Murder on the Mountain

The Lynching of James Thomas Scales

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On the cool morning of November 23rd, 1944, at the Agricultural Reformatory School for Negro Boys in rural Bledsoe County, Tennessee, James Thomas Scales was shot six times in the head in front of the tree where he was going to be hung by a lynch mob. It was shortly before eleven a.m. and, in those five hours that preceded his untimely demise, sixteen-year old Scales had been accused of murder, taken to jail, removed from the jail and taken back to the reformatory school by an incensed mob of approximately thirty citizens. Rather than hang him from a tree merely a hundred yards from where Scales had allegedly murdered two women, one man in the mob gunned Scales down with a six-shot revolver then calmly walked away. As the news spread and the Tennessee Department of Safety sent several highway patrolmen to secure the scene, every member of the mob took credit for the slaying. In a scene reminiscent of *Spartacus* the entire mob confessed to being the shooter and this story, the official story reprinted in newspapers around the nation, became a forgotten part of Bledsoe County—as well as American—history. The deaths of the two women, however, remained foremost in the memories of those who heard the story passed down through the generations.

Placing race in the foreground, this paper seeks to re-tell the story of the lynching of James Thomas Scales as newspapers and official accounts largely failed to do so. This paper will exhume the long-buried truth of what really happened that tragic morning, and construct an image of lynching based on history, culture, and race, derived from the eyewitness account from a man who, quite possibly, is the only person still alive who saw the lynching. This paper will tell the story of what happened, what the police investigation and newspaper accounts would have the readers believe had happened, and construct a theory of lynching that seeks to illuminate racial violence against African Americans in the South. But first, some back-story is necessary.
At approximately 9:00AM on November 23rd, 1944, Assistant Superintendent W.S. Neil and storekeeper Virgil Davis discovered the gory bodies of Mrs. H.E. Scott—wife of Superintendent Scott who was away on business in Nashville—and her daughter, newly-married Gwendolyn McKinnie. They had been murdered by use of a hammer, two butcher knives, and a double-bitted axe that were found in the hallway beside the bodies. Mrs. Scott, still clinging to life, was rushed by ambulance to a Chattanooga hospital where she died later that evening.

Meanwhile, a farmer and former employee of the Reformatory School in the nearby community of Winesap noticed a young African American boy on his property at approximately 9:30AM (Killer Attacks, Reward Offered). The boy was wearing a military Airman’s jacket. Knowing that such a person, in this part of the county, had to be an inmate of the Reformatory School, the farmer captured the young boy and took him the ten miles back up the road to the school. That boy was newly-promoted Reformatory trusty and inmate James Thomas Scales, the not-yet seventeen year-old son of Ellis Scales and Daisy Mae Holden of Murfreesboro, TN (State of Tennessee). When Scales arrived back at the reformatory, he was greeted with a trip to the Bledsoe County jail on suspicion of two counts of murder. He was not charged or arrested by a police officer or agency, but was driven sixteen miles down the mountain to the jail by two men from Winesap and an employee of the Reformatory, Virgil Davis (Angel, Negro Lynched).

Little is known of what happened to Scales while at the jail. He was there for less than one hour (Negro Murderer), because he was promptly taken from the jail by an incensed mob of townsfolk and driven back up the mountain to the reformatory. According to newspaper reports, W.S. Neil had telephoned the jail to ask that Scales be searched for a missing pistol (Reward Offered), only to be told by Mrs. Ruth Douglass that Scales had already been taken from the jail by three men who claimed to be from the Reformatory. They had told her that Scales was wanted back at the Reformatory School and, believing the visit to be official, Mrs. Douglass subsequently turned Scales over to the three men.
The accounts of the lynching published in local newspapers say only that Scales was driven back up the mountain to the school where a rope had been thrown over a tree less than a hundred yards from where the brutal murders of Mrs. H.E. Scott and Gwendoyln McKinnie had taken place. Scales was hoisted upon an overturned barrel which served as a gallows, and his head was put through the rope. At about that time, W.S. Neil heard the commotion occurring outside and went to investigate. He protested the lynching, saying that he didn’t want anything like that to happen here on account of his wife being ill, and the crowd seemed to acquiesce (Negro Murderer). Newspaper accounts say that Neil then turned to speak with someone, and shots rang out. As Neil hit the dirt to take cover, Scales was shot multiple times in the head and face; his body was then taken inside the reformatory to be shown to all of the other students as an example of what could happen.

There is, however, a different version of events which never made it into the local or national newspapers. I first learned of this event approximately three years ago, as I listened to an elderly man talk about what he had seen that November day. I interviewed this man and recorded his words, which I then transcribed long before I had begun to collect other research on the murder. Indeed, his story was not so much about the lynching of Scales as it was about the murders of two white women. I recall thinking how little things had changed in the sixty years between the murders and his recounting the story; the concern of the white community of Pikeville seemed to lie entirely in the tragic deaths of two white women at the hands of a “Negro murderer”. For the context of this paper, in order to protect his identity, this gentleman will be referred to as Informant Alpha. As this informant told his story, focusing on how the entire town of Pikeville was “tore up” by the murders, I am comforted to know that he was not, himself, a member of the lynch mob. He was, like so many other people who bore witness to mob violence, a spectator who wanted to know what was going on. He had seen the body of Mrs. Scott as the ambulance stopped for fuel before heading sixty miles to a Chattanooga hospital. He had encountered a man driving Scales—at that time, a nameless
Negro youth who was *undoubtedly* guilty of a double homicide—back up the mountain to the lynching site. He had followed the three vehicles to the school and watched as the rope was tied around the young man’s neck. He had watched and listened as one man—“a Davis...from Van Buren County ...went and shot him. Killed the shit out of him” (Informant Alpha). This is in stark opposition to newspaper accounts of the lynching, which said that Scales was killed by gunshots from the mob (Morning in Bledsoe County, Negro Murderer Shot, Negro Lynched).

