

Mink Slide Riot

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GE117: Composition 1

Culver City 145

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February 27, 2012

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Small town USA, 1946, The South, James Stephenson was a World War II vet, who had returned to his hometown after fighting to defend our freedoms. What began as an act of defense for his mother reared its ugly head, causing turmoil, not because he defended his mother, but because of a much larger issue, race. Gail O'Brien, author of a book about the Columbia case, said the case was important for three things: the spotlight it put on police violence in the growing protest against segregation, the way it demonstrated Thurgood Marshall as a legal strategist, and what it revealed about post-war society.

Columbia, Tennessee, which is located forty-three miles south of Nashville, was a town of twelve thousand and a county seat of Maury County. It was a region of large plantations and a rich horse-farming area at the center. Three incidents that preceded the "Mink Slide Riot," or "Columbia Race Riot," shaped the events of this racial injustice. In 1924, although the judge set aside his sentence, Robert Wilson was sentenced to two years in prison after being convicted on a charge of raping a young white woman. Following his acquittal, the brother of the alleged victim shot and killed Wilson inside the courthouse. In November of 1927, eighteen-year-old Henry Choate was accused of attacking a white woman. After he was arrested and taken to jail, a white mob forced their way inside the jail and abducted him. They hanged him from the second floor balcony of the courthouse. In 1933, twenty-year-old Cordie Cheek was cleared of charges of allegedly assaulting a white woman. He was abducted, castrated, and hung from a tree after being released from a Nashville jail. Although his lynching made the front page of the New York Times, his killers were never brought to justice (Wood, 2012).

Those incidents, along with African American military vets who were unwilling to accept prevailing racial norms upon returning to their hometowns, were the sparks to the racial flames

in the riots of 1946 (West, 2009). Leonard Evans, one of the black men arrested during the riot, said, "I had lived with white soldiers over there and we was side by side, and you mean to tell me I come back home and have to live through this again? The war changed the whole situation. It was time to stop all this." (Johnson, 2004) These veterans returned home from a war fighting for freedom for others, only to be reminded of certain freedoms that they didn't have. Many black Tennesseans began to openly oppose segregation and other racial injustices and, for many, change could not wait.

On Monday, February 25, 1946, James Stephenson accompanied his mother Gladys to the local Castner Knott store because she was not satisfied with the repair of her radio. Mrs. Stephenson and the white male clerk, Billy Fleming, began to argue about the repair order. He became verbally aggressive, even threatening Mrs. Stephenson. James, a former boxer in the Navy, stepped in to defend his mother. Mr. Fleming ended up flying through a window and was stabbed with broken glass, suffering non-life threatening injuries. Mrs. Stephenson was struck in the eye during the scuffle. The Stephensons were arrested, while Mr. Fleming was taken to the hospital. Both Stephensons plead guilty to disturbing the peace and paid a fifty-dollar fine (West, 2009).

Although the altercation seemed over with, Mr. Fleming's father swore out a felony warrant on James Stephenson on the same day. He was arrested, again, and charged with assault with the intent to commit murder. However, Julius Blair, a black businessman and community leader, posted bond. After the Stephensons were taken from a jail, James headed north and Gladys was taken to Nashville (Wood, 2012).

Sheriff J.J. Underwood, who had a generally good relationship with the black community, made attempts to resolve the situation as he met with Julius Blair and his son, Saul.

Billy Fleming's brother pleaded with the crowd around the courthouse not to cause trouble. Crowds of whites started discussing the incident while hanging around the square. There were rumors spread that someone had purchased some rope from a hardware store on a square. Black citizens heard rumors that the white citizens were planning a lynching. Black citizens, including many World War II veterans, armed themselves to prevent another social lynching. After they ordered all the businesses in *Mink Slide* to turn off their lights, the black citizens shot out the street lights. Police Chief and three officers responded to the reports of gunfire. As the policemen entered the darkened *Mink Slide*, gunfire rang out and injured all four policemen (Riots, 2012). Sherriff Underwood called upon Tennessee Governor James Nance McCord for help from state law enforcement. They sent the Highway Patrol, headed by Lynn Bomar. Mayor Denham, on the other hand, called the Tennessee State Guard, lead by General Jacob Dickinson, for help. The State Guard, which consisted of teenagers and men ineligible for the draft, was created in 1941 for military protection while the National Guard was mobilized during World War II. Its troops were underfunded, undertrained, and underequipped (Wood, 2012). The state safety commissioner and state highway patrolmen arrived within hours and, along with some of the town's whites, surrounded the *Mink Slide* district (West, 2009).

After they placed a curfew on the black citizens to control unnecessary activity on the streets, local and state law officers made plans to enter the Mink Slide district at 7 a.m. on February 26. As head of the Highway Patrol, Lynn Bomar ignored the plans and entered the district early. Bomar, Sherriff Underwood, and 40 to 50 patrolmen converged on the East Eight Street. Lawmen started a gunfight at Saul Blair's barbershop, claiming a shot was fired from inside the shop. They shot out the barbershop's windows and lock and arrested William "Rooster Bill" Pillow and Loyd "Papa" Kennedy. Patrolmen broke into the Morton Funeral Home and

wrote the letters “KKK” in powder across a blue coffin, causing \$2000 in damage. The coffin’s image was reprinted in publications around the country and became a symbol of the race riot. Undoubtedly illegal, Bomar was granted permission from the state attorney general to search homes and businesses for weapons. The state guard, in contrast to the highway patrol, stopped a group of armed whites from entering the *Mink Slide* area. After officers had fired randomly into buildings, stole cash and goods, searched homes without warrants, took and shotguns or rifles they could find; more than one hundred blacks were arrested and about four hundred weapons were confiscated. Twenty-five blacks faced attempted murder charges for the shooting of the white officers. None of the blacks accused were granted bail or allowed legal counsel (West, 2009).

