Mattie Green

“It Cannot Be Walked Away From and Forgotten”¹

Heather Catherwood, NUSL ‘12 and Rashida Richardson NUSL ‘11
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Civil Rights and Restorative Justice
(Working Document)

Over the past two years, the Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project (CRRJ) at Northeastern University School of Law led by Professor Margaret Burnham has investigated the murder of Mattie Green by synthesizing available research and conducting interviews.

In the early morning hours of May 19, 1960, Mattie Green, black mother of six, was fatally injured when her home was bombed in Ringgold, Georgia. Her husband, Jethro Green Sr., was left unconscious and the couple’s young son, Larry, was injured but both survived the incident. The tragic case was initially investigated by the Catoosa County Sheriff’s office, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation and the Federal Bureau of Investigation but efforts were largely unsuccessful. Mattie Green’s family and community have waited fifty years for answers or some measure of closure but the case remains unsolved.

Mattie Green’s Life and Murder

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2 Georgia Officers Find No Motive For Fatal Blast at Ringgold Home, Catoosa Times, May 21, 1960.
3 State Offers Reward In Bomb Death, Atlanta Constitution, May 20, 1960
4 Georgia Officers Find No Motive For Fatal Blast at Ringgold Home, supra note 2
5 Id.
Mattie Green was a domestic worker for a retired railroad man. Jethro Green, her husband, was employed as a mechanic and repairman at the Abney Motor Company in East Ridge, Tennessee. The couple had two daughters Ruth and Lethia and four sons Jethro Green Jr., David, William and Larry. The Greens resided at the edge of a small black neighborhood on Guyler Street in Ringgold, Georgia. Jethro Green Sr. was a lifelong resident of Ringgold and remained there until he passed away on December 29, 1995. The Green’s home sat on the border between the white and black areas of the neighborhood. The Greens moved to that home in 1955, five years before the bombing. One of the Green’s white neighbors described Jethro as “one of the nicest colored men I’ve ever known-- a real Christian who lives right and tries to bring his children up right”.

On the night of the bombing the couple’s daughters, Ruth and Lethia, were spending the night at their grandmother’s home. It was later determined by investigators that the perpetrator removed a metal ventilator from the foundation of the Green’s home and set the explosives some three feet under the couple’s bedroom. When the explosive detonated, the couple’s bedroom absorbed much of the impact. Mr. Green was thrown under the back porch. Baby Larry, asleep in his own bed in the couple’s room, fell under the sills of the now-floorless room and Mrs. Green’s body was thrown and trapped beneath the lumber and plumbing of the bathroom. Prior to the arrival of first responders, the couple’s oldest son, Jethro Green, Jr. rescued David, William and his father but was unable to reach his mother. Neighbors and family flooded the crime scene after the incident. Black and white residents of Ringgold experienced great shock to learn of the senseless murder of an innocent mother and all called for justice. In the hope of seeking justice for the family and the community, the Governor offered a $500 reward for more information on the dynamiters. Unfortunately, the reward failed to lead to charges brought against any suspects.

Reports in 1960 of the Crime Scene

A memorandum to the FBI laboratory provided the identification of the explosive materials found from the remains of the Green’s home. The whitish material found at the crime site was Ammonium Nitrate. The substance was commonly used as a fertilizer but when mixed with other substances it

6 Memorandum from SAC. C. E. Weeks, Unsub: Bombing of Residence __ Ringgold, Georgia, May 19, 1960; Mattie Green-Victim; Bombing Matters. (on file with the Atlanta Division of the FBI)
7 Sheriff, Other Officials Probe Dynamite Cause, Atlanta Daily, May 22, 1960
8 Georgia Officers Find No Motive for Fatal Blast at Ringgold Home, Chattanooga Times, May 21, 1960
9 Negro Woman Is Killed in Ringgold As Blast Razes Home; FBI in Case, Chattanooga Times, May 20 1960
10 State Offering Bomb Reward, Atlanta Constitution, May 20, 1960 at 1
11 Id.
12 Id.
13 Sheriff, Other Officials Probe Dynamite Cause, supra note 7
14 Id.
15 Id.
16 Sheriff, Other Officials Probe Dynamite Cause, supra note 7
17 Id.
18 Id.
19 Id.
20 State Offering Bomb Reward, Atlanta Constitution, May 20, 1960 at 1
21 Memorandum to FBI Laboratory, Unsub Bombing of Residence of______ Ringgold, GA., 5/19/60; Mattie Green Bombing Matters (May 26, 1960) (on file with the FBI)
22 Id.
creates a powerful explosive.\textsuperscript{23} From a dynamiting crew that worked on the US Interstate Highway 75 in Ringgold, the investigator learned that the Ammonium Nitrate was mixed with diesel fuel and after setting for two hours can be used for blasting.\textsuperscript{24} The investigation revealed that such a mixture was used exclusively by the Ledbetter and Johnson Company located in Rome, GA.\textsuperscript{25} The mixture is a significantly cheaper option than its equivalent in dynamite; an 80 pound bag of fertilizer costing 80 dollars was equal in strength to dynamite worth 2,500 dollars.\textsuperscript{26} A memorandum summarizing the investigation offered that a piece of red and orange wire was found in the midst of the debris later in the day on May 19, 1960, near the explosion site.\textsuperscript{27} The red an orange wire was consistent with electric dynamite caps, likely used in the bombing.\textsuperscript{28}