The interviewee says that he “was down there with Old Man Neil, he’d got back from Nashville, and Bob Williams, and Mugum Turner...Old Man Neil went to [the] jail and got him [Scales] out.... And Mr. Neil said it wouldn’t do for me to haul him out there in my car...” After switching vehicles a couple of times, they arrived at the scene. He goes on to describe the murder: “and that little Davis from Van Buren County took out his little pistol and shot...” He goes on to state describe the events following the lynching of Scales:

old Man Neil said to get all them ol’ boys out there. Told ‘em, see what’s happened? And he made ‘em go around and look at him. There was some didn’t want to see him, but he made every one, made them go around and look at him. That’s gonna happen to the rest of yuns if you can’t take orders... But what set it off... Vaughan Chevrolet was down there where Mary Ruth’s beauty shop is now, and they had gas pumps out there. And that ambulance pulled there and we looked in that back glass of the ambulance. Her hair, where it was bloody... she had long hair, where he took that axe, I mean all over bloody, chops... Man that tore up that town. Tore everyone up. (Informant Alpha)

The man that did the shooting is dead, according to the informant, but he was a “little old short feller. He wore a mustache. I can see him right today...” It must be noted that this account of the lynching is derived from an eyewitness account, not a mere reprint of a news article. It must also be noted that it is categorically different in several critical aspects from what was revealed in
newspaper accounts. It would also be different from official accounts of the lynching provided by the police investigation, if such results were ever made public. After much outcry from the African American community of Nashville in the weeks following the lynching, Tennessee Governors Prentice Cooper and Jim Nance McCord refused to divulge the results of Tennessee Department of Safety chief Lynn Bomar’s investigation. To this date, the evidence collected during the murder investigation lies in an un-marked box in one of three warehouses used by the Tennessee Highway Patrol, The Department of Corrections, or other police agencies. It is the coldest of cold cases.

The recollection of Informant Alpha sheds new light on what really happened in those mid-day hours on top of a mountain in rural Tennessee. Contrary to media accounts, the murder was perpetrated by one man, not a vicious mob. The story reported by Time Magazine, later used as a source for Margaret Vandover’s *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South*, that “the shotguns blasted” (Morning in Bledsoe County) as “a small mob took him outside and hanged and shot him” (Vandover 22), is erroneous. The mob did not collectively end his life, though their presence may have certainly contributed to Scales’ death. What we learn from Informant Alpha is that one man, quite possibly the same Davis who had not only discovered the women’s bodies but had also driven Scales to the jail only to reclaim him less than an hour later, pulled the trigger between four and six times then calmly walked away. It also casts doubt on the reported role of Assistant W.S. Neil in the lynching.

In some accounts, Neil was depicted as a hero who “stopped the lynching” (Governor Offers). Neil turned away, he told reporters, and “had taken but a few steps when he heard a fusillade of shots. He dropped to the ground and, when the shooting stopped, found the Negro lying dead with some six bullet wounds, all in his head, at least two through both eyes” (Negro Murderer). The story given by Informant Alpha, however, is starkly different. Neil was apparently present as Scales was being transported up to the office, not behind the scenes or in his office as reports would have one believe.
Although he may have not encouraged the lynching itself, W.S. Neil does seem to have facilitated the removal of Scales from the jail and his subsequent transport back to the reformatory. He is further implicated in exploiting the grisly act as a weapon of intimidation, displaying the body to other young inmates in order to keep them “in their place”. At some point, the murdered body was going to be placed in the furnace to be destroyed. The Tennessee Highway Patrol, the law enforcement division of the Department of Safety, was called to the scene by persons unknown before the destruction of the body could take place.

The presence of the Tennessee Highway Patrol requires moderate explanation. In Nashville, Superintendent H.E. Scott was meeting with Institutions Commissioner W.O. Baird when he heard what had happened (Killer Attacks). Presumably, Scott was notified by W.S. Neil as to the death of his daughter and his wife’s deteriorating condition. Baird then notified Governor Prentice Cooper while Scott drove off to be with his wife in Chattanooga. Cooper immediately ordered an investigation by the State Highway Patrol. The time frame of these events, however, is dubious. Such a large number of patrolmen, and the presence of Lynn Bomar, would have been necessary only after Scales had been apprehended and at least threatened with lynching. The murders of his wife and daughter, however, would have been reported to H.E. Scott immediately given that his whereabouts were well known by Neil and other administrators at the reformatory. It’s possible that Neil was notified first of the murder of his family, then that W.O. Baird was notified of Scales’ apprehension. Nonetheless, Bomar was based in Nashville, approximately a three hour car drive from Pikeville, and the highway patrol stationed in Bledsoe County were usually less than four in number (Informant Alpha). Exactly what transpired in those hours before Scales was murdered has been largely lost to history. However, flaws in the investigation and suspicions within the African American community cast doubt on the officials who were involved in this lynching.
The possible culpability of W.S. Neil, complicit with the actions of the lynch mob, is further supported by reasoning in addition to reports given by the African-American newspaper *The Nashville Globe*. In a series of articles appearing after the lynching, the *Globe* questions the curious absence of the reformatory’s armed guards “when the mob shot Scales to death and then boldly carried his body into the school building” (Governor Cooper). These guards, used to protect the white administrators from the black inmates as well as ensure that the inmates do no harm to each other, had the training and the weaponry necessary to quell any riot. In the lynching of James Thomas Scales they failed to do so and their presence, or lack thereof, was omitted from every newspaper report other than those made by the *Nashville Globe*.

