

Lest We Forget: The Lynching of Will Brown, Omaha's 1919 Race Riot

(Article begins on second page below.)

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Article Summary: A mob stormed the burning Douglas County Courthouse on September 28, 1919, and lynched an African American, Will Brown. The victim, accused of raping a white woman, had no opportunity to prove his innocence. Political boss Tom Dennison and his allies may have encouraged the lynching in order to discredit Mayor Edward P Smith, an advocate for reform.

Cataloging Information:

Names: William Brown, Chris Hebert, Henry Fonda, Milton Hoffman, Agnes Loeback, Marshall Eberstein, Tom "the Old Man" Dennison, John A Williams, Edward Rosewater, James Dahlman, Edward P Smith, William Francis, Harry B Zimman, Asel Steere, Leonard Wood, Ralph Snyder, Claude Nethaway

Place Names: Omaha, Nebraska

Keywords: lynching, racism, segregation, covenants, William Brown, Douglas County Courthouse, Milton Hoffman, Agnes Loeback, Marshall Eberstein, "Red Summer," Omaha World-Herald, Omaha Bee, Second Great Exodus, Central Labor Union, Industrial Workers of the World, "New Negro," African Americans, Monitor, Omaha Daily News, William Francis, Tom "the Old Man" Dennison, John A Williams, Edward Rosewater, James Dahlman, Edward P Smith, Leonard Wood, Ku Klux Klan

Photographs / Images: burning of the Douglas County Courthouse, September 28, 1919; Omaha's Riot in Story and Picture photographs: Will Brown, arrival of police patrol, mob on south side of courthouse (2 views), burning of the police patrol, pole on which Brown was hanged, historic cannon used by mob as a battering ram, soldiers on guard at Twenty-Fourth and Lake Streets; rioters on the south side of the courthouse; bullet holes in the treasurer's office window; spectators gathered around Brown's body (2 views); inset upper half of Omaha World-Herald front page, September 29, 1919; wreckage in Judge Sears's office; Red Cross women in their courthouse headquarters after the riot

LEST WE FORGET:

THE LYNCHING OF WILL BROWN, OMAHA'S 1919 RACE RIOT

BY ORVILLE D. MENARD

MCA.

DRUG CO.
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The burning of the Douglas County
Courthouse, Omaha, September 28, 1919.
The mob in the street is barely visible by
the light of the flames. NSHS RG2281-71



From *Omaha's Riot in Story and Picture*
(Omaha: Educational Publishing
Company, 1919).

For almost a hundred years, Will Brown's bullet-ridden and charred remains lay in an unmarked grave in the potter's field of Omaha's Forest Lawn Memorial Park. Accused of raping a white woman, Brown was taken from the burning Douglas County Courthouse by a riot-crazed mob. Beaten as he avowed his innocence, his bleeding body was dragged to swing at the end of a rope, and repeatedly shot. According to his death certificate, Brown died on September 28, 1919, age about forty, a laborer by trade, marital status unknown, birthplace unknown, as were the names of his parents. The cause of death was "bullet wounds through the body and lynched."¹

Today Brown has a gravestone, donated by Californian Chris Hebert, who learned in a Henry Fonda television special of Omaha's riot and Brown's murder. The donor had no connection with Omaha and asked only that "Lest we forget" be engraved on the stone. "It's too bad it took deaths like these to pave the way for the freedoms we have today. . . . I got the headstone thinking that if I could reach just one person, it was well worth the money spent."²

The circumstances of the riot and Brown's death remain controversial. Was he guilty of rape or was he innocent, physically incapable of the feat? Was the riot a spontaneous eruption of fervor, reflecting a violent "spirit of the times" in a year of social and economic anxieties? Or was it a politically inspired event, designed to discredit the city's administration?

Around midnight on September 25, 1919, Milton Hoffman and Agnes Loeback were assaulted at Bancroft Street and Scenic Avenue as they were walking home after a late movie. They said their assailant robbed them at gunpoint, taking Hoffman's watch, money, and billfold, plus a ruby ring from Agnes. He ordered Hoffman to