\textit{Patterns in Klan Conduct and the Explosives Connection}

To offer a contextual backdrop, a few years prior to the bombing of the Green’s home, a Klan splinter group, the Dixie Klan, originating from Chattanooga registered their organization in Georgia.\textsuperscript{29} The group known for its violence engaged in the use of explosives similar to those believed to be used in the murder of Mattie Green.\textsuperscript{30} In the investigation of southern Klan violence in 1965, the HUAC stored at the National Archives produced a list of bombings that occurred between January 1, 1956 and June 1, 1963.\textsuperscript{31} The authorities suspected that there were 138 separate race related-bombings, one of which was Mattie Green.\textsuperscript{32} The concentrations of bombings occurred around voting registration sites as well as areas struggling with school desegregation.\textsuperscript{33}

The HUAC files also contained information that on October 1, 1961, training was held for members of the UKA “in the handling and detonation of explosives.”\textsuperscript{34} This training was held at an isolated farm nine miles Northwest of Macon, Georgia owned by J.R. Mixon.\textsuperscript{35} It was suggested that Mixon made financial contributions to a vigilante group who engaged in explosive demonstrations in the area.\textsuperscript{36} At a public session in 1965, Calvin Craig, Grand Dragon of the United Klan of America, gave examples of demonstrations including “how to explode a type of fertilizer used by farmers, known as sodium phosphate.\textsuperscript{37} Craig had been present at the 1961 explosives training.\textsuperscript{38}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[23] Id.
\item[24] Id.
\item[25] Id.
\item[26] Id.
\item[27] Memorandum to SAC (157-102), UNSUB; Bombing of Residence of ____ Ringgold, GA, 5/19/60; MATTIE GREEN- VICTIM BOMBING MATTERS (Jul. 22, 1960)
\item[28] Id.
\item[29] Memorandum from Philip R. Manual, Investigator, History of Georgia, Klans to February 1959 (May 12, 1965)
\item[30] Memorandum to FBI Laboratory, supra note 21
\item[31] Memorandum Overall Violence Figures from Various Sources: Bombings (on file with House Committee on Un-American Activities).
\item[32] Memorandum Overall Violence Figures from Various Sources: Bombings (on file with House Committee on Un-American Activities)
\item[33] Id.
\item[35] Id.
\item[36] Id.
\item[37] Questioning by Philip Manuel of Calvin Craig, Public Session, 89th Congress. 1049-1051 (Oct. 28, 1965)
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Theories on the Murder

As the murder remains unsolved, all that exist are rumors that circulated in Ringgold around the time of the bombing. There has been much speculation on this case but are three frequently cited theories: (1) this was a intra-family attack (2) this was an accidental bombing of the Green’s home and the actual target was a neighbor’s home; and (3) Lester Waters or other Klan members set the bomb as a hate crime.

The intra-family theory focused on Mattie’s spouse, Jethro Green, Sr., as the prime suspect. The FBI memorandum summarizing the investigation noted that it was rumored among black Ringgold residents that Mr. Green was involved in the bombing. During the 2009 interviews, an unnamed black male interviewed by the Atlanta Division of the FBI alluded to a rumor that her husband may have set the bomb. The interviewee shared that he did not believe this to be true as he was home when the bomb was detonated. It is interesting to note that the FBI interviews immediately following the bombing do not make mention of this theory. A newspaper article offers Sheriff Stewart did not consider Mr. Green a suspect; he was merely questioned for more information. One possibility is that this was engineered as a tool of the actual perpetrators to draw attention from their involvement.

Another theory suggests that the person who set the bomb intended to bomb a neighboring home and mistakenly attacked the Green residence. A FBI interview from 2009 contained a rumor that an unidentified individual had gotten into fights with “white boys” and that whoever bombed the Green home had actually meant to bomb the unidentified individual’s home. An additional piece of this puzzle emerges when this information is viewed in conjunction with the interview of another black male who admits that as a teenager in 1960 he often got into fights with “white boys” in Ringgold. It is important to note that the man interviewed here does not make mention of expecting retaliation. The teenager lived in the same neighborhood as Mattie Green’s family.