Although the account of the lynching was dropped quickly from most newspapers, it did garner national attention for a brief moment. The story was carried by the African-American newspaper *The Chicago Defender*, and later covered briefly in *Time* magazine. The *Defender* had gone as far as to send a correspondent, a young black reporter named Robert Lucas, to Pikeville in order to interview Sheriff Henry Goforth about the event. Writing two stories, both of which were published in the December 2, 1944 issue of the *Defender*, Lucas first reported on the ‘facts’ of the case as provided by those involved. He identifies Walter Hale as the “white farmer... who took him back to the school to collect the $10 reward offered for escaped inmates.” At the time that the mob took Scales from the jail, Sheriff Goforth was “working in a mill in another part of town”, leaving Mrs. Ruth Douglass, her young daughter, and her mother to watch over the empty jailhouse. Mrs. Douglass said that the three men who took Scales from the jail “appeared to be the same men who had brought him to the jail.” The article further states that Scales was in the army for nineteen months, his body was “delivered to his father in Nashville”, and the “people in Pikeville, both Negro and white, have little faith in the outcome of the investigation” (Lucas 1+). Their lack of faith appears to have been justified.
The *Nashville Globe* reported in February 1945 that newly-elected governor Jim Nance McCord was “not to be an improvement over Cooper.” Citing McCord’s failure to champion the repeal of the poll tax for soldiers and his disregard for pleas of reform at the Reformatory school in Pikeville, the paper states

The governor already has failed that large group of Godfearing men and women of both races who have pleaded with him to take immediate steps to lift from Tennessee the disgrace it suffers from maintaining that awful prison for boys at Pikeville. It is called an industrial school by people who have no regard for truth. It ought never to have been put where it is located and the only way Tennessee has for atoning for its sin in doing so is for a Godfearing governor to take the lead in abandoning the prison and building a real industrial school in a proper community. (New Governor Not…)

This was not an undeserved condemnation of the previous Cooper administration. In the months preceding this article—indeed, in every issue of the *Nashville Globe* from December through the end of January—the newspaper reported the suspicions and growing concerns of a cover-up that permeated the African American community. The newspaper steadfastly reported not only on Cooper’s failure to divulge the results of Bomar’s investigation, but on the “leaked” information that Scales may have been innocent of the murders for which he was accused by the mob. Although the mainstream newspaper coverage “has seen to it that the public was duly ‘educated’ with regard to the bestiality of Negroes, the fact remains that the same public has not been given one shred of credible evidence that Scales actually murdered the wife and daughter of the superintendent…” The newspaper asserts that information in the case may have been leaked out, claiming that Scales did not, in fact, murder the two women, that the crime was committed by others, “and that Scales was lynched because he may have
been able to tell who where the actual murderers of the two women.” “Not even the newspapers,” the story reports,

have been able to explain why there were so many instruments of death at the scene of the murder and how the 17-year old boy would use a hammer, a knife and other death-dealing weapons to commit two murders when either one of the instruments would have been enough. Scales was no abnormal, vicious boy, it is held, and this fact is established by his having been made a trusty a few weeks after he was sent to the institution. (Rumors Persist...)

Also of note is the fact that “Gov. Cooper failed to install the assistant superintendent of the institution as the superintendent,” sending a man named Mr. Hart to the school to administer it until a replacement for Mr. Scott—who subsequently left the county—could be obtained. Although the lynching of James Thomas Scales did much to enrage the African American community, and caused serious discussions regarding the removal of the institution from the predominately white area, the state continued to invest in the facility by constructing new buildings. Nothing was done, except for the offering of a reward which was never claimed, to appease the worried minds of the African American community.

Very soon after the lynching occurred, so soon, in fact, that the newspapers were able to publicize the reward the day after the lynching, Governor Prentice Cooper offered a $500 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the members of the lynch mob responsible for murdering Scales in the pursuit of vigilante justice. The Bledsonian and Pikeville Banner, in what appears to be the only coverage of the murders, reports:

A group of Nashville Negroes has joined with the New York offices of the International Labor Defense to increase to $1,531 the reward for arrest and conviction of those who lynched James T. Scales, 17 year old Negro, according to the Associated Press. Vito Marcantonio, president of the ILD, contacted governor Prentice
Cooper asking him to add $500 to the reward of $500 already offered. Scales, a trusty charged with killing the daughter and wife of the superintendent of the Tennessee Training Agricultural School, was shot to death November 23rd after he was removed from the county jail.

In this report, Marcantonio stated: “There is no question in the minds of anyone who read even the accounts of the lynching of James Scales that the identities of the lynchers are widely known in Pikeville.” Who is Vito Marcantonio, one might ask, and what does a New York congressman have to do with a southern lynching?