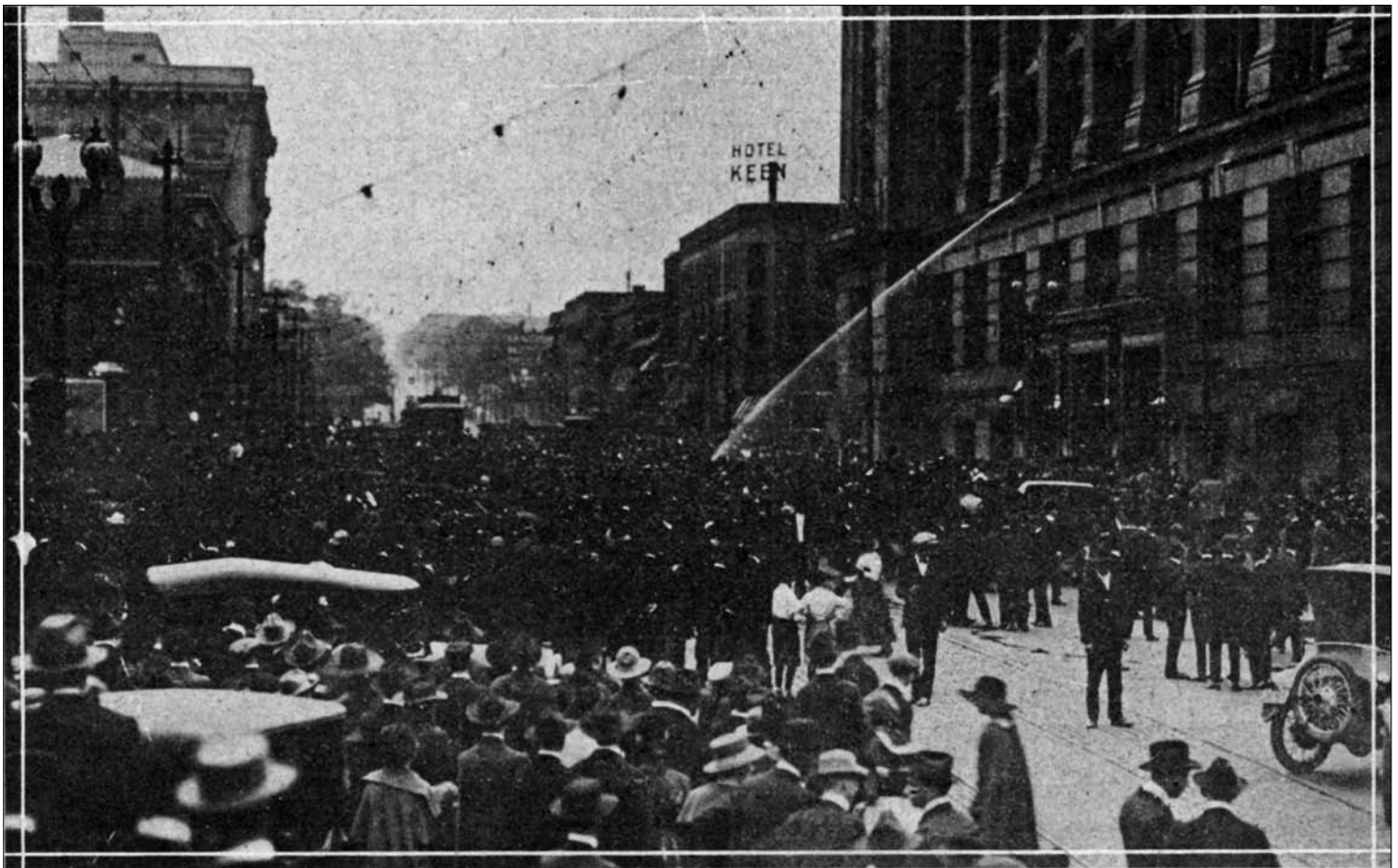
move several steps away, then dragged nineteen-year-old Loeback by her hair into a nearby ravine and raped her.³

On Friday the twenty-sixth, an *Omaha Bee* headline proclaimed that a "black beast" had assaulted a white girl. Police and detectives combed the vicinity for two hours, joined by four hundred armed men under the leadership of Joseph Loeback (Agnes's brother) and Frank B. Raum. The group included railroad workers who knew Agnes from her job at an eatery (she also worked in a laundry). A neighbor told the searchers of a "suspicious negro" living in a house at 2418 South Fifth Street with a white woman, Virginia Jones, and a second black man, Henry Johnson. Raum and four of his men found William Brown at the house and covered him with a shotgun. Arriving on the scene, police found Brown hiding under his bed. They took him to Loeback's home nearby, bringing with them clothes found in Brown's room.⁴