The jail, a converted two-story house, was packed with one hundred prisoners. There were a limited number of beds and buckets served as toilets. All the guns confiscated from the black citizens were stacked inside the jail. James “Digger” Johnson, Willie Gordon, and Napoleon Stewart were taken to the sheriff’s office to await bail. Gordon and Johnson got their hands on two loaded guns, as each fired and grazed Deputy Tom Darnell. Patrolmen, who were in the corridor at the time, obtained guns and opened fire on Gordon and Johnson, Stewart ran to a corner and was not wounded. Instead of being taken to the local hospital, Gordon and Johnson both died en route to the all-black Meharry Hospital in Nashville. Some believed it was because of the all-white policy and others said they could not handle the severity of the injuries the two men suffered, but many questions were raised why the men were not taken to the local hospital. Those were the only deaths of the race riot (Wood). That was the end of the immediate violence of the *Mink Slide Riot*. The case continued throughout the spring and summer of 1946 (TN Encyclopedia).

A federal grand jury hearing was convened April 8, 1946 before Judge Elmer D. Davies to address the treatment of law enforcement and civil rights issues. On June 14th, after their jury investigation, the jury reported: no evidence that would warrant indictments for “violation of any federal statute,” they could not assign blame in fight between the Stephensons and Billy Fleming, no evidence of an organized lynch mob action, the force used arresting officers was “not unreasonable,” and the killings of James Johnson and Willie Gordon were “justifiable homicides.” Black citizens were disappointed at the investigation and concerned by Judge Davies’ membership to the KKK during his youth. The law turned to prosecuting the suspects in the riot. The defense attorneys, hoping for a move to Williamson or Davidson Counties, requested a change of venue in late June. Judge Joe Ingram moved the trial to neighboring Lawrence County and denied the defense attorneys’ withdrawal of change of venue motion (Wood, 2012).

As the legal system began to sort out what had happened, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sent lawyers Thurgood Marshall and Walter White to Tennessee to organize a defense for the accused blacks (Riots, 2012). Marshall was born in 1908 to a multiethnic family in Baltimore, MD. He became interested in law from family dinner arguments between him and his family. They would debate, “race and everything in general...very loud,” as Marshall once described it (Johnson, 2004). Marshall would go on to become the first black Supreme Court Justice. Marshall and White hired Nashville attorney Z. Alexander Looby and Maxwell Weaver, a white Chattanooga lawyer (Riots, 2012). A native of the nearby town of Mount Pleasant, Paul Bumpus was the attorney general who prosecuted the cases. U.S. Attorney General Horace Frierson, a Columbia native, asked for FBI involvement after the deaths at the local jail.

Case 4720 against Loyd “Papa” Kennedy, 21, and William “Rooster Bill” Pillow, 38, went to trial in Columbia in November. The two were being prosecuted for allegedly firing on Officer Ray Austin from inside Saul Blair’s barbershop on the morning of February 26 (Wood, 2012). After he had caught Virus X and was hospitalized for three months, Thurgood Marshall came to town as the lead attorney for the defense. As expected, the mood of the town was tense. Marshall and the defense team, fearing their safety during the trial, roomed in Nashville (American Radio Works). Marshall called the Columbia case one of his most frightening cases ever. Marshall and his team were well prepared as they interviewed more than seven hundred potential jurors to get their twelve. Marshall’s ability to get along with enemies helped him skillfully work the court system. Inside the courtroom, he was a master of cross-examination and examination. Mark V. Tusknet, a professor of law at Georgetown University and former law clerk of Marshall, said, “His ability to understand a witness’ testimony and develop questions in response to a witness’ unanticipated responses made him especially impressive” (Johnson, 2004). The jury deliberated for approximately an hour and a half after the testimony and closing arguments. They acquitted Pillow. Kennedy, who was sentenced to not more than five years imprisonment, only served a few months in prison after he was convicted of attempted murder in the second degree.

After the trials were over, as the defense team left Columbia for the final time, they were followed by a convoy of patrolmen. They were stopped twice for imaginary highway violations. Marshall was arrested for drunk driving the third time (West, 2009). The rest of the defense team in another car was told to take off, but they followed Marshall in the police car. As Marshall recalled, “They were taking me down to the river, where all the white people were waiting to do a little lynching, and I managed to get away. That was one of the closest ones I ever was into.”

After a ride through the countryside, he was taken back to town to the magistrate's office. The magistrate determined Marshall wasn't drunk after giving him a test. The drunken driving charge against him was dropped. He was released and immediately ran to the *Mink Slide*. Marshall was put in another car and he, along with the other attorneys, was escorted to Nashville by their Columbia friends (West, 2009).

The silver lining to the dark clouds left by the events surrounding the Mink Slide Riot was the positive effect it had on the community and African Americans during the civil rights movement. Saul Blair, in Carl Rowan's 1952 book "South of Freedom," said, when asked about the riot, "You just tell them that before the riot Columbia was a hell-hole, but we've got a good city now. Used to be that when a Negro went in a store uptown the clerks didn't see him until he started to walk out. Then they might offer to serve him. You go in now and ask for a pair of galluses and those clerks will button 'em on you." Instead of increasing the friction between whites and blacks, the riot had an opposite effect on the citizens of Columbia, TN (Wood, 2012). Historian Dorothy Beeler stated, "The Columbia incident and the reaction to it were major events of the late 1940's, which helped create a base from which black organizations gathered strength for the civil rights push of the 1950s and 1960s." The legacy of the 1946 Columbia Race Riot is that brave men stood up for their rights and said there would be no more social lynchings.

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