The International Labor Defense organization was “heavily influenced by Communists” (LaGumina 39) and existed to “protect labor’s freedom by making available a legal staff to assist labor when its rights were threatened” (40). Vito Marcantonio was “an integral part of the ILD”, becoming “its president immediately upon joining the organization in 1937” (40). He was offered this position because he was not, unlike many of the others in the group, closely identified as a Communist though he did sympathize with certain communist ideals. With Marcantonio at the helm of the ILD, “[c]hampioning labor’s rights and civil rights became dual and overlapping objectives” (40). Importantly, “the ILD also expressed grave concern over the spread of vigilantism throughout the country. Marcontonio’s [sic] organization denounced the ominous development as one of the greatest menaces then confronting traditional American liberties” (40). Marcantonio frequently “came under fire as a communist tool” because the majority of the cases championed by the ILD involved leftists (41). During World War II, Marcantonio took up the fight on behalf of Black Americans: “he now sought to bring the Negroes’ plight to the attention of his colleagues by reminding them that Negroes also fought heroically on the battlefronts to preserve American democracy, the benefits of which they scarcely enjoyed” (71). Marcantonio became involved in a series of lynchings in Florida during the war (71), and he “introduced the first bill in United States history to permanently ban discrimination in employment” in 1942 (LaGumina 75). It is
likely that members of the Nashville Ministerial alliance—closely affiliated with the NAACP—contacted the offices of the ILD and enlisted their support. Members of the ILD, including W.E.B. DuBois, would later go on to petition the United Nations for intervention in support of civil rights in *We Charge Genocide* and the NAACP publication *An Appeal to the World*. Despite the African American presses’ diligent coverage of the lynching, and the substantial reward which was later increased to almost ten thousand dollars, Lynn Bomar’s investigation was never publicized and no one ever told who was involved.

A discussion of the failures of the community to help provide justice for James Thomas Scales is not complete without a detailed discussion of Lynn Bomar himself. Robert Minor, in his pamphlet *Lynching and Frame-Up in Tennessee*, details the role played by Lynn Bomar in the Columbia, TN race riot of 1946 which resulted from the failed lynching of a Mrs. Stephenson and her son. In response to the black community’s role in saving these two people from a certain death, and the killing of a white police officer during the struggle, the Tennessee government sent the state militia into Columbia. According to Minor, “the firing line of the State Highway Police, commanded directly by Lynn Bomar and under the direction of General Dickinson, moved into the Negro district in advance of the troops and with Tommie guns blazing…” (62). The scene was immediately compared to what veterans had seen during WWII, but “there was one difference: only the places owned by Negroes were destroyed; every white shop was left untouched, and in that respect it was more like a Nazi storm-troop raid on a Jewish quarter” (62). Some newspapers reported that the state police had targeted Negro businesses, while leaving the white ones untouched. Some of the black business owners had tried to defend themselves from the assault by the police, and Bomar later described the raid as a success (64). Importantly,

every piece of property pledged as bail for Mrs. Stephenson and her son was carefully demolished. The objects of police vengeance were particularly Morton’s undertaking establishment, Julius Blair’s store, and Sol Blair’s barber shop...juke boxes and cash drawers
were smashed and money and jewelry stolen at a time when the only persons present were state policemen. (Minor 64)

At Morton’s Funeral Home, the scene was especially horrific. Before the state police left the funeral home, “one of the most imposing of the coffins was hauled out and placed in the middle of the funeral chapel. Huge letters were inscribed in white on its lid: ‘K.K.K.’” (64). The Daily Worker, a New York based Communist paper, was the only press to expose “the connection of the State Police with the Klan” (64-65). After they published the first photos of the coffin lid, the Washington Post ran the images a full two months later. When the governor arrived on the scene in Columbia, all blame was put onto the black citizens. A new policy was implemented: “All talk about any attempt having been made to lynch any Negroes must be stopped; there wasn’t any attempt at lynching, he said—what had happened was an armed uprising of Negroes, attempting to murder the white population of Columbia” (71). White lawyers from the NAACP were dispatched to help free the blacks that had been arrested on weapons charges during all of this: “Lynn Bomar went down to East 8th Street, intercepted Mr. Blair in his car and demanded: ‘What the h.... were you doing with those G.... d.... white lawyers?’ Patrolmen with Bomar said “You have been seen around in town with those two white lawyers, and you know that’s not the way we do things here” (74).

C. Hayes Denton, a local magistrate, along with Sheriff Underwood, had deputized Lynn Bomar and 67 members of the State Highway police and General Dickinson and 59 members of the State Guard so as to avoid a declaration of martial law. The militia would not be acting as a state militia, but as deputy sheriffs (67-68). Two black men named Gordon and Johnson were riddled with bullets, taken to a nearby hospital and given blood plasma, then sent on a 1.5 hour trip to an African American hospital in Nashville; they died on the way (80). The coroner, Bert Erwin, had no inquest into the deaths of these two men and the cause of death was given as shot while attempting to kill officers of the law (80). The judge of the federal grand jury who the police petitioned was a former member of the KKK (82). In a pattern which was
repeated in virtually every attempted trial of lynch mobs, the grand jury ruled that Bomar did not violate any constitutional rights (85). As a final note, the author mentions that lynchings concern the entire nation: “Lynching could not continue in the South if it was not supported by powerful forces in the North...They could not operate a single day without support of the giant monopoly corporations of the North who control and loot the South’s economic resources and who speak through such men as Vandenburg, Taft, Dewey, and the Hoovers (Herbert and J. Edgar)” (92). On the role of the Tennessee Highway Patrol in lynchings, a role of much importance to the lynching of James Thomas Scales, Robert W. Ikard also discusses Lynn Bomar and the Columbia race riots.