From *Omaha's Riot in Story and Picture.*

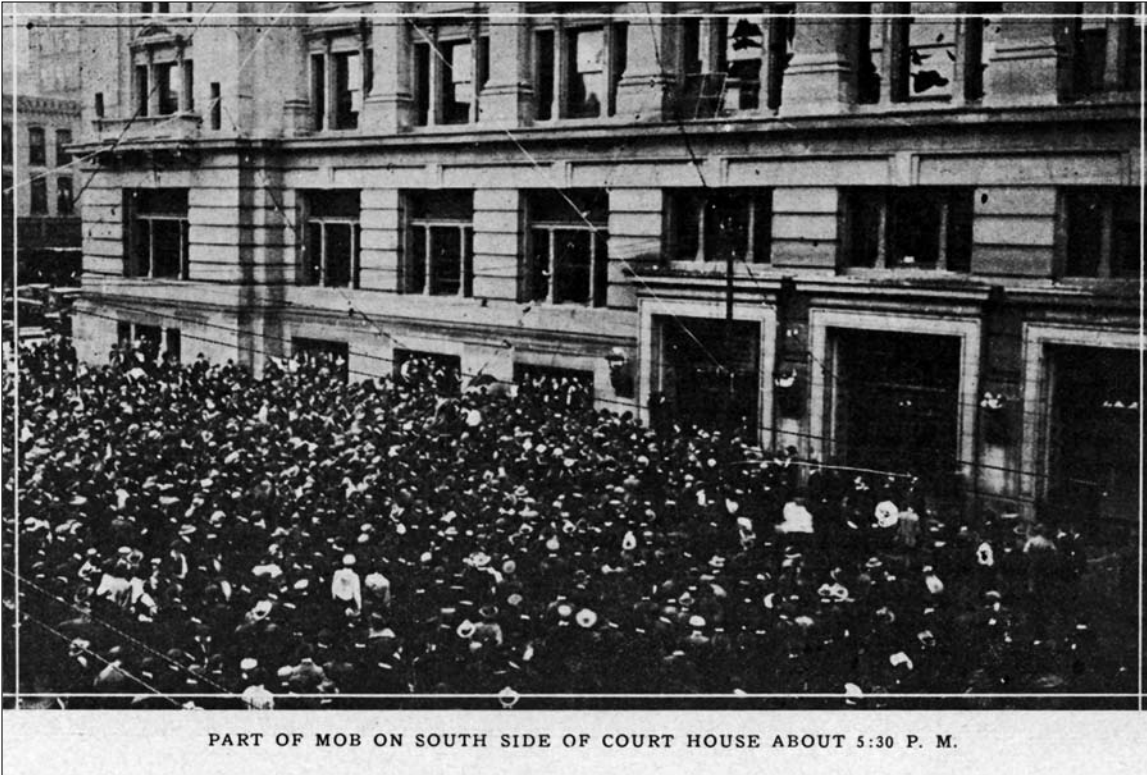


ARRIVAL OF POLICE PATROL ABOUT 4:15 P. M. WITH FIRST LOAD OF RESERVES
(This patrol was burned later by the mob)



MOB ON SOUTH SIDE OF COURT HOUSE ABOUT 5:15 P. M.
(Showing fire hose turned on crowd by police inside of building)

From *Omaha's Riot in Story and Picture.*



PART OF MOB ON SOUTH SIDE OF COURT HOUSE ABOUT 5:30 P. M.

Loeback and Hoffman identified Brown as their assailant. Her description of him tallied with that of a mugger in the vicinity three weeks earlier. Agnes also identified the clothing, including a white felt hat that had been worn by a man seen in the Gibson neighborhood. Later, however, Agnes stated that her attacker was black, but “I can’t say whether he [Brown] is the man or not.” Hoffman, arriving at the Loeback home, identified Brown “with not the least bit of doubt but what he is the Negro who held him at gunpoint while he raped Agnes.”⁵

By then a crowd of some 250 men and women had gathered around the house, shouting that Brown should be lynched. They struggled with the police and twice succeeded in putting a rope around Brown’s neck. Despite slashing of tires and beatings, the police prevented a lynching and took Brown first to the police department’s jail, and then to the new Douglas County Courthouse jail, where they believed he would be safer. Chief of Police Marshall Eberstein said he did not know if Brown was guilty and that further investigation was necessary.

Across the nation, stories of racial violence were headline news in what was called the “Red Summer.” A September 27 editorial in the *Omaha World-Herald* decried police protection, claiming that women and girls were

left helpless. “Our women must be protected at all costs,” the newspaper insisted. Omahans had been reading for weeks, especially in the *Bee*, of police failures to keep the peace, and shocking accounts of black men assaulting white women.

In addition to the enmity aroused by putative rapes, racial tension was fueled by numerous additional sources of discontent. During the second decade of the twentieth century, societal turmoil aggravated race relations as thousands of blacks migrated to the north in what was known as the Second Great Exodus. (The first was 1870-79.) Omaha’s black population doubled from 5,143 in 1910 to 10,315 in 1920.⁶ (Omaha’s 1920 white population was 191,601.) Wartime worker shortages in northern cities lured blacks seeking better paying jobs, better lifestyles, and the promise of freedom from Jim Crow. Factory agents recruited black workers, paying railway or reduced fares and offering unskilled jobs with railroads and meat-packing plants.

The 1918 armistice quieted the guns in Europe, but hostilities increased on the home front. Labor unrest was widespread. White union members striking for recognition and higher wages confronted black strikebreakers, exacerbating racial animosities. The teamsters went on strike in June 1919, and bricklayers, street and railway workers, and others followed, mostly failing to reach their goals. The Central Labor Union unsuccessfully



Rioters on the south side of the courthouse. NSHS RG2281-72

tried to organize a general strike in Omaha, where police claimed that agents of the Industrial Workers of the World were forming a committee to work for the impending strike. Rumors circulated of black strikebreakers to be imported from East St. Louis.⁷

Returning veterans seeking jobs in a tightened employment market discovered a “New Negro,” one anticipating that long-endured indignities and denial of rights would now pass into history. The war to make the world safe for democracy had been won, but black Americans found their own situation largely unchanged in their postwar world. President Woodrow Wilson had even sent a representative to France to warn black troops not to expect French democracy when they returned home.⁸

Discontent grew in the black community. In Omaha and elsewhere, jobs open to blacks offered low wages, were concentrated in packing plants

and railroads, and involved servile positions as porters, janitors, and waiters. Segregated neighborhoods offered substandard housing and minimal streets and amenities. Low wages made utilities unaffordable.⁹ Prejudice, intolerance, and frustration in the white community flourished amid a mindset of white superiority and a conviction that blacks should be submissive and “know their place.”

A potent and combustible component of the racial divide was sex—the longstanding notion of black men preying on white women. A day before Brown’s lynching, U.S. Senator John Sharp Williams proclaimed that “the protection of a woman transcends all law of every description, human or divine,” legitimizing the mostly sex-related lynchings of African Americans.¹⁰ Fifty-four blacks were lynched in the United States in 1916; by 1920 the annual number had grown to eighty-three.

