

A NIGHT OF VIOLENCE

The Houston Riot of 1917

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Louisiana State University Press

Baton Rouge

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ISBN 0-8071-0172-9

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 75-18041

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Designed by Albert Crochet

To Martha

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Haynes, Robert V

A night of violence.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Houston, Tex.—Riot, 1917. I. Title.

F394.H8H39 976.4'1411'06 75-18041

ISBN 0-8071-0172-9

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Map of 24th Infantry Camp, Houston, Texas, October, 1917

Camp Logan, from the *Houston Chronicle*, September 2, 1917

Preface

This book began in 1968 when I agreed to offer a course in Afro-American history in response to the requests of black students at the University of Houston. The course was one of the few classes in black history taught at a predominantly white institution in the South, and the experience was a particularly valuable one for a white Mississippian seeking to gain a better understanding of United States history. In my preparation, I first learned about the Houston mutiny and riot of 1917. My interest was further quickened after Phocion Park, Jr., a graduate student working under my supervision, completed a master's thesis on the riot. During two years he and I frequently discussed, sometimes late into the night, certain intriguing aspects of the subject. I am grateful for the insights he offered and for his assistance in tracking down valuable sources.

Although my research was interrupted by administrative duties after I agreed to become acting director of Afro-American Studies at the University of Houston in 1969, my interest in the topic never waned. In fact, I gained appreciation of the black experience in America.

Research grants from the Menil Foundation of Houston and the National Endowment for the Humanities aided me immensely in locating sources at distant libraries. Through the kind assistance of Senator Ralph Yarborough of Texas, I was permitted to examine the military records of several soldiers involved in the riot. Two summer grants from the Office of Research at the University of Houston made it possible to examine

new materials and to return to the Federal Records Center at Suitland, Maryland, for additional study. The handsome grant from National Endowment for the Humanities freed me from teaching responsibilities for one semester and a summer, permitting me to complete the writing. I am especially grateful for this support.

Various librarians and archivists went out of their way to assist me in searching for pertinent sources. The staffs at the Federal Records Center in Suitland and the Military Records Center in St. Louis were particularly helpful as were those at the National Archives and the Library of Congress. Dr. Edward Holley, Mrs. Marian Orgain, Dr. Charles Peavy, and Mr. Steve Salmon of the University of Houston proved valuable friends whenever I needed their assistance. In addition, friends, too numerous to name, put me in touch with Houstonians who remembered the riot and who furnished me with details not available in written records. I wish to express my thanks to them. Mrs. Pat Bradfield served me well as a typist, and the late Charles W. Hamilton and his wife, Mary Alice, taught me much about Houston. My wife, Martha Farr Haynes, sustained me through many periods of discouragement. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my three children—Catherine, Carolyn, and Charles—who put up with a grouchy father and encouraged me to finish this study.

Robert V. Haynes

The Execution

The early morning of Tuesday, December 11, 1917, was raw and overcast. The sun could not break through the thick clouds that hovered over San Antonio, Texas, where thirteen black soldiers were spending the last moments of their lives. After one of the longest courts-martial in American military history, these men had been convicted of participating in a mutiny against their superior officers and of murdering fourteen white persons and seriously wounding eight others. The commanding general of the Southern Department, United States Army, had secretly ordered their execution at dawn.¹

The events that led to the executions began approximately five months earlier when the Twenty-fourth Infantry returned to Camp Furlong in Columbus, New Mexico, ten miles from the Mexican border, after unsuccessfully chasing Pancho Villa over northern Mexico. After the United States entered the First World War, the regiment, instead of being sent to the western front, as was expected, was split up and ordered to three guard-duty stations. The First Battalion went to Waco, Texas, and the Second was sent to Deming, New Mexico. The Third Battalion drew what appeared to be the choicest assignment; it arrived in Houston on July 28, 1917.² UA 29 24th 1972

1. C. E. Butzer of Houston Heights, who was a member of the quartermaster corps at Fort Sam Houston, was the only eyewitness of the execution to write a description. His letter was published in the *Houston Chronicle*, December 13, 1917.

2. The only regimental history of the Twenty-fourth Infantry. William G. Muller's *The Twenty-fourth Infantry: Past and Present* (Reprint; Fort Collins, Colo., 1972) [82], first published in 1923, is uncritical, incomplete, and unpaginated. The Punitive Expedi-

Less than four weeks later, on the evening of August 23, approximately one hundred men of the Third mutinied against their white officers, seized rifles and ammunition, and engaged in a three-hour riot that left twenty persons dead or dying on the streets of Houston. After an investigation of nearly six weeks, the army charged sixty-three men of the battalion with violating four articles of war and ordered them to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio to stand trial for disobedience of orders, aggravated assault, mutiny, and murder. During the month of November these men sat through the largest court-martial ever held within the United States. For twenty-two days 169 witnesses for the prosecution and 27 for the defense were heard; their testimony filled more than 2,100 typewritten pages.³

On November 28 thirteen high-ranking army officers who comprised the court retired to deliberate in secrecy the relative guilt or innocence of each of the soldiers. Two days later, in a closed session, the court announced the verdicts and imposed sentences. The president of the court promptly dispatched the findings to Major General John Ruckman, commanding officer of the Southern Department, for his review and consent.

According to the army manual of courts-martial, General Ruckman either had to approve the verdicts and sentences or return them to the court for reconsideration. While the general and his staff were reviewing the lengthy proceedings, the men

tion of 1916-1917 into Mexico is discussed in several studies. One of the best is Clarence E. Clendenen, *The United States and Pancho Villa: A Study in Unconventional Diplomacy* (Ithica, N.Y., 1961), but the most thorough account is Robert Bruce Johnson, "The Punitive Expedition: A Military, Diplomatic, and Political History of Pershing's Chase after Pancho Villa, 1916-1917" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1964). The return of the Twenty-fourth Infantry from Mexico in early 1917 may be followed in "24th Infantry Officers, Regimental Field, Post and Strength Returns," Records of the Adjutant General, in World War I Strength Returns, Infantry Regiments, 24th-26th, Box No. 14, Military Service Records, Record Group 94, National Archives, hereinafter cited as NA.

3. Robert V. Haynes, "The Houston Mutiny and Riot of 1917," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LXXVI (1973), 418-39; *Houston Chronicle*, December 12, 1917; *United States v. Sergeant William C. Nesbit et al.*, General Courts Martial Case 109045, Records of the Judge Advocate General, General Courts Martial, 1812-1938, Box 5384, Record Group 153, Federal Records Center, Suitland, Md. hereinafter cited as FRC.

charged with the crimes remained incarcerated, as they had since the last week of October, in the cavalry guardhouse (today the base library) at Fort Sam Houston. There they waited for word of their fate, not knowing if each day would be their last. Not one of the men broke under the weight of anxiety; some spent their time in meditation and prayer. According to a Roman Catholic chaplain, one of the few ministers allowed to visit them during the tension-filled weeks, a number professed faith in Christ for the first time.⁴

From the court adjournment, on November 28, these soldiers could only guess what the verdicts might be. On Sunday, December, 9, the army notified thirteen of them that they were to be hanged, but the officials were unable to say when or where the executions were to take place. The condemned soldiers did not tell their fellow prisoners that they had heard of their fate, but twelve of them sought spiritual counsel from army YMCA workers, and at least two of them—Corporal Charles Baltimore and Private Risley Young—wrote farewell letters to their families.⁵

The first indication that their time was near came during the evening of December 10 when army guards transferred them from the cavalry guardhouse to a barracks. In the darkness shortly before 5:30 the next morning, they were awakened, ordered to dress, and escorted to several army trucks. They were then taken, by a circuitous route, to a small clearing along the banks of Salado Creek, located four miles east of San Antonio at the edge of Camp Travis, an army training camp adjacent to Fort Sam Houston. At approximately 6:20 A.M., the procession, including the condemned men, Sheriff John Tobin of Bexar County, 7 deputies, 125 cavalymen, 100 infantrymen, 2 white army chaplains, and a black civilian minister, arrived

4. *United States v. Sergeant William C. Nesbit et al.*, RG 153, FRC, 2129-60; *Houston Post*, December 4, 1917; *A Manual for Courts-Martial: Corrected to April 15, 1917* (Washington, D.C., 1917), 182-85; M. M. Hoffman, "Court-Martial Conversion," *Catholic World*, CLXXII (October, 1950), 45-51.

5. *Chicago Defender*, March 2, 1918; *Topeka Plaindealer*, December 14, 1917; *New York Age*, December 29, 1917.

at the site of execution where the Army Corps of Engineers had, by the light of bonfires, hastily built a large wooden scaffold. Thirteen gallows hung above two large trapdoors on a twenty-four-by-eighteen-foot platform that stood twelve feet above the ground. A newspaper reporter later wrote that no more lonely spot could have been selected. The scaffolds stood in the midst of a secluded forest of scrubby mesquite trees along the banks of a narrow, meandering creek and were hidden from "public gaze." Surrounding "underbrush [ran] densely up to the creek bank."⁶

When the condemned men saw the gallows, they knew that their last request to the army had been denied. At the trial they had stated that, in case any of them were condemned to death, they would prefer to die in a dignified military manner before a firing squad rather than to suffer the army's most ignominious punishment—death by hanging.⁷ As they faced the gallows, they knew that the army had prepared for them the most severe punishment possible under the military code of justice.

Hidden from the view of the condemned were thirteen unpainted wooden coffins placed along side thirteen open graves. The cavalrymen took their positions in the surrounding brush, at twenty-yard intervals. The prisoners, handcuffed with hands behind them and feet secured together by ankle bracelets, were lifted from the army trucks to the platform and seated in two rows of folding chairs set back to back, six on one side and seven on the other. The men, who refused blindfolds, were smartly uniformed; only two were unshaven. The men of Company C, Nineteenth Infantry, who had been guarding them since the courts-martial began on the first day of November, drew near the scaffold with their rifles in firing position. The *Chicago Broad Ax* described the setting for the execution: "The bonfire

6. This description of the execution is based largely on C. E. Butzer's account in the *Houston Chronicle*, December 13, 1917. See also *Cleveland Gazette*, December 15, 1917. The manual for courts-martial stated that "death by hanging is considered more ignominious than death by shooting" *Manual*, 160.

7. *Houston Chronicle*, December 13, 1917; *Cleveland Gazette*, December 15, 1917; *Topeka Plaindealer*, December 14, 1917; *Chicago Broad Ax*, December 15, 1917.

illumination for the hanging, just as streaks of daylight were beginning to appear through a cloudy sky, the bleak landscape of dull gray and bronze against which the new timber of the scaffold stood out sharply, the khaki clad military guard, officers with coat collars turned up for the morning cold, made an unforgettable picture."⁸

A young white draftee from Houston, the only eyewitness to write a description, arrived as the condemned men were being taken from the trucks to the platform. "The prisoners were sitting in two rows, back to back on folding chairs," he recalled; "and the hangman's knots were being adjusted." He heard the men "droning a hymn, very low and soft." The only words he could make out were, "I'm coming home, I'm coming home." Over the chairs he saw "thirteen ropes, seven on one side and six on the other side [which] converged on two great triggers" manned by twelve soldiers, "six to the side."

The black minister from San Antonio and the two white chaplains ascended the platform with the soldiers. As they "offered up a consolation and a short prayer," all witnesses removed their hats. One of the prisoners whispered to the black minister that "he hoped to meet him on the other side," and Private Frank Johnson declared that he was dying "not for Uncle Sam but for God." Colonel Millard F. Waltz, the army officer in charge, gave the command "Attention!" The prisoners snapped to their feet and stood erect on the trapdoors. "Then, as if by preconcerted plan, they broke into a song. It was a dolorous hymn they chanted in a nasal monotone." Their last words were addressed to their white guards from the Nineteenth Infantry with whom they had become friendly. And the men of the Twenty-fourth could be heard to say, "Good-bye boys of Company C."