Although Tennesseans had resisted the idea of a state police agency, Ikard notes that “Governor Henry Horton signed a law creating the Tennessee Highway Patrol in 1929” (29). The Highway Patrol soon found themselves doing jobs other than enforcing traffic laws, which was the original mandate. They were also used politically

Edward “Boss” Crump of Memphis was effective political czar of Tennessee in 1946. He notoriously used highway patrolmen to watch and, if necessary, intimidate voters at key precincts during elections...With the apparent sanction and support of its director, Lynn Bomar, the patrol was not only political but had an unprofessional Gestapo reputation. (Ikard 29)

This source also furthers the 1946 work by Robert Minor, detailing the February 1946 Columbia, TN race riots in which Bomar participated. The author observes that

Bomar immediately concluded that the prevalent threat came from the entrenched blacks on East Eighth, among whom were likely those who had shot the policemen. He saw only allies in the chaotic group of armed whites buzzing around the square. Without apparent concern for legality or increased danger, he and his men quickly demonstrated a penchant for vigilantism” (Ikard 31).
In attempting to capture those they believed responsible for shooting police officers, the THP and the deputized militia swept a reign of terror across the area known as Mink Slide. As also reported by Minor, “cushions on the four chairs [of a barbershop] were slashed, mirrors broken, linens scattered and clippers and razors stolen. Searchers threw all the instruments out of Dr. Frank L. Hawthorne’s cabinets and demolished his equipment.” Ikard also reports that the mob of policemen and military personnel also defaced a casket with the letters KKK (40). Bomar later rode through the town in a jeep with a bullhorn, “asking the few nonarrested blacks to let him “see you smile” (41).

Given Bomar’s reputation merely two years after the lynching of James Thomas Scales, his role in the investigation of Scales’ murder must be carefully scrutinized. It is safe to say that Bomar was not an impartial investigator devoid of a political agenda. In being used to deter voters, Bomar’s Highway Patrol seems relevant to a discussion of why lynchings happen in the first place. Many scholars agree that the act of lynching was largely political, not driven by an urge for justice. In order to understand the political underpinnings of lynching, it’s necessary to know more about the area where such events occur.

As I write this paper in 2007, Bledsoe County, Tennessee has not changed that much from November of 1944. The population makeup, predominately white with a small percentage of African Americans and other races, is largely unchanged. In a 1949 study conducted at the University of Tennessee, John Ballenger Knox discusses the population of Tennessee in detail. The 1940 population of Bledsoe County was 8,358; of those, 576 people were African American (Knox 172). In 1948, the population of Tennessee as a whole was 3,149,000 people. On African-American populations in Tennessee, the author notes “the percentage of Negroes in Tennessee has never been as high as in the Southeast as a whole” (Knox 20). In that study, Bledsoe County and neighboring Van Buren County were both described as entirely rural, with no urban population (172, 174).
It is in this extremely rural area of Bledsoe and Van Buren Counties where the lynching of James Thomas Scales occurred. Located on a mountain top piece of land formerly known as the Herbert Domain, the Agricultural Reformatory School for Negro Boys was formed in 1915 as “an institution for the colored male youth offenders” (Jones 43). These boys—some as young as twelve years old—were sent from all areas of Tennessee for rehabilitation and reformation. Often referred to as a school, this institute was governed by a Superintendent and an Assistant Superintendent. Although the institute was formed specifically for taking care of troubled Black youths in Tennessee, it was located in an area of the county completely devoid of an African American population (Horror Prison at Pikeville). The site of the Reformatory—now known as Taft Youth Center—was approximately sixteen miles from the tiny city of Pikeville. It was located quite literally in the backwoods of the county, on top of a mountain and isolated by both culture and geography from the African American populations these students or, to use a more proper term, inmates, called home. Although the racial makeup of the inmates has changed since integration, currently at a 60% white / 40% black ratio, the percentage of African American guards, counselors and educators has changed little; the staff of 219 employees who oversee the 136 inmates is 98% white and 2% other (Muscanero).

To this isolated, overwhelmingly white area, James Thomas Scales was sent in late October of 1944 as punishment for having held up two women. Before that, Scales had several encounters with the police in Nashville, TN. According to news accounts published in the Nashville Banner, Scales’ criminal record dates to New Years Eve of 1937 “when he was arrested for disorderly conduct at the age of nine.” Arrested three other times on ten counts, including assault with a knife, highway robbery while carrying a pistol, housebreaking, larceny, and purse snatching (Killer Attacks Wife), he had apparently served fifteen months in the Navy (Scales Negro Well Known) having lied about his age to enlist in the military. However, it is also possible that he had served nineteen months in the Army—not fifteen months in the Navy—
(Lucas 1+), and that his name was not even James Thomas Scales. His death certificate identifies him as James Ellis Scales (State of Tennessee), while some newspaper accounts refer to him as James I. Scales (Negro Lynched, Governor Offers, Morning in Bledsoe), John Thomas Scales, John Ellis Scales, and Robert Scales (Killer Attacks, Rumors Persist, Horror Prison). The rest of the time he is referred to as either James Scales or, more often than not, “the Negro”. Although his death certificate identifies him as being 16 years and ten months old at the time of death, he is usually referred to as being seventeen years old; or, as reported in The Chattanooga News Free Press the day after the murders, “[his] age on the reformatory records was sixteen but was believed to be nearly twenty” on account of being “an ex-sailor” (Negro Murderer Shot). Given that such a wide discrepancy exists in not only his name and age, but also whether or not he had served in any branch of the armed forces, one must question the absolute certitude displayed by the newspapers of the time who condemned him as “Killer,” “Negro Slayer,” and “Negro Murderer,” as the headlines of the mainstream—read, white—American newspapers proclaimed.