Widespread violence erupted in some twenty-five U.S. cities during the “Red Summer” of 1919. Over one hundred blacks lost their lives in these clashes, including thirty-six in Chicago, where thousands were injured or left homeless.¹¹ While there are several identifiable causes of the riots, one is granted first place: sensation-seeking newspapers. Stories of racial violence and lynching dominated headlines; especially provocative were reports of white women assaulted by blacks, which were presented in stories that condoned the lynching and mob brutalities. The result was an atmosphere receptive to rabble rousing and tolerant of violence.¹²

Adding to Omaha’s disquiet and distrust was a political battle between a recently elected city reform movement and an entrenched political machine eager to regain control by demonstrating the ineptness of the reformer “goo-goos.”

In its alliance with Tom “the Old Man” Dennison, Omaha’s powerful political boss, the *Omaha Bee* was the primary strident voice of alleged racially shocking crimes. Alarmed at the *Bee*’s promotion of violence and racial prejudice, the Rev. John A. Williams—first president of the local chapter of the NAACP and publisher of the *Monitor*, a weekly black paper—called upon the editors of the *Bee* and the *Daily News* to stop their propaganda. The *Bee* was charged with being the mouthpiece of a gang that ruled Omaha with the cooperation of behind-the-scene influentials who decided who should run for office, with Dennison’s organization electing them. In return, according to the source, Dennison received money and control of the police department, juries, and the police court to protect the city’s vice interests.¹³

Dennison and *Bee* founder Edward Rosewater forged their political alliance around 1900; after Edward’s death in 1906, his son Victor sustained the paper’s pro-Dennison orientation. Thanks to Dennison, James Dahlman served as mayor of Omaha from 1906 to 1918, when he was defeated by reform candidate Edward P. Smith. Reform advocates—especially civic and church groups, inspired by wartime rhetoric of fighting for democracy and offended by city administrators’ tolerance of gambling, prostitution, and drinking in the Third Ward—removed Dennison’s allies from city hall.

But his influence and connections with the *Bee* carried on. The police department commissioner, J. Dean “Lily White” Ringer, devoted to “cleaning up” the city, was stymied by a police department little interested in his puritanical ambitions. A press campaign led by the *Bee* attacked city government,



Bullet holes in the treasurer’s office window.
NSHS RG2281-74

assailing it for rising crime and inefficiency. City commissioners were hobbled by the intramural contest between “moderate” reformers, whose goal was “good” structures for governing the city, and the radical reformers intent on cleansing it.¹⁴

Omahans perceived their governance and safety as unsatisfactory, and looked back to the years when Dennison “kept the lid on.” Vicious politics, racial intolerance, black migration, alarmist sex stories, labor unrest, housing and employment shortages, dissatisfaction with city governance, all vied for redress. City elections were but two years away.

When he was taken to the county jail, Brown said he was working as a coal hustler (carrying coal from truck to cellars), and limping because of rheumatism.¹⁵ Other sources have him employed in a packinghouse or in a lumberyard, suggesting heavy labor. However, a series of comments were made attesting to Brown’s physical limitations. A physical examination showed Brown was “too twisted by rheumatism to assault



BURNING OF THE POLICE PATROL AT FIFTEENTH AND FARNAM STREETS

From *Omaha's Riot in Story and Picture*.

anyone." An unidentified *Omaha World-Herald* reporter allegedly interviewed Brown in jail and "confirmed by his observation the man's crippled condition." His chronic rheumatism meant Brown would be unable to overpower Loeback and Hoffman, concluded Jim McKee, a *Lincoln Journal* writer.

Subsequent accounts have frequently alluded to an unnamed lawyer who commented on Brown's physical limitations. For example, George Leighton in his 1938 *Five Cities* (and likely a source for others to follow), states that a lawyer examined Brown and "he found the man badly twisted with rheumatism and wondered how anyone in such a condition could have assaulted anyone."¹⁶ During a WPA interview on November 11, 1938, Harrison J. Pinkett, a prominent African American Omaha attorney, said that he was the lawyer "that examined Will Brown and he definitely states that it would have been impossible for him to attack anyone. He states that it was merely an administration fight and Tom Dennison's way of fighting Ed Smith and his administration"¹⁷

Ironically, Hoffman was repeatedly mentioned in the press as a cripple. He denied that description, saying he had a disability because of a childhood broken leg that never mended properly.¹⁸

At about 2:00 p.m. on September 28, Hoffman exhorted about two hundred mostly young people at Bancroft School to follow him to the courthouse and seize Brown. (Times and numbers given are approximate.) Detective John Dunn told the marchers to halt, but they ignored him, their numbers increasing as they passed. By 4:00 p.m., several

hundred people had gathered at the south side of the courthouse, bantering with thirty policemen who formed a cordon around the building. Thinking there was no threat, a police captain sent home fifty officers who had been summoned to police headquarters as a reserve.

The crowd grew. Sixteen-year-old William Francis, who became known as "the boy on the horse," rode with a rope on his saddle pommel, leading part of the crowd. Policemen ordered him several times to leave, but he kept returning. Another agitator was William Sutej; a third was Claude Nethaway, who urged the crowd "to get the nigger and lynch him."¹⁹ Within an hour police were confronted by some 4,000 to 5,000 angry people throwing rocks at the courthouse. The north doors gave way to what had become rioters, and the police chased them from the building several times.

The mob attacked the police a little after 5:00 p.m. One officer was pushed through a glass door; two others became targets when they drew their clubs. Fire hoses were turned on the mob but without effect. Stones and bricks broke almost every window on the south side of the courthouse. The police tried to discourage the assault by firing their revolvers down elevator shafts, but this only made the crowd even angrier. Mayor Ed Smith and Police Chief Marshall Eberstein arrived and entered the building to restore order. Instead the crowd battered down a door, and Francis appeared with several men hanging onto his horse's tail as he rode through the entryway.