A third and arguably the most frequently discussed theory is a member of the local Klan splinter organization set the bomb because of Mr. Green’s connection to the emerging NAACP chapter. The southern Klan’s modus operandi was homemade bombs as the FBI connected two previous residential bombings occurring in Catoosa County to the Green’s home bombing. A black unnamed female interviewed by the FBI in 2009 relayed a conversation she had with Sheriff J.D. Stewart years after the bombing: “a white male named Lester Waters had confessed to the bombing and that the guilt had driven him crazy.” The black female interviewee also noted the rumor that J.D. Stewart took Lester Waters to a

38 Id.
39 Memorandum to SAC (157-102), UNSUB; supra fn. 27
40 FBI Interview-8, in Ringgold, GA (May 19, 2009)
41 Id.
42 Husband at Loss on Blast Motive, Chattanooga Times, May 24, 1960
43 FBI Interview-9 in Ringgold, GA (May 18, 2009)
44 FBI Interview-11 in Ringgold, GA (May 18, 2009)
45 Id.
46 Memorandum to SAC (157-102),
47 Memorandum to Director, FBI and SAC, Knoxville (157-New), UnSubs, Bombing of ___ Residence of ___ Ringgold, Georgia One A. M, May Nineteen, Sixty, Mattie Green Dash Victim, Bombing Matters (May 19, 1960)
48 FBI Interview-10 in Ringgold, Georgia (May 18, 2009)
mental facility in Milledgeville, Georgia. She added that, during 1960, Klan members were very active in Ringgold and the surrounding area. They held meetings and would drive hooded in caravan fashion through black neighborhoods. CRRJ research reveals that Lester Waters was a Dixie Klan member and maintained a friendship with Sheriff J.D Stewart. It remains unconfirmed whether Sheriff J.D. Stewart was also a member of the Dixie Klan. At the very least, the friendship between Lester Waters and Sheriff J.D. Stewart poses the obvious question about equal protection for blacks in a system where law enforcement openly fraternized with known active Klan members.

The Recent FBI Investigation

Beginning in 2006, the Department of Justice engaged in an effort to investigate civil rights era cold cases. Over 15 unsolved homicides from the civil rights era, all suspected of having been racially motivated, have been documented as having occurred in Georgia from 1946-1966. After assessing the viability of each of the cases in 2008, the FBI reopened the Mattie Green murder as a full civil rights investigation in March 2009. Mattie Green’s case was identified by the Department of Justice and the Civil Rights Division because no clear suspects were initially identified, the perpetrators usage of explosives implicated federal law and the original highly redacted FBI interviews suggest that there were other similar bombings in the area at the time. In 2009, an FBI Agent conducted an extensive investigation of the murder by interviewing family members, witnesses and other relevant parties. At the writing of this report, the FBI’s attention to this particular case appears to have lured the media into taking a deeper look at this case. But the Green family remains without answers or any new information.

Conclusion

The passage of fifty years, destroyed evidence, deceased witnesses/suspects, potential collusion between law enforcement and Klan members are the obstacles that stand in the way of us confirming who killed Mattie Green and why. Unlike a number of civil rights era cases, the FBI conducted an extensive investigation through Georgia to find answers and that work has brought a significant amount of media

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49 Memorandum to Director, FBI and SAC, Knoxville (157-New), UnSubs, Bombing of ___ Residence of___ Ringgold, Georgia One A. M, May Nineteen, Sixty, Mattie Green Dash Victim, Bombing Matters, supra note 47
49 FBI Interview-10 in Ringgold, Georgia supra note 48
50 Id.
51 Id.
52 FBI Interview-16 in Adairsville, Georgia (Sep. 18, 2009)
53 Id.
54 Attorney General’s Second Annual Report to Congress Pursuant to the Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act of 2007 (May 13, 2010) available at http://www.northeastern.edu/crrj/resources/emmitt_till_unsolved/documents/DOJ_Civil_Rights_Cold_Case_Report_2010.pdf. Note: The report lists 122 cases identified through the Cold Case Initiative. Through the initiative, the Department of Justice has partnered with following organizations to further their work National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Urban League, Southern Poverty Law Center, Syracuse University College of Law, Northeastern University Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project.
55 Memorandum from Atlanta Squad C6- Public Corruption and Civil Rights (Mar. 31, 2009)
56 Id.
57 Memorandum from Atlanta Squad C6- Public Corruption and Civil Rights (Mar. 31, 2009)
58 Telephone Interview, Anna Ruth Montgomery, (Jul. 13, 2009)
59 Telephone Interview, Anna Ruth Montgomery, (Sep. 16, 2010)
60 Id.
attention. Unfortunately, the FBI’s determined investigation into this matter made more difficult CRRJ’s efforts on behalf of the family as witnesses were frustrated and exhausted and thus hesitant to discuss these matters time and again.

Unfortunately Mattie Green’s case serves as a painful reminder that sometimes when cases are “walked away from and forgotten” for years upon years, justice for families becomes an unattainable ideal and, in effect, some were able to get away with murder.