Indeed, only one Tennessee newspaper appeared to be interested in the full scope of the lynching at all. As demonstrated earlier, that newspaper was the Nashville Globe, a member of the National Negro Press Association and premier voice for Nashville’s African American community. In the weeks following the lynching, the Nashville Globe alone carried the story whereas the other papers had “dropped the whole Pikeville tragedy as though it were a hot potato” (Horror Prison). A weekly paper, as compared to the dailies who failed to cover the story in full, the Nashville Globe steadfastly covered the lynching beginning on December 1st and continuing through the end of February 1945. This paper reported on the failings of Tennessee Governor Prentice Cooper to publicize the results of his investigation into the lynching, the suspicions and rumors that were floating throughout the African American community in Nashville regarding Scales’ alleged guilt in the murders, and the likewise failure of the new governor, Jim Nance McCord, to publicize the results of the
investigation. Newspaper accounts from *The Chattanooga Times, Chattanooga News Free Press, The Tennessean* and *The Nashville Banner* carried similar details in the hours immediately following the murders, with several crucial variations in the story they reported. For the week of November 24th, 1944, the Pikeville newspaper—*The Bledsonian and Pikeville Banner*—was curiously missing from microfilm reels at both the Bledsoe County Public Library and at the Tennessee State Library and Archives. The *Bledsonian and Pikeville Banner* newspapers omit what was Thanksgiving week and skip ahead to Friday, December 1st. That edition of the local paper makes only brief mention of the murders of Mrs. H.E. Scott, Mrs. Gwendolyn McKinnie, and James Thomas Scales; the primary focus of the article was to publicize the $500 reward being offered by the International Labor Defense, the Nashville Ministerial Alliance, and the State of Tennessee (Reward Hiked). The primary focus of the newspaper, however, seems largely to have been the promotion of War Bonds and the war fund quota. A substantial portion of the front page of each issue was dedicated to the war in Japan, and minor events like lynchings were lucky to receive space at all. It seemed to be far more important that the public knew which prominent citizens were buying the most war bonds for the week, rather than which prominent citizens were involved in the murder of a sixteen year old boy.

Writing in 2001, James H. Madison theorizes that “most scholars emphasize that whites felt threatened by blacks, that whites were fearful that blacks might challenge the subordinate economic, social, and political status forced on them by whites” (14). As “a performance that sent a message of white supremacy... the ritual proved even more powerful if it happened on a public stage...sometimes the mob moved the dead victim to such a place even if death had occurred in a less visible spot.” Lynching was, Madison contends, “a weapon of terror...” (14), an idea recently furthered in the work of Sherrilyn Ifill. Writing that lynching was used as “a tool of white supremacy...the violent analogue to these other methods of oppression” (64-65) Ifill explains that
“jurisdictions where lynchings occurred are often characterized by continuing
disparities that reflect the long-term effects of racial exclusion” (166). The
American South is such a place, as discussed by W.J. Cash.

Writing in *The Mind of the South* in 1941, W.J. Cash discusses the
mentality of the Southern white male: “what the direct willfulness of his
individualism demanded, when confronted by a crime that aroused his anger,
was immediate satisfaction for itself—catharis for personal passion in the
spectacle of a body dancing at the end of a rope or writing in the fire—now,
within the hour—and not some ponderous abstract justice in a problematic
tomorrow” (Cash 43). The south’s penchant for violence, Cash argues, partly
explains their role in volunteering for combat in even the most unpopular of
wars, such as the Mexican War waged by James K. Polk, a Tennessean.

The pertinent question to ask is why did the newspapers, generally
speaking, fail to cover such a seemingly-newsworthy event? Grace Elizabeth
Hale’s book, *Making Whiteness*, seems to shed a lot of light on exactly what
happens during the lynching process. Hale notes in her preface that “the racial
identities crafted in that space and time between Reconstruction and World
War II have grounded those of our own national present” (xi). She discusses
whiteness, and the role that the south had in creating a national identity of
whiteness, arguing that “whiteness can be unmade, so that other, more
democratic grounds of coherence can be established and lived” (xii). Early on
she notes that “the South has been...the darkness that has made the American
nation lose its color” (3). Most importantly, Hale ties lynching directly to the
idea of spectacle: “spectacle, the power of looking, was different from narrative,
the power of telling. A picture, a representation, could convey contradictions
and evoke oppositions like white racial supremacy, white racial innocence, and
white racial dependency more easily and persuasively than a carefully plotted
story” (8). To illustrate this point, Hale also argues that D.W. Griffith’s early
film *Birth of a Nation* “brought the thrillingly new power of film spectacle to
bear on the theme of Reconstruction as race war” (79). The author quotes
John W. Burgess, “a Confederate veteran turned professor” who “described
Reconstruction as the rule ‘of the uncivilized Negroes over the whites of the south’” (80). Paraphrasing W.J. Cash, Hale notes that “southern whiteness sustained both regional distinctiveness and national unity” (83). “The culture of segregation,” according to Hale, “was always a process, never a finished product”, and as such blacks were constantly having “to fight separation and exclusion, pushing against each new boundary” (200). Even though “the number of lynchings decreased even in the South” following the peaks in the 1890s, the cultural impact of the practice became more powerful. More people participated in, read about, saw pictures of, and collected souvenirs from lynchings even as fewer mob murders occurred. In the twentieth century white southerners transformed a deadly and often quiet form of vigilante “justice” into a modern spectacle of enduring power. (201)