With the courthouse surrounded and breached, Police Chief Marshall Eberstein climbed to a second-story windowsill to speak to a briefly quieted audience. But after only a few moments the crowd began jeering and shouting and throwing rocks, one of which nearly hit him. Eberstein was forced to retreat. City commissioner Harry B. Zimman tried to talk to the growing mob, only to be drowned out by shouts of "Lynch the damn Jew." He suffered a few blows before being helped back inside by friends. There were no rocks or jeers for the words of mechanic John Thomas as he lauded the protection of white women.

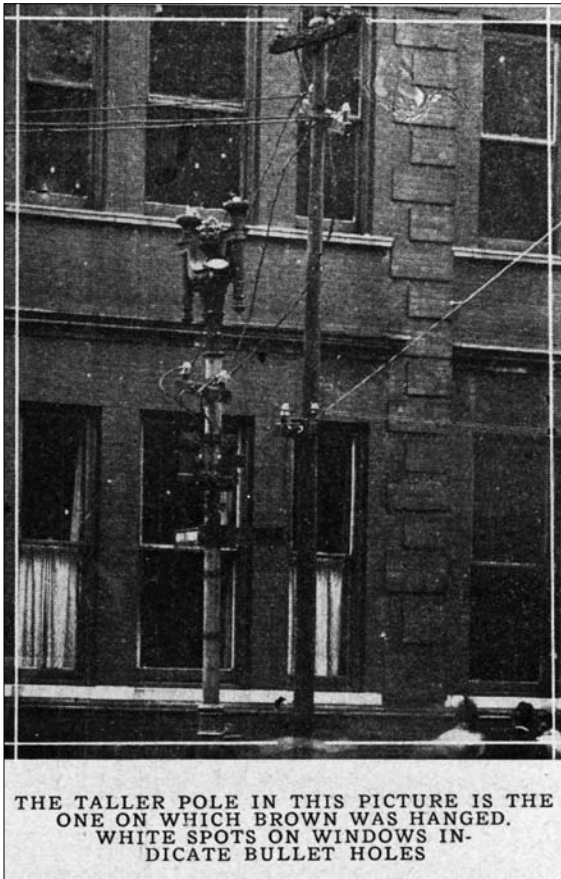
The police cordon was forced, and officers' caps, badges, and revolvers taken from them. Blacks in the vicinity were beaten, as were whites that tried to help them. Most of the police retreated inside the building by 7:00 p.m., joining Sheriff Clark and his half dozen deputies. Fire broke out an hour later and a nearby filling station was vandalized to provide fuel. Shots were fired, and pawnshops and the Walter G. Clark and Townsend

Gun Company were broken into for revolvers and rifles (the looted establishments later estimated their losses at \$20,000).

Mayor Ed Smith came out the east doors on Seventeenth Street to confront the mob, calling upon them to let the law take its course. His appeal was short-lived. He was hit with a baseball bat or other blunt object (a Leonard Weber later said he hit the mayor over the head with a gun) and a dozen other blows.

"No, I will not give up the man," Smith said. "I'm going to enforce the law even with my own life." The crowd took his words to heart, shouting "hang him" and "string him up." With a noose around his neck, the mayor was dragged along Harney Street to the Sixteenth Street traffic signal tower. The rope was thrown over a bar and tightened around Smith's neck when Russell Norgaard saved the mayor's life by removing the rope. (Emmett C. Hoctor writes in a letter that a witness, requesting anonymity, identified his uncle, James P. Hoctor, as the man who removed the rope from Smith's neck.)²⁰

Police reinforcements arrived with drawn pistols, and State Agent Ben Danbaum (he had been an Omaha police officer under the Dennison



From *Omaha's Riot in Story and Picture*.



regime) drove an automobile to the traffic tower with city policemen Al Anderson, Charles Van Deusen, and Lloyd Toland to rescue Smith. They took the unconscious mayor to the Ford Hospital.²¹

Smith later said he was positive that a man named Davis was one of his assailants. Davis was charged with assault to murder, to do great bodily injury, conspiracy to murder, unlawful assembly, and rioting. Davis claimed he was home during the riot, and was not convicted.

The mob rushed back to the courthouse, and the riot escalated as more gasoline was thrown into the building. Spreading flames forced the police to retreat to the second floor. Firemen brought hoses, which the crowd soon hacked to pieces. Rioters took the firemen's ladders and used them to enter the courthouse's broken second-story windows. While leading a charge up the stairs to reach Brown, sixteen-year-old Louis Young was shot and killed, one of three people to die that day. Policemen and sheriff's deputies took to the fourth floor with flames and angry men below them. Someone shouted, "Let no one leave," and armed men were stationed at every exit door.

Sheriff Clark led Brown and his 121 fellow prisoners to the roof, but bullets fired from nearby buildings sent them back downstairs. Clark convinced the rioters on the stairs to allow female prisoners to leave. Officers and deputies began telephoning their wives with parting words. Deputy clerk of the court Asel Steere, realizing that several large record books were threatened by the fire, made his way through an entrance and went to

From *Omaha's Riot in Story and Picture*.

his office, where he carried several district record books to a vault and safety. He led three wounded police officers into the vault, and then someone slammed the door. Trapped in the blazing building, the men broke through a wall and escaped while being shot at.

