"One lady said to me, 'I'd have to be sloppy drunk to stand what you stood.'
And I said, 'I don't drink.'"

Mary Ellis Carson

"That night ... I remember!"

Mary Ellis Carson (formerly Harris, at left holding baby) escaped with her infant son, James Harris, after her family was attacked Jan. 9, 1950. Her daughter, Valene Thurman (left photo, right) and her then-
husband, Thomas Harris (right), were shot. It testified against the attackers but later died. Above: At her home in Durant, Carson recounts the attack on her family by three white men.

Slaying of 3 children still haunts mother

It's a little-known chapter in the racial history of this state. A chapter with a beginning like many before: Three black children murdered. But the ending was different from most: Three white men convicted. One for manslaughter. Two for murder. During the course of these extraordinary events of 1950, many things mattered to the people who had the power to bring about that end: politics, justice, the grief of a mother, the reputation of a state. For once, what didn't matter most was race.

By Gary Pettus

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DURANT — In the fading light of a late fall day, Mary Ellis Carson slits from a chair by the open front door. In her lap is a box of Kleenex.

The tissue is for her eyes, which are filling up fast — as fast as the room fills up with the sunset. The man who had money, who gave her the tissue, is her son. On the night of Jan. 9, 1950, James Harris was 7 months old and as portable as a box of Kleenex.

That is why his mother was able to save him. But she couldn't save the others. That's why, almost six decades later, she is still wiping her eyes.

"One lady said to me, 'I'll have to be sloppy drunk to stand what you stood.'" she says.

"And I said, 'I don't drink.'"

"When my husband was still alive, a white man wrote him a letter. It said for a man to do what that man had done to us — a mail like that didn't suppose to live."

See JUSTICE, 5A

INSIDE: Remembering the trial, 5A

Red tape homes mean Coast's Katrina By Ana Radelet Clinton Ledger WASHINGTON

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Fascinating story still lives in memories of many

By Gary Pettus

DURANT — It didn’t take long to find the men who did it.

One turned himself in. A posse of sheriff’s deputies还包括 Leon Turner, hiding either in a corn crib or potato house — surrounding cotton fields in 1950, the news reports you read. Newspapers also differed on details. They spent first names a variety of ways, including the names of one of the two survivors, their father, her great-uncle, Verma Turner’s name right.

But there was one thing the men and women seemed to agree on: The men shot and killed the three children in the Attalla County sharecropper’s home had to answer for it.

Justice: Penitentiary trusty who didn’t like black people helped hunt killers of black children

From LA

Anger was the popular sentiment of the day. It poured from this report of the massacre that followed the news:


It was a terrible crime. The trial was held in a white courtroom, the spectators were all white. The jury was all white. The judge was all white. The district attorney was all white. The sheriff was all white. The coroner was all white. The police were all white. The newspapers were all white. The radio stations were all white.

But there was one thing the men and women seemed to agree on: The men who killed the three children in the Attalla County sharecropper’s home had to answer for it.

The all-white jury acquitted.

It was the first-ever conviction of a white man killing black people — a crime that could not be called murder — said Bill Minor, the veteran journalist who covered the trials for The Clarion-Ledger.

It was so unusual in Mississippi in the years that came after that. I used to point to that to say that things could be different here.

But racial tension had not yet ended in Mississippi. After the verdict, Sheriff Roy Brashell described the killing as “a sordid, tough-looking man of something, a man with a gray streak in his shaving hair.

On the same day, the family knew how. The mother, Mary Ella Davis, and her husband were staying at the house. She was watching TV when the car came into view.

When Turner was growing up, his father let him stay there, says James Harris, 57, who was a baby when his mother saved him from Turner’s rampage.

His father had had several children with black women. Leon Harris was his father’s only white child.

“My take is that he felt so isolated, so alone that he decided to associate with black people so he could feel better than them.

“Leon was the best man I knew. He was smart, he was tough. He was a good boxer. He even stayed at their house.

When Turner was growing up, his father let him stay there, says James Harris, 57, who was a baby when his mother saved him from Turner’s rampage.

He didn’t go to their funerals.

He couldn’t have been more than 10 years old, was that he helped stoke the rumors.

One woman told me, “You got yourself three children killed,” she says. “That’s what some people were mean enough to tell me.”

The second trip was to the dead, the son from Mary Ella’s first marriage, Frankie Turner, and his daughter, 10-year-old Verma Harris.

They were shot outside a house in a small town near the Mississippi River.

The two girls were shot in their beds.

Their mother and the baby had stayed the night at the nearest neighbor’s house, about 100 yards away. Where they had lied, the baby carried there, under her mother’s right arm, a little girl.

The baby is now a software developer for Verizon.

In the years following the murders, another man moved from Kossuth to Durant. When he lives in a house with his mother, the baby is now married, but she is a widow again.

She is left with two children.

Mary Ella’s son, James Harris, now 57, was born in 1969. He was 10 years old when his mother was shot.

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