For Hale and others, lynching was a way to keep black people in the social position deemed fit by white America. Given that the national consciousness became white, it was the will of the entire nation to keep blacks down; lynching “succeeded in limiting and often eliminating African American political activity and achieving significant white control of black labor” (202).

Lynchings tended to follow an eerie program, the details of which Hale shares with the reader:

The well-choreographed spectacle opened with a chase or a jail attack, followed rapidly by the public identification of the captured African American by the alleged white victim or the victim’s relatives, announcement of the upcoming event to draw the crowd, and selection and preparation of the site. The main event then began with a period of mutiliation—often including emasculation—and torture to extract confessions and entertain the crowd, and built to a climax of slow burning, hanging, and/or shooting to complete the killing. The finale consisted of frenzied souvenir gathering and display of the body and the collected parts” (203-04).
The author blames this tendency on consumer culture, the greed for souvenirs and desire to watch the show: “In a grisly dialectic,” she writes, “consumer culture created spectacle lynchings, and spectacle lynchings became a southern way of enabling the spread of consumption as a white privilege” (205). Southerners helped to spread the word of lynchings via newspaper reporters and word of mouth, which “all helped shape the stories of specific events into a dominant narrative of southern spectacle lynchings that evolved...” (206). Hale then discusses three lynchings in detail; in all, the lynchers’ had a role “as enforcers of white supremacy” (212). As such, “lynching became more about conjuring ‘southerness’—understood as white—than about ‘whiteness’—understood as American—the form and narration of the spectacle necessarily changed” (222). With the lynching of Claude Neal in 1934, in which the NAACP publicized the gruesome details of the lynching in conjunction with the ILD to help pass anti-lynching legislation, spectacle lynching seemed to come to an end (222-23). Also of importance is the observation that “lynchings...worked by ritualistically uniting white southerners, by embodying the community in action” which was also evident in the fact that lynchings were often named after the town in which they occurred, thereby uniting the town as a whole (228). From a sociological standpoint, lynching worked on a class level as well, as it provided for poor whites a type of superiority that they wouldn’t ordinarily obtain (236).

Roberta Senechal de la Roche furthers the idea of spectacle in claiming that “blacks were often lynched in mass public spectacles that featured torture and sexual mutilation by whites” (48), and that “southern whites seldom lynched capriciously. Lynchings usually followed allegations of serious criminal conduct such as murder and rape” (48). Her theory is that “lynching is social control” which “predicts and explains lynching with the social structure of each conflict” (49). “Lynching, then, is a form of collective violence characterized by informal organization and a logic of individual liability”; as such, it “was not a peculiarly American practice” as previously claimed by W.J. Cash (51). Senechal de la Roche provides four criteria which seem to determine heavily in
when, and why, lynchings occur. Lynching rates seem to be determined by relational distance, “the number and type of ties people have to one another” (52); functional interdependence, “the extent to which they rely on one another economically, politically, militarily, or otherwise” (55); vertical direction, “inequality of status...an upward offense—one by a social inferior against a superior—is treated more seriously and results in more punitiveness than a downward offense by a social superior” (56); and cultural distance, “differences between individuals and groups in the expressive and symbolic aspects of their social life such as language, religion, cuisine, clothing, and entertainment” (58). Finally, Goldsby’s work *A Spectacular Secret* also illuminates the reason that lynchings occurred in America at such a high rate.

Mostly concerned with works of literature, Goldsby identifies a sort of cultural logic of lynching. She refers to lynching as “spectacular: the violence made certain cultural developments and tensions visible for American to confront”, although “cultural logic also describes how we have disavowed lynching’s normative relation to modernism’s history over the last century” (6). Goldsby agrees with Cash and others when she states that “the racialization of lynching...took clear shape during the era of Reconstruction” (17). On the coverage of lynchings in black newspapers, she writes: “unlike mainstream newspapers, though, black journals covered the whole spectrum of lynching offenses, whether murders had occurred or not. For the African American press, lynching was a chronic crisis that required regular surveillance rather than the spasmodic attention paid it by the white press, whose inconsistent coverage made of the violence an estranging event, indistinguishable from any other of its kind.” (66-67). Lynching is typically viewed in one of several ways: “as a phenomenon peculiar to the South and its regimes of white patriarchal supremacy in economic and electoral politics; as the murderous fulfillment of Freudian sexual pathologies; or as the perverse but decisive culmination of “making” whiteness and masculinity the nation’s ideals of citizenship” (20-21). She claims
lynching thrived at the turn of the new century not because the violence was endemic to the South’s presumed retrograde relation to the developments that constituted modernity in America. Rather, I contend that anti-black mob murders flourished as registers of the nation’s ambivalences attending its nascent modernism, which we can see on many cultural fronts. (24) According to Goldsby “southern lynch mobs—like millions of other Americans—distrusted judicial and political administrations per se, and sought to counter the effects of living under centralized systems of power that were increasingly deaf to the needs of individuals…” (29). “More than anything else,” she writes, “lynching and its cultural logic signal how little Americans care for the deaths of black people” (287). With this in mind, we begin to uncover the simple truth behind ambivalence in lynching.