Ten officers in Court House Court Room 1 on the fourth floor were threatened by the flames, but their call for help was refused with calls of "Let 'em burn. Bring the nigger down with you and we'll hand you a ladder." From the west side of the building, three slips of paper floated down. Scrawled on one of them was, "Judge says will give up Brown. He's in the dungeon. There are 100 white prisoners on the roof. Save them." Another message read,



"Come to the fourth floor of the building and we will hand the nigger over to you."²²

Ladders were placed against the west side of the burning courthouse, and two men, one with a rope, the other carrying a shotgun, rushed up a ladder to the second floor. From there they performed an acrobatic climb to reach Brown and his defenders two floors up. By now it was dark, and automobile headlights illuminated the window ledges and cornices for their ascent, while about thirty rioters groped their way through smoked-filled stairways to reach Brown. Then shouts and shots came from the building's south side. Brown was in the hands of his executioners.

Accounts differ on how Brown ended up in the hands of the rioters. Sheriff Clark claimed he surrendered Brown to save the lives of the police officers and deputies, fearing they would be killed if the struggle continued. In another version, the black prisoners grabbed Brown and turned him over, shouting, "Here is your man." The day after the riot a youngster said he read the note that urged others to come to the fourth floor and "get the nigger." With two friends he followed the instructions and somebody handed Brown over to the thirty men who had come up the stairs. "They tied a rope around his neck and dragged him to the south side of the building."²³

Detail of above photo.
NSHS RG2281-69



Beaten and bloody, he was taken downstairs and handed over to the waiting horde, anxious to hang him from the traffic tower at Eighteenth and Harney. Several men pulled Brown's body into the air as the crowd cheered. The swaying body became a target for gunfire. Lowered after twenty minutes, Brown's remains were tied to the end of a police car that the mob had seized, and dragged to Seventeenth and Dodge streets. There he was burned on a pyre fueled with oil from the red signal lanterns used for street repair. Brown's charred remains were then dragged behind an automobile through downtown streets.

Estimates of the crowd vary from 5,000 to 20,000. As it dwindled, U.S. troops began arriving in response to requests for assistance. Earlier in the day, Chief Eberstein had called Council Bluffs, Iowa, Chief of Police J. C. Jensen for assistance. Jensen replied he had no right to send his men out of the state. Omaha city officials asked the Lancaster County Home Guard for help, but the riot would be over before it could respond.²⁴ When Lt. Col. Jacob Wuest at Fort Omaha received a report that a riot was underway at the Douglas

County Courthouse, he told Omaha's police chief that federal troops could not get involved unless ordered by the War Department. The military's chain of command had to be initiated, delaying action while communication passed from Secretary of War Newton D. Baker down to the fort's commanding officer. Not until 10:45 p.m. was the Fort Crook commanding officer authorized to lend all possible assistance to Omaha's police.

Colonel Wuest ordered two companies (six officers and 206 enlisted men) to the courthouse to restore order, and sent a third company to the black district as a precaution. While the troops marched, Brown was being lynched, burned, and his body dragged around the city's downtown streets. Another detachment was added a little later, so that a total of 320 soldiers were patrolling the streets by 2:00 a.m. About the same time a local commander in Omaha reported to Maj. Gen. Leonard Wood, Commander of the Central Department of the Army, "all quiet in Omaha," where rifles and machine guns kept the peace.

During the day special trains brought reinforcements from army camps in Iowa, Kansas, and South Dakota, to place 1,600 troops on duty in

Mayor's Life May Be Cost of Sunday Night Violence



Mayor Ed F. Smith, Mayor Smith lies in a critical condition at the Ford hospital from the effects of violence at the hands of the mob which last night lynched William Brown, seized, charred with coals, a white girl, burned the court house and sacked stores in search of weapons.

Are you seeking employment? Read the Help Wanted Ads in today's World-Herald.

Morning World-Herald. Published daily, except on Sundays and public holidays. Omaha, Nebraska, Monday, September 28, 1919. TWELVE PAGES. Price 5¢ per copy. Yearly, \$1.50. Advance, \$15.00. Outside city extra postage extra.

THE WEAR Nebraska—Unsettled with night or tomorrow cooler in today. Iowa—Unsettled with much rain. South positions today; showers and cool tomorrow.

MAYOR CAUGHT BY MOB AND HUNG TO TRAFFIC TOWER

Saved From Death by Police Officers Who Cut Rope and Rush Him to Hospital—Emergency Car Driven Through Crowd, Knocking Several Down.

CITY OFFICIALS ON ROOF OF COURT HOUSE AS GANG STORMED

The mob gathered there, to the Ford hospital, at 10:00 a.m. The mob was led by William Brown, who was lynched there. The mob was led by William Brown, who was lynched there. The mob was led by William Brown, who was lynched there.

DEATH BY THE ROPE, IS VERDICT OF MOB

Negro Is Beaten Senseless When Dragged From Dining Court House—Is Hung, Shot and Burned. Pieces of Rope Sold as Souvenirs.

FRENZIED THOUSANDS JOIN IN ORGY OF BLOOD AND FIRE

Douglas County Court House Fearfully Damaged as Howling Avengers Storm Jail With Bullet and Flame—One Man Killed and Many Injured—Police Overwhelmed and Soldiers Summoned.

