REPORT OF LYNCHINGS FOR 1940

The following definition is used as a working definition for lynching by the Department of Records and Research, Tuskegee Institute (1940): A lynching is regarded as an activity in which persons not officers of the law, in open and public defiance of the law, administer punishment by death to an individual for an alleged offense or to an individual with whom some offense has been associated. In accord with this definition, at the present time, there have been two cases of lynching recorded by the Department of Records and Research as follows:

1. June 22, 1940; Brownsville, Haywood County, Tennessee; Elbert Williams, Negro; charge: Attempting to qualify to vote ("interest in Negro affairs"); murdered and body thrown into the Hatchie River.

2. September 8, 1940; LaGrange, Troup County, Georgia; Austin Callaway, Negro; charge: Attempted attack on a white woman; taken from jail and shot to death by band of masked men.
March 31: ATLANTA, GEORGIA: (The Nation, April 6, 1940) Sarah Renis and Benton Ford were found beaten to death in a local lover’s lane where they had been sitting in Ford’s parked car. Ford and the girl were supposed to be violating the Ku Klux Klan’s code of sexual decency. (Both white)

March 7: ATLANTA, GEORGIA: (The Nation, April 6, 1940) Ollie Gaston, white proprietor of a barber shop in an Atlanta suburb, was visited by hooded vigilantes on the night of March 7. The next morning his body was found in a field near by, cut to shreds by blows with a long, cleated belt.

June 23: BROWNVILLE, TENN.: (Knoxville, Tenn., News-Sentinel, June 27) (Also firsthand reports during 1940 NAACP Annual Conference and investigation by Walter White, June, 1940) Elbert Williams, because he attempted to register and vote in the 1940 presidential election, was lynched. His body was found in the Hatchie river swamps.

June 28: LITTLE ROCK, ARK.: (Reported by Birmingham Branch, NAACP) Jesse Thornton, was lynched by a mob led by police officers because he did not use "Sir." in referring to one of the officers. Thornton was shot to death and his body thrown into the Patayalga River. Here it was found by a Negro fisherman. The town authorities upon being notified placed the body in a crude casket and buried it without even notifying Thornton’s wife.

Sept. 2: LAGRANGE, GEORGIA: (New York Times, Sept. 9, 1940) A 15-year-old Negro, charged with an attempted attack on a white woman, was taken from the city jail and lynched. Austin Callaway was taken from the jail by about six masked men, at least one of whom was armed, who forced Acting Jailer S. J. Willis to release the prisoners. A searching party found the Negro on the Liberty Hill road, 6 miles from town, with bullet wounds in his head and arms and took him to a hospital where he died late in the afternoon.

Aug. 2nd or 3rd: DYERSBURG, TENN.: (Kansas City Call - Aug. 9, 1940) Roosevelt Jones - a 20-year-old Negro of Arkansas was tracked down and shot to death by a Tennessee posse about August 2nd or 3rd. He was arrested near Elsberryville, Ark., for questioning in connection with a minor theft, but escaped from his captors and was finally caught after a chase which led thru three states and shot.

Nov. 24th: HAMMOND, LA.: (New York Daily News, November 25) Alonzo Garrett, accused of killing a white farmer reclusus during robbery, was shot to death by an officer leading a posse of whites. Garrett is alleged to have escaped from the officer who formed the posse to give chase.
Gaston Death

At Tuskegee

Group Holds an All-Day
Discussion at Institute.

The stench in the courtroom was overpowering. The
body of the victim, a local activist, lay on the table,
his lifeless form a testament to the cruelty of the
era. The judge, a man of the old school, declared the
man guilty without hesitation. The crowd, a mix of
white and black, watched in silence, some with tears
in their eyes, others with anger etched on their faces.

The trial had been a farce, a charade, a mockery of
justice. The defendant, a man who had dedicated his
life to fighting for the rights of his people, had been
brought to his knees, his dignity trampled underfoot.

The outcome was not surprising. Thelynchings had
been a common occurrence in the south, a brutal form
of punishment used to suppress those who dared to
challenge the accepted order. The state, in its
madness, had preserved the system.

But the people had not been silenced. Across the
country, they had stood up, their voices ringing out in
protest. The NAACP, led by a young man named
Hubert Humphrey, had taken up the cause. They had
filed a petition with the United Nations, demanding
an end to the killings. The international community,
while sympathetic, could do little to intervene.

The trial had ended, the verdict had been rendered.
The man had been found guilty, his name had been
placed on the list of the dead. But the struggle
continued. The fight for justice was far from over.
December
50th
1940

MEMORANDUM TO MR. MURPHY FROM MR. WHITE.