Given that mainstream American presses were not members of the African American community, the problem created by lynchings belonged to somebody else, a marginal group that “had it coming” by seeking to be equal to whites. Lynchings grew out of the white, irrational fear that African Americans would displace whites in politics; some cartoonists depicted “Negro rule” in Washington as a result of Reconstruction. Driven by fear and, quite possibly, an innate hatred of all things different or unknown, lynch mobs murdered 3,408 African Americans between 1900 and 1941 (Morning in Bledsoe). For Americans, lynching “was necessary because black men were uncivilized, unmanly rapists, unable to control their sexual desires” (46). The myth that “black men tended to rape white men” arose in the late 1880s and became as popular in the North as it was in the South (47). Yet the predominance of lynchings in the South as opposed to the North cannot be ignored. Whether for socio-economic security or political gain, blacks were lynched throughout the south at an alarming rate. The newspaper coverage, however, tended to only focus on the extraordinary murders, such as the lynching of Sam Hose.

Sam Hose was brutally lynched in April of 1899 for the alleged crime of having murdered his white employer and raped his wife as well. Hose was
captured in Macon, Georgia, taken back to the community where the rape allegedly occurred, and was identified by the alleged victim’s mother given that the white victim was still “in a state of collapse” (Williamson 88). Hose was paraded through town, tied to a tree, and systematically cut apart before being burned at the stake. His ears, nose and lips were cut off, followed by each of his fingers, then his genitals. While he was still very much alive and in agony, the lynch mob built a fire using wood that they had carried with them from a nearby farm. The fire was intentionally slow burning so as to prolong his torture. After he was dead and most of his body had been horribly burned, members of the lynch mob cut away pieces of his body to take home as souvenirs. Williamson writes that “all over America, people knew about the lynching” (87). The *Atlanta Constitution* revealed “shocking details” of the murder and rape that Hose had allegedly committed, sensationalizing the text and noting that the woman lie ravaged only inches away from where “brains were oozing from her husband’s head” (87). The newspaper “reported that they agreed that hanging was not enough”, and had systematically labeled Hose as a “black beast” (88). “While a cadre of activists proceeded with the torture of Hose, hundreds of people watched sometimes so silently that only the crackling of fire could be heard. At other times, one journalist declared, ‘instead of pity, there was mirth and merriment at every wild contortion’” (88). The newsworthy events, in other words, were those that could entertain a public who took pleasure from other people’s pain. Just as the Romans cheered when the Christians were fed to the lions, the American people went to view lynchings as a form of entertainment which was later sensationalized and reprinted in newspapers. The Scales lynching was not sensationalized however, and no genital mutilation occurred. There was no souvenir gathering, although his body was placed on exhibition. The feeling throughout the town of Pikeville, in the minds of those who spoke with me about the tragic deaths of two women, is that justice was served.

Picture this: it is early December of 1944. In the undertaking parlor of H. Preston Scales Funeral Home—a prominent African-American business in
the small town of Murfreesboro, Tennessee—an elderly man takes extreme care to prepare a body for burial. It will undoubtedly be a closed-casket service due to the extreme facial trauma caused in the victim’s death. As H. Preston Scales closes the lid on his own grandson’s casket, what could he possibly feel but anguish and distrust. He knows that an investigation into his grandson’s murder has been ordered by the governor himself. He also knows that this is a white governor, with a white police force, searching for a white lynch mob who carried out white vigilante justice. I feel no hope in his heart as he carries his grandson to the grave.

Writing this, sixty years later, I must wonder if a sort of justice has been achieved. Am I not complicit, however, with the lynch mob themselves in refusing to name the one witness—the only living witness—to this crime? What would happen if I did is probably the same thing that may have happened in 1944. Had Informant Alpha spoke up at the time, collected the reward money and aided in an investigation, justice probably would not have been served. Given that Scales was informally accused of a double murder, a white jury in a white town would likely have not punished the lynch mob or the lone gunman. He may very well have been extolled as a hero. Informant Alpha, on the other hand, would have been threatened and ostracized. The individual, surrounded by a vicious mob mentality, had little option but keep quiet and let others tell the story in the future. To speak out would have been suicide. Naming the informant in this day and age, where little has changed in the town of Pikeville, would carry similar results. Regardless, the story of this lynching must be told. Even if Scales were guilty, a travesty of justice has still taken place. With the compelling evidence that Scales did not murder the two women, by virtue of lack of fingerprints, lack of testimony, and the oddity of the weapons recovered at the scene of the crime, there is a strong possibility that a truly innocent young man was brutally gunned down before a crowd of would-be lynchers turned spectators. The murders of Mrs. Scott, Mrs. McKinnie, and James Thomas Scales have never been solved; the lone gunman who murdered Scales and the person or persons who murdered the two women have since passed
away. The judgment of history, then, cannot be rendered except to say that justice for all was categorically denied.
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