, supposedly at the hands of a mob, was widespread.
Body Found in River

On Thursday morning Constable Snugg of the local police force was noticed walking near the banks of Pearl River. Some time during the morning he discovered the nude form of Joe Rodgers in the sluggish waters of the river. When the body had been recovered from its watery grave it was laid upon the banks where it was viewed by many citizens.

The body of Joe Rodgers bore mute testimony to the manner in which he had been disposed of. Although stilled in death, his lifeless form was a ghastly and revealing witness to the fact that he had come to his death at the hands of a mob. With a half-inch rope his feet had been securely bound and his hands tied tightly behind him. According to numerous persons who viewed the body immediately after it had been recovered from the river and while it reposed at the funeral home, Rodgers’ body had been beaten to a pulp. The marks on the body seemed to indicate that Rodgers was beaten from head to feet with wooden clubs and sticks. The head was smashed from a heavy blow and the body so bruised and misshapen as to arouse doubt as to whether it was Rodgers or some other victim of a mob’s fury. One of Rodgers’ friends was present and caused the mouth to be examined for an upper plate of false teeth. The plate when extracted from the mouth tallied in detail with the description given by Rodgers’ friend. According to reliable testimony the body bore no signs of having been cut or burned with hot irons. It appears that Joe Rodgers was simply beaten to death by blunt instruments which were used to smash his naked body.

Work of Mob

The evidence in the case points conclusively and unmistakably to the conclusion that Joe Rodgers was lynched by a mob composed of a considerable number of men. It is unreasonable to believe that “a powerfully muscled man” as one witness described Rodgers, who weighed around 190 pounds, could be securely tied hand and foot with a half-inch grass rope, beaten to a pulp, dragged to the river’s edge and his body disposed of by a single man or by only two or three men. Such could have happened had Rodgers been knocked unconscious by a blow or in some manner made powerless. If such had been the case there would have been no necessity to go to the trouble to bind the body in the manner heretofore described.

The mill at which Rodgers was employed is located partly within the limits of the city of Canton. It is so situated as to make it extremely unlikely that a group of men from outside of the mill could enter the grounds without being seen by the colored residents. No unusual excitement or disturbance was known to have been noted by the Negro residents in the mill area. The facts would seem to warrant the conclusion that Joe Rodgers was lynched by a mob composed of workers at the Dinkman Mills.

The opinion was advanced by several persons that the Negro employees may have been forced to accompany the mob and to witness the lynching of Rodgers. This was done in order to “teach the niggers respect for white men” and to have a scapegoat should any word of Rodgers’ death leak to the general public.

Your investigator is inclined to believe that unusual factors operate in this case since persons who are known to possess valuable information refuse to divulge any facts in connection with the case or in any way to talk about it. Your investigator worked through well-known Negro citizens of the immediate vicinity of Canton, but they were unable to secure certain information from some persons known to have considerable knowledge of the affair.

Negroes of Canton are no more or no less sensitive to such brutal treatment as that meted out to Joe Rodgers than any Negroes generally. They are human beings who are intimidated, coerced, bruised and brutalized by the very nature of the society of which they are a part and in which they must live and work. Life is often painful and always sustained by the slenderest of circumstances. A man’s work or station in life is no guarantee against mob attack or less overt expressions of the white man’s will to dominate and rule the countryside. If a Negro violates the long-established codes of the white man he must pay and all too often his life is the only thing acceptable to those who rule.

The white people of Canton are just ordinary folk with a fair respect for the decencies of a civilized society. To many citizens of Canton the lynching of any man is a repugnant and repulsive thing. There are people in Canton who are incensed over the Rodgers case. They, too, are intimidated and held in check by long-established mores and customs.

The Mayor’s Newspaper Is Mum

In almost every community there is a small group of self-elected men who quietly but always thoroughly guide the affairs and thinking of the people. In small southern towns the country newspaper has considerable opinion-moulding influence. In Canton, Mayor Charles N. Harris is owner and editor of The Madison County Herald. The fact that not a single word concerning such brutal affairs as thelynching of Joe Rodgers ever reaches the pages of his paper is telling testimony to the Mayor’s attitude toward Negroes and of his determination to prevent any knowledge of such incidents to get abroad so as to reflect upon the “civilizing” influences at work amongst his fellow townsfolk.

Following the discovery of Rodgers’ nude form the
body was taken to the People’s Funeral Home at Canton. Shortly thereafter Joe Rodgers was returned to his former home near Forest, Mississippi, to rest amongst the pine-scented hills where as a child he chased yellow butterflies and gathered in the fruits of a rich countryside. To Joe Rodgers, strong of body and spirit, came cruel and agonizing death. To thousands of Negroes in the deep South the death of Joe Rodgers is but an awful omen of that which stands between them and the fulfillment of the dreams of every child who bares his face to reason and fair play. To thousands of others, both black and white, it is the symbol of death in a land which has hardly begun to live.

Facts Known, but Hidden
Your investigator believes the following points to be self-evident from the evidence just cited:

1. That Joe Rodgers did not come to his death at the hands of persons unknown but to the contrary he came to his death at the hands of a mob composed of employees of the Dinkman Mills.

2. That the above is known to be the facts by the officials of Madison County.

3. That no real effort has been made or will be made to bring the guilty parties to justice.

Death of Claude Banks

O n the afternoon of July 21, 1928, a mill worker by the name of A. B. McAdams, of Brandon, Mississippi, came to Canton, Mississippi, to visit his daughter who lay ill in a local hospital. Before leaving Brandon Mr. McAdams had borrowed approximately $90 from his employer with which to meet certain of his daughter’s hospital expenses. Mr. McAdams visited his daughter during the afternoon and later talked with various acquaintances in Canton. During the early part of the evening Mr. McAdams was discovered by a group of citizens as he lay on the sidewalk suffering apparently from some minor injuries inflicted upon his person. Mr. McAdams related that he had been but recently attacked by an unknown Negro man who had robbed him of his money. Mr. McAdams was then taken to a local hospital where he was treated for his wounds.

Officers and local citizens soon gathered at the scene of the alleged crime and decided to throw a “blockade” or cordon around that part of the city in which the crime was supposed to have occurred.

On the same evening several young people were having a party at the home of a friend. Among those present were two young Negro boys, Claude Banks and Willie Jones. Banks was the youngest son of an honored and respected citizen of Canton who was the proprietor of the People’s Funeral Home. Young Banks was 22 years of age and had but recently graduated from high school. His companion, Willie Jones, a most pleasant and agreeable young man, was about the same age.

The young men decided to leave the party early. Neither of them had any knowledge that any trouble had occurred in the city and were wholly unaware that a group of white men were engaged in a manhunt on the streets of Canton.

They Drive Into Death

In returning home it was necessary for them to go through that section of the city occupied by the white men who were on the lookout for the alleged assailant of McAdams. As Banks and Jones approached the guarded area they noted the presence of an unusual number of people on the street, but since the group at this point was not particularly large and since there were no obstructions in the street to thwart the passage of automobiles, they assumed the crowd to be a body of citizens gathering after some meeting or a group of youngsters playing on the streets in the late summer evening. They heard voices, saw flashlights but recognized no serious effort being made to stop or delay them. As they neared the scene of the collected men they slowed down their car and moved slowly through the crowd. Just as the car passed beyond the so-called “blockade” several members of the posse or mob began to shoot at the moving automobile with shotguns and pistols. Young Claude Banks was at the wheel. As he drove away a bullet smashed through the west side of the car and entered the back part of his head. His companion did not know that he had been struck by a bullet until young Banks began to slump in his seat and the automobile to careen across the pavement. A few moments later it overturned on the curb.

The posse followed the automobile bearing the two men and when young Jones came to himself he found guns and flashlights being shoved into his face. Jones was jerked from the car by members of the posse which by this time had been greatly augmented by other citizens attracted to the scene by the shouting and shooting. No one was permitted to touch young Banks, who lay at the bottom of the car, or to examine him to discover the extent of his injuries. Young
Jones, still unaware of the cause of the excitement, was immediately placed under arrest, thrown into a waiting automobile, driven, incidentally, by a white woman, and hurried off to jail.

The Police Are Present

Present at the scene were four members of the Canton police force, a deputy sheriff and many prominent business men. A deputy sheriff and two local policemen accompanied Jones to the jail. During the drive to the jail the officers repeatedly sought to force young Jones to say that he and young Banks had been drinking. This Jones refused to do and likewise denied any connection or knowledge of the alleged robbery of McAdams. Evidently the temper of the mob had by now been raised to a high pitch. One of the men in the car was heard to say, "Well, we've done killed one, we might as well kill another one." One of the men in the car claimed with considerable satisfaction that he had fired the shot which killed young Banks but my informant was unable to say who this person was.