CROWDS SEARCH THROUGH STREETS, ATTACKING NEGROES EVERYWHERE

Red terror seized in Omaha yesterday and last night when an infuriated mob attacked and virtually wrecked the court house, lynched William Brown, the negro captured as a result of the riot, and attempted to hang Mayor Ed F. Smith and then scattered through the streets for hours, looting and burning. The police were powerless to stop the advance of the mob, which had once gained possession of the city.

MARTIAL LAW RULES WHERE MOB HELD SWAY

Secretary of War Orders All Soldiers at Fort Omaha to Patrol City.

Machine Gun Guard Court

Police officers were ordered to use machine guns in the streets of Omaha, according to the secretary of war.

MUNICIPAL RECORDS BURNED IN MOB ATTACK

The records of the city of Omaha were destroyed by the mob.

Big Ak-Sar-Ben Week Includes Two Parades

Negroes Shoved Brown Into Mob

William Brown was shoved into the mob by the crowd.

DEATH BY THE ROPE, IS VERDICT OF MOB

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Omaha World-Herald, September 29, 1919



Wreckage in Judge Sears's office. NSHS RG2281-73

Omaha. On the thirtieth, General Wood arrived in Omaha to organize his command: three company-size units were assigned to protect the courthouse, city hall, two black areas at Twenty-Fourth and Lake Streets, Twenty-Fourth and O in South Omaha, plus a reserve unit at the city auditorium. All but two companies left Omaha on October 17. The remaining federal troops on riot duty were withdrawn on November 15.

The courthouse was in ruins. Completed in 1912 at a cost of \$1,500,000, damage to the building was estimated at \$1,000,000; tax records were burned, as were land indexes in the office of the register of deeds. The county clerk's office was gutted, and furnishings and equipment in other offices a shambles.

Three men were killed as victims of the mob's fury: William Brown; teenager Louis Young, shot in the heart leading rioters up a stairway; and H. J. Hykell, a businessman shot in the abdomen while walking two blocks away. Fifty-some individuals were injured with cuts, bruises, beatings, and smoke inhalation. County Attorney Abel Shotwell proclaimed the law would be enforced and the rioters prosecuted.

Fifteen men, whose names were drawn by chance from a county voting list, took the grand jury's oath on October 8, 1919. Sheriff Clark selected a sixteenth, Henry W. Dunn, a Dennison loyalist and former chief of police who later became commissioner of police. October and November indictments included counts of murder with revolvers, hanging, striking, beating, bruising, wounding,

shooting, choking, strangling and suffocating Brown, along with arson, breaking and entering, and inciting others to the same acts.

The grand jury issued 189 indictments. Twelve-year-old Sol Francis was the youngest to be arrested; he had urged other rioters to follow him as he climbed a ladder. Only a few of the arrested were ever prosecuted, mostly on minor charges. Two exceptions were Ralph Snyder and Claude Nethaway, both charged for Brown's murder. They were found not guilty after brief jury deliberation. From atop a burned police car, Snyder had shouted, "We have showed the nigger what a northern mob can do."²⁵

Six weeks of deliberations culminated with the grand jury's report, submitted by its foreman, John W. Towle, who lamented obstacles to their investigations, including uncooperative eyewitnesses. The report attributed the riot to multiple causes, which were similar to those cited after "Red Summer" riots in other cities: unmentionable assaults on females; contempt for authority and laws; economic conditions; strikes and lockouts; unsettled soldiers; class hatred; and social unrest. Bolsheviks, sovietism, and anarchists took advantage of these conditions to provoke a riot and bring down the city's government. Absent from the list is racism.²⁶

Milton Hoffman disappeared

after the riot. He went to Denver, where he married Agnes, later returning to Omaha where he spent the rest of his life.²⁷ Denver was the home of Dennison's friend Vaso Chucovich, and Hoffman was, in fact, Dennison's employee. His uncle had recommended him to the "Old Man" a few years earlier after the teenage Hoffman completed a business course. He worked as Dennison's secretary, assisting with election ballots and voting before he was twenty-one. Though he had left Omaha to travel, he returned prior to the riot.²⁸

Collusion between Dennison and the *Bee* is frequently identified as the prime immediate cause of the riot. The alleged goal of the longtime allies was to poison an already volatile environment by discrediting the Smith reformers so as to ensure their defeat in the election.²⁹

The grand jury report said people in the mob were under the influence of liquor, but lamented it had no evidence of drinking or drunks. Rumor filled in where verification was lacking; stories spread of liquor distributed throughout the city, with unlimited quantities available at the courthouse. The courthouse gang urged the crowd to "drink up" and spur enthusiasm for the task at

hand. Another story was that taxicabs were made available to bring people to the scene and to take the wounded away. Many people believed that accounts of black rapists were actually white men in blackface.

Some denied Dennison's involvement. "Dennison never had anything do with that riot," claimed a former police officer, adding it was "a bunch of punks" who started it and it kept getting bigger and bigger. Another person recalled that kids were responsible, and Dennison didn't know about it. Dennison stalwart William "Billy" Maher denied the "Old Man" had anything to do with the riot, but added, "I don't say he didn't get a kick out of it, the way it ruined the administration that was in."³⁰

There is no evidence to prove Tom Dennison's direct involvement in Brown's death, but his long-time relationship with the *Bee's* Rosewaters, his campaign to discredit the Smith administration, his political and legal influence, and his connection with Hoffman seem noteworthy in the search for responsibility. It does appear that Dennison was

party to a conspiracy to sow the seeds for a racial outburst. However, when it would occur and who the victim would be were most likely not decisions he made personally, but were spontaneous in a combustible setting.

Brown's guilt or innocence remains unknown. He never had the opportunity to prove what he uttered with his last words: "I am innocent." Despite the presence of thousands of people, few cooperated with law enforcement; a conspiracy of silence protected the participants. Collective guilt prevented individuals from identifying or denouncing fellow rioters. Witnesses without recollections and jurors unwilling to convict were the riot's progeny. Short-lived voices of condemnation were heard, but mostly a consensus of acceptance of lynching, even approval, was typical in Omaha and other cities.

The violence did not evoke any initiatives to assuage racism or improve conditions for Omaha's African American community. Instead, segregation was promoted by covenants that restricted

Red Cross women in their Courthouse headquarters in the riot's aftermath.
NSHS RG2281-70




Twenty-fourth and Lake is at the heart of the Omaha's traditionally black district. From *Omaha's Riot in Story and Picture*.



SOLDIERS ON GUARD AT TWENTY-FOURTH AND LAKE STREETS
(Machine gun at left and one-pound cannon at right)

property ownership to neighborhoods where blacks already were in greatest number. Two years after the riot, the Ku Klux Klan formed an Omaha Klavern.

Given the fuel provided by Tom Dennison and his allies, Brown may have been the victim of a politically inspired maneuver to restore the city officials dislodged by the 1918 election. Brown's death was timely, if not timed, to strike hard at Mayor Ed Smith. Dennison's machine won the next election. 

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NOTES

¹ *Douglas County Nebraska, Department of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, A28856.*

² Jim Eisenberg, "Grave injustice—Riverside man buys long overdue headstone for Omaha, Neb., victim of racist mob" www.pe.com/.../PE_News_Local_S_hebert06.3792504. Elliot Njus, "Lest We Forget," *Omaha World-Herald*, July 15, 2009. As a fourteen-year-old, Fonda witnessed events from a window in the building where his father had an office.

³ Newspapers reported Hoffman's first name as Millard for several days before correcting it to Milton. Agnes's name was erroneously given as Lobeck (sometimes Loebeck), and so remained for ninety years in articles and books. Jan Voogd notes the two ways Agnes's name has been spelled and comments "the correct spelling is not known." Jan Voogd, *Race Riots: The Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Com-

pany), 36n191. In fact, her name was Loeback and will be so used in these pages. Janice Maloney of Omaha, Nebraska, while doing research on her family, discovered that her great aunt was the woman Brown was accused of raping. Further research indicated Loeback as the proper spelling, as found in the genealogy website for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, family recollections, and the *Omaha City Directory*. The Fourteenth Census of the United States lists the particulars of the Joseph Loeback family, matching the details gathered from sundry other sources: Joseph and Frances Loeback lived at 3228 South Second Street; both were immigrants from Germany; Joseph was a boilermaker. Agnes was twenty years old, listed along with her siblings. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920—Population, Nebraska, Douglas County, 5th Precinct, Enumeration District 48, Sheet No. 10B.

⁴ Agnes Loeback's address was 3228 South Second Street; Milton Hoffman's was 1923 South Thirteenth Avenue. The *Omaha World-Herald*, *Omaha Daily News*, *Omaha Bee*, and the *Omaha Monitor* editions of September 26, 27, 28, and 29, are the main sources for descriptions and events of the 1919 riot. Rumors and various accounts circulated by word of mouth. One of them contended that Brown and the young lady were in the underworld together, and following an argument she made up the rape story to get even with him. The robbery was a lucrative one, it was said, with Brown not only taking a ruby ring with a tiffany setting, but also a diamond one.

⁵ *Omaha World-Herald*, September 27, 1919. *Omaha Evening Bee*, September 27, 1919.

⁶ "Black/Negro Population in Omaha, Nebraska: 1900 to 1950," compiled by David Drozd, Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha, from 1900 to 1950 Decennial Censuses, U.S. Census Bureau. Nicholas Swiercek, "Stoking a White Backlash: Race, Violence, and Yellow Journalism in Omaha, 1919." University of Nebraska <http://digitalcommons.unl>.

edu/historyrawleyconference/31, 5. *The Negroes of Nebraska*, Workers of the Writers Program, Works Projects Administration in the State of Nebraska (Lincoln: Woodruff Printing Co., 1940), 14, gives the total population of Nebraska in 1900 as 1,066,300 with 6,269 Negroes. Nebraska's total population in 1920 was 1,296,372, of which 13,242 were Negroes. "Racial Tension in Omaha African American Migration," http://nebraskastudies.org/0700/stories/0701_0131.html.

⁷ Lee E. Williams and Lee E. Williams II, *Anatomy of Four Race Riots: Knoxville Elaine (Arkansas), Tulsa, and Chicago 1919-1921* (University and College Press of Mississippi, 1972). Lee E. Williams, II, *Postwar Riots in America 1919 and 1946: How the Pressures of War Exacerbated American Urban Tensions to the Breaking Point* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991).

⁸ Williams, *Post War Riots in America*, 3-6. Williams, *Anatomy of Four Race Riots*, 3-9. During the war, black troops served in segregated units under white officers in noncombatant assignments. Sixty-eight members of the black Ninety-third Division, serving under French command, were awarded the Croix de Guerre for Valor. See "The Race Riots of 1919-1920," www.blackwallstreet.freeservