

Southern Lynchers Write 'Finale' to Horror Story

With Prison Torture Death of Willie Peterson, Nightmare of Lynching Continues Unabated Against Negroes in South

By Angelo Herndon

The finale of a great American crime ended on a high note during the month of June with the brusque word: "DECEASED!"

A good title for a great drama for any American dramatist who has nerve enough

to attempt the job. The story is typically American and quite in keeping with a famous American pastime. Plot construction is simple and easy, certainly far more simple and easy and true to the facts than all the drivel ever dumped on the public by "Gone With the Wind" and "Birth of a Nation."

Time: Aug. 3, 1931.

Place: Birmingham, Alabama.

Opening scene of first act: News-paper account:

"Shades Valley, Birmingham. In this exclusive section of Southern white aristocracy, three beautifully attired Southern white belles are motoring on the afternoon of Aug. 3, through this mountainous area, known for its private affairs of the heart between the wives and husbands of prominent white citizens.

"As their automobile winds with rapid speed around the huge mountains, suddenly a figure (later described as being a tall, light brown Negro with clean shaven face and a heavy mustache) leaps from the woods onto the running board of their car. The three occupants are ordered by the 'Negro' to halt the car. They are directed through the woods to a very quiet spot, where they are held captive at the point of a shining revolver.

"The three Southern ladies are terrified and all worn down with fatigue and boredom after having been subjected to an hour's lecture on 'how the white folks treat Negroes,' 'social equality, and 'Communism.' Nell Williams, heroine of the three, could stand it no longer. She plunged forward and engaged in a great scuffle with the 'Negro' who opened fire, seriously wounding two of the girls who died later in the hospital. Nell escaped with slight wounds."

IF YOU HAVE TO KILL ALL

Second scene: Police Headquarters—evening of Aug. 3, 1931: "Calling all cars. Three white girls shot by a Negro in Shades Valley. Be on the lookout for tall, light brown Negro with heavy mustache. Get him if you have to arrest or kill all Negroes of Birmingham. The man is a dangerous criminal and carries a gun."

Night fell on Birmingham like a pall and as the shadow of darkness engulfed the steel and coal towns the life of one innocent Negro had already been rubbed out by bullets from a policeman's revolver. Three other Negroes were beaten to a pulp and told to go home. At the break of dawn two of the three mutilated victims, Charles Horton of 3116 Twenty-Seventh Ave., and James Jennett of Besmer, were taken from their homes and shot. Jennett was shot three times in the stomach and Horton in the neck.

Ed. Edwards and his cousin were shot as they jumped off a moving freight train. Edwards was killed

instantly. That same day a Negro cafe in Woodlawn was bombed by white hoodlums and a group of Negroes standing on the street were fired on by a carload of whites.

The next day a 16-year-old boy was lynched in Heynesville, Alabama. As innocent Negro blood had already painted the streets of Birmingham red, the white newspapers howled and raged with unabated fury: "Get the Black Criminal!" An order was issued from the police department to arrest and interrogate all Negroes traveling to and from Birmingham. The terror against Negroes spread so far and wide that white employers complained that the dragging of their Negro servants from their homes was interfering with their comfort.

But still the wholesale slaughter continued.

On Aug. 13, two more Negroes were shot and the dead body of a Negro woman was found on the street. By the end of the month 70 Negroes had been murdered and lynched and scores wounded. Jails throughout the state of Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee and Mississippi were overrun with Negroes who had been arrested and booked on "suspicion." I was one of the first to be arrested in Birmingham and beaten over the head more than three and a half hours with a rubberhose by three policemen.

Later, the charge of "suspicion" against me and two other Negroes was dropped after Nell Williams who, soon recovered from her wounds, failed to identify us. With the charge of "suspicion" dropped, I was appropriately booked on another charge of "vagrancy" for which I was sentenced to 90 days on the chain gang and fined \$25.

Last scene of act one: A reward of \$3,300 was posted for the capture of the assailant of the three white girls. The Negro businessmen of Birmingham and other Negroes with less backbone, were so frightened by the terror of police officials and hooligans, that they rushed with great haste to contribute a large sum of money for the apprehension of the criminal.

Three thousand dollars being no small sum to sneeze at, Nell Williams donned her thinking cap, and one day when she was motoring down the busy streets of Birmingham, she suddenly "recognized the Negro" who had committed the crime by a slouch hat he was wearing.

The Negro, Willie Peterson, a World War veteran, was immediately arrested, taken to jail, and, within a short time, tried and railroaded to the electric chair. At the trial he produced evidence substantiating his claim that he was

in the city hospital receiving treatment for wounds sustained in the World War when the crime was committed. The Judge very promptly ignored his claim and ordered him committed to the death cell.

EVIDENCE SUPPRESSED

(A letter, written by one of the girls before she died in the hospital, was recovered by the police, the contents of which were never revealed. Rumor had it that the girl had confessed the innocence of Peterson and that the three girls had become involved in some complicated love affair.)

Sometime after Peterson had been confined to jail, the brother of Nell, Dent, visited him at the jail and shot him in cold blood. Dent was placed under ball and completely exonerated for this heroic act when the trial was called.

The International Labor Defense entered the case and developed a wide movement of protest against the killing of innocent Negroes and the arrest and conviction of Peterson. Police officials absolved themselves of all guilt.

"Why, why—the n . . . s were shot by Red agitators," they said. "The dirty Roshian . . . ! We'll get the foreign heathens, yet."

Public pressure directed against Alabama officials forced the Governor to commute Peterson's death sentence to one of life imprisonment. For a while Peterson was confined in the horrible prison camp at Wetumpka, Alabama, after which he was transferred to Kilby at Montgomery, where five of the innocent Scottsboro boys still languish.

FINALE

Last act, last scene: Peterson, too old to stand up under the hard work to which he had been assigned, suffering from the pistol wound inflicted upon him by Dent Williams, and needing constant medical care, was kept at Kilby Prison, where he was subjected to the most gruesome tortures.

For years he suffered and lingered on behind the dark walls of Kilby the innocent victim of a great American crime. The drama of this tragedy had waned with the years. But his tortures only grew worse as the finale to this tragic crime of lynch justice was being prepared.

Apparently Alabama prison officials are masters in the art of such dramas. Last week or some time during June, the final curtain was drawn and the case and life of Willie Peterson was ended forever as the warden at Kilby scrawled on the face of a letter which contained a money order sent to Peterson by the ILD—

DECEASED