My informant stated that young Jones was literally thrown into the automobile and from it into the jail and that he was roughly handled throughout the time that he was in the custody of the officers. He was placed in a cell in the local police station. While there he was continuously subjected to threats and questioning. He was told, according to my informant, not to say that "you ain't been drinking." After being held in the jail for nearly two hours young Jones was released. Upon leaving the jail he was told that he would "catch sudden pneumonia" (be lynched) if he did not keep quiet about the whole affair.

Meanwhile a friend telephoned Claude Banks's father and revealed to him the terrible events of the evening. Mr. Banks sent his eldest son, who had but recently graduated from Morehouse college in Atlanta, Georgia, to secure the body.

Bloodhounds

Shortly after Mr. McAdams had related his story of the attack to officers in Canton preparations were made for a real man-hunt. Bloodhounds were ready and on hand with which to track down the person who it was alleged had attacked McAdams. The bloodhounds led the posse to the home of a Rev. Jackson in Canton. At Rev. Jackson's home the posse discovered a man by the name of John Pate. In Pate's room the officers stated that they found garments covered with dust and blood. Pate was arrested and taken to jail.

By this time the entire countryside had been aroused and word of the man-hunt had reached the state capital. A photographer for the Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger sought to take a picture of the body of Claude Banks but he was prevented from doing so on the personal orders of Mayor Charles N. Harris of Canton. The Clarion-Ledger states (July 22, 1938): "A Clarion-Ledger photographer, attempting to photograph the body of Claude Banks, was stopped by police under orders of Mayor Charles Harris of Canton. Despite his protests that he wanted no photographs of the pose, but the only of the Negro's body, the newspaperman was ordered away with his camera and an officer assigned to see that the order was obeyed."

Father Told to Forget Killing

As far as your investigator was able to discover there were no protests on the part of white citizens over the murder of Claude Banks. There were, however, certain citizens who privately expressed their indignation and sent expressions of sympathy and regrets to Mr. Banks and his family. Soon after the murder of his son Mr. Banks called upon the Mayor, Charles N. Harris, in an effort to get the city of Canton to make some compensation for the death of his son. The Mayor, in consultation with other city officials, declined to give any assistance to the family and refused responsibility for the crime on the basis that the men who killed young Banks had not been deputized, did not constitute a pose and hence the city was not responsible. The city furthermore refused to assist in any way to repair the damage done to the automobile in which the two young men were riding at the time. Following Mr. Banks interview with Mayor Harris he called upon Judge Julian Alexander of Jackson who advised Mr. Banks that there was little if anything that could be done in the matter and that the better policy would be to let the matter rest.

From conversations with numerous people your investigator found the following account of the incident which resulted in the death of Claude Banks to be fairly generally held among the citizens of Canton.

Didn't Pay Hospital Bill

Mr. McAdams, who was employed at a sawmill in or near Brandon, Mississippi, borrowed approximately fifty dollars from his employer with which to meet certain hospital expenses of his daughter. Although it was understood that Mr. McAdams had visited the hospital, seen his daughter, he had not paid the hospital bill. Mr. McAdams alleges that he was attacked in the white residential section of the city whereas it is reliably reported that he was first noticed in the Negro section of town. Various persons who later recognized him reported that McAdams seemed to be under the influence of liquor during the latter part of the afternoon.

McAdams was not seriously wounded. His clothes were disarranged and his body bore a few minor abrasions and scratches. There was little to indicate that he had been attacked by a person intent upon
Robbery. When the incident was reported in Brandon where McAdams lived it was genuinely doubted. It was believed there and also in Canton that McAdams had lost his money in a gambling house or had been "fished" out of it at a dive and that he invented the story of the attack upon him by a Negro man in order to cover up the loss of the money which he had borrowed to pay his daughter's bill at the local hospital. It is reliably reported that McAdams was shortly thereafter discharged by his employer in Brandon.

Suspect Released

On the evening of July 21 officers had been led to the home of Rev. Jackson where they arrested a Negro man by the name of John Pate. Officers stated at that time that bloody soaked clothes were found in his possession. Pate was lodged in jail and charged with the robbery of McAdams. Within a few weeks Pate, who had been charged with the crime, was released from the local jail. It would appear that there had been the slightest reason to accept McAdams' version of the story Pate would have been duly tried and sent to prison or the electric chair. That the story was pure invention is attested to by the fact that Pate continues to reside in Canton and has not been molested by anyone since the affair of the 21st of July.

Young Banks and Willie Jones left the party between eight-thirty and nine o'clock, or shortly after twilight. By the time they reached the area occupied by the posse it was just dark. The incident occurred one month after the longest day in the year. It is reasonable to assume that McAdams was not discovered by officers before eight-thirty and in all probability not before eight o'clock. The alleged attack upon his person therefore must have occurred during the early part of the evening, between seven and eight o'clock. At this time of evening it is still quite light. It is unreasonable to believe that a Negro would attack an unknown white man in the residential section of a small southern town at an hour when most people are seated on their front porches and all windows and doors flung wide open, and when his actions could be easily discernible at a considerable distance.

The evidence seems to indicate that the group of men who fired upon Banks and Jones was a legally deputized posse. It is understood that numerous telephone conversations occurred during the early part of the evening between the jail and local residents. It is furthermore understood that Sheriff James was in Canton at the time. It is positively known that both deputies and members of the local police force were among those who shot Claude Banks.

"Get Some Negro"

Whether a posse or a plain mob matters little to Claude Banks or his parents and brother. A young life, full of glow and promise, has been snuffed out. The posse in Canton acted as similar groups always act. A white man had been attacked by a Negro: A Negro must pay, the right Negro if possible, but a Negro at whatever costs. Two careless, happy Negro boys rode by. When it was discovered that they were Negroes and did not stop, they became immediately guilty in the eyes of the white men who formed the posse. No effort was made to stop them by a blockade of the street or by shooting out the tires of their automobile. They were "just two niggers" and as such could be shot down like wild animals seeking to escape before the hunter.

Thus death came to another citizen of Canton, Mississippi.

Lynching Goes Underground

With regard to the whole problem of lynching your investigator desires to make the following statement. It is his considered judgment that, for various reasons, lynching is entering a new and altogether dangerous phase. Lynchings in the past have been characterized by the mob, the faggot, the rope. Hundreds of people, often thousands, poured out to participate or witness the lynching of a man or woman accused of some crime, often of the most trivial nature and often without any real charge at all. Pictures of the mobbed and mobbers have been taken and widely circulated. Souvenirs of the lynched man or woman, in the form of fingers, toes and other parts of the body, have been brazenly displayed by members of the mob.

Public opinion is beginning to turn against this sort of mob activity. Sentiment is growing against lynching. Agitation for Federal and state anti-lynching laws gives pause to the lynching crowd. Lynching, they say, must go on, but it must be done quietly so as not to attract attention, draw publicity. Thus those who must rule by terror and intimidation turn to new methods. The old mob is disappearing but the work of the mob goes on. A Negro is accused of some crime, real or alleged. A few white men gather, formulate their plans, seize their victim. In some lonely swamp a small body of men do the job formerly done by a vast, howling, bloodthirsty mob composed of men, women and children. The word is then passed that the matter has been handled to the satisfaction of those in charge of such matters.

Your investigator has probed numerous lynchings. His acquaintance with lynchees and the lynched extends over a lifetime. It it his judgment that countless Negroes are lynched yearly, but their disappearance is shrouded in mystery, for they are dispatched quietly and without gen-
eral knowledge. The lynching of Joe Rodgers is a case in point.

It is his judgment that a careful study covering four or five states of the deep South for a period of months would reveal a startling number of lynchings otherwise unaccounted for. He believes that a revelation of this character would greatly influence public opinion and go a long way in rectifying the present situation.

Four Unreported Lynchings

Your investigator was informed by competent observers that since the notorious double blow torch lynching which occurred at Duck Hill, Mississippi, in 1937, word has been passed that in the future all difficulties between Negroes and whites will be handled by a small group of white men already appointed for that purpose. He was similarly advised that in the vicinity of Cleveland, Mississippi, at least four Negroes had been lynched within the past four or five months.

It is his judgment finally that every effort should be made to secure the active cooperation and assistance of the Department of Justice in an effort to bring to light such activities as heretofore described.

Facts About Lynchings

1. More than 5,000 have occurred in America since 1882.

2. More than 1,500 victims have been white people.

3. 103 women have been lynched.

4. America is the only nation on earth where lynching occurs.

5. In 99.2% of the lynchings nothing has been done to apprehend or punish lynchers.

6. In the seven years, 1933-1939, there have been 102 lynchings, an average of better than one a month.