Will you prepare and release to the daily papers today, sending copies to the larger Negro papers, a story on the N.A.A.C.P.'s record of lynchings in 1940?

The number of lynchings authenticated to date is five (5), as follows:

IKE GASTON, white, March 7, Atlanta, Ga.
O'DEE HENDERSON, May 8, Fairfield, Ala.
ELBERT WILLIAMS, June 20, Brownsville, Tenn.
JESSE THORNTON, June 22, Luverne, Ala.
AUSTIN CALLAWAY, Sept. 6, LaGrange, Ga.

The facts about each are given in the attached sheet which please return to Miss Randolph when you have finished with it.

Tuskegee Institute issued a statement giving four (4) as the total number of lynchings. Subsequent to the release of that statement Dr. Frederick D. Patterson, President of Tuskegee Institute, wired the N.A.A.C.P. as follows:

"Recent information substantiates Luverne case as lynching. Our total revised to five."

In addition to the lynchings about which there is no question, the N.A.A.C.P. and other agencies are investigating killings which bear the earmarks of lynchings in ten cases in the following states:

Georgia - 3
Louisiana - 4
Florida - 1
Mississippi - 1
Tennessee - 1

Whether these cases shall be classified as lynchings or not will be made known later when investigations are completed.

The total of five (5) authenticated lynchings for 1940 is one more than occurred in 1939. Four of the victims were Negroes and one a white man. Only one of the five victims was charged with a sex offense, this case being that of Austin Callaway, lynched at LaGrange, Georgia, "charged with an attempted attack". O'Dee Henderson was lynched by police officers and citizens inside the jail at Fairfield, Alabama, on May 8th. Elbert Williams was lynched for attempting to register to vote at Brownsville, Tennessee, on June 20th, while Jesse Thornton was lynched at Luverne, Alabama, for failing to use "Mr." in
PRESS SERVICE OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
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ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE
69 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY
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FIVE LYNCHED IN 1940
N.A.A.C.P. Reports;
TEN OTHER DEATHS
UNDER INVESTIGATION

New York—During the year 1940 five persons, four colored and one white, whose cases have been authenticated, were found to have been lynched, and the deaths of ten others suspected of being lynched are still under investigation, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People announced today.

The record, according to the N.A.A.C.P., represents one more than the number reported for 1939. The lynchings, two of which took place in Georgia, two in Alabama, and one in Tennessee between March and September, were listed in the order of their occurrence as follows:

Ike Gaston, white, March 7, Atlanta, Ga.; O’Dee Henderson, May 8, Fairfield, Ala.; Elbert Williams, June 20, Brownsville, Tenn.; Jesse Thornton, June 22, Lufkin, Ala.; Austin Callaway, September 8, LaGrange, Ga.

In only one case, that of Austin Callaway, a 16-year-old youth was the victim charged with a sex offense. Callaway was charged with attempting to attack a white woman. He was taken from jail by several masked men, carried about eight miles from town and shot.

Gaston, a white barber shop proprietor, was borton to death by a vigilante mob because he was said to have been drunk often and beaten his wife on numerous occasions. The body of Williams, a member of the Brownsville, Tenn., branch of the N.A.A.C.P., was found in a river swamp the day after he had gone with a group of Negro citizens to the city hall in an effort to secure information about registering in order to vote in the 1940 Presidential election.

Thornton was shot to death by a mob led by police officials, one of whom Thornton had failed to address as "Sir." Henderson, a 24-year-old Birmingham, Ala., steel worker, who had been arrested following an altercation with a white man, was lynched and shot by police officers and citizens inside a police station.

The cases of suspected lynchings still under investigation by the N.A.A.C.P. and other organizations include 3 in Georgia, four in Louisiana, and one each in Florida, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Whether these cases will be classified as lynchings will be determined upon the completion of the investigations, N.A.A.C.P. officials said.

Although Tuskegee Institute announced December 19 that the total number of lynchings during 1940 was four, N.A.A.C.P. officials made public today a telegram from Dr. Frederick E. Patterson, president of the school saying: 'Recent information substantiates Lufkin
case as lynching. Our total revised to five."

The revised list of 1940 lynching cases issued by the National Council of Negro Women, which included the Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was presented to the President of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Mr. A. Philip Randolph, at a meeting earlier this week. The conference was held in order to prevent the issuance of different accounts of lynching figures in the future.

An increased tendency of lynching "to go underground," was noted during the conference. This is true particularly in the case of the lynching of a black man in Tennessee, which was not reported in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's annual report. The situation has been brought to the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation by the NAACP.

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