The condemned men were composed, looking straight ahead, as their caps were neatly placed on their heads and the nooses were adjusted around their necks. At 7:17 A.M., the official

8. Description of C. E. Butzer, *Houston Chronicle*, December 13, 1917; *Cleveland Gazette*, December 15, 1917; *Chicago Broad Ax*, December 15, 1917.

hour of dawn, though none of the sun's rays had as yet penetrated the overcast, the colonel signaled the command of execution by bringing his arms down. Under the platform the twelve executioners hit the levers, and the thirteen men "plunged nine feet to instant death." As the two long trapdoors dropped on their hinges, there was a "loud thud," and "the heavy beams trembled." No word was spoken, and all was over in less than a minute. "There seemed not to be a struggle by any of the men," one witness recalled. "Their hands were not clenched and their muscles seemed to be relaxed in death."⁹ The soldiers had met death with "neither bravado nor fear," but in a courageous, dignified manner which seemed almost to mock the army's elaborate security measures.¹⁰ To the end, the military had prepared for trouble from either the soldiers themselves or from other black Americans who might wish to see the men freed.

Within a few minutes after the executions, army surgeons checked the pulse of each soldier and, with a stethoscope, listened to their hearts for signs of life. Satisfied that the men were dead, the medical officers allowed the ropes to be untied from the heavy beams. While the corpses lay on the ground, the doctors conducted a second and final examination. Mexican laborers then removed the hangman's knots. (Two or three of the knots were so tightly "jammed by the impact" that it took between twenty and twenty-five minutes to unfasten them.) The laborers then placed the corpses in the coffins, each with a soda water bottle containing a typewritten slip of paper with name and rank and a notation, "Died December 11, 1917 at Fort Sam Houston." The same laborers lowered the coffins and filled the graves, which were arranged in the order that the gallows had been. Small metal markers, numbered one to thirteen, were placed at the head of each grave. While the coffins were being lowered into the ground, another set of workers busily dismantled the scaffolds and burned the lumber. An hour after

dawn, the only remaining evidences were the thirteen anonymous markers protruding from the freshly dug earth.¹¹

Later that same morning, Major General Ruckman announced the verdicts and executions to a small group of surprised and highly annoyed newsmen, who had been taken in by a rumor, obviously planted by military authorities, that the hangings were to take place at Camp Stanley in Leon Springs, some thirty miles northwest of San Antonio. General Ruckman informed the newsmen that he had approved the sentences imposed by the court-martial. In addition to the thirteen death sentences, forty-one men were given life terms, and four others received sentences of two and a half years or less in prison. Five were acquitted. General Ruckman also revealed that he had selected the site and the hour of the execution. The *Houston Chronicle* noted that "The remains were interred near the place of execution."¹²

Black Americans could hardly believe that the army had secretly hanged thirteen men before the public knew of the verdicts and before the president and the secretary of war had reviewed and approved them. On the other hand, most white Americans, particularly Houstonians, greeted the news with satisfaction if not enthusiasm. They were pleased that justice had been done and that the severity of punishment matched the brutality of the outrages committed by the black soldiers.¹³

11. *Ibid.*, December 12, 1917; *Houston Post*, December 12, 1917.

12. The response of Nick Chiles, crusading editor of the *Topeka Plaindealer*, was typical. The issue of December 14, 1917, carried the headline, "Negro Soldiers Hanged Without Chance to Appeal to President." See also Isaac N. Nutter to Senator Joseph Frelinghuysen (N.J.), December 18, 1917, General Court Martial Case 109018, Records of Judge Advocate General, RG 153 FRC.

13. *Houston Chronicle*, December 13, 1917; *Atlanta Constitution*, December 13, 1917; *El Paso Morning Times*, December 14, 1917.

9. *Chicago Broad Ax*, December 15, 1917.

10. *Houston Chronicle*, December 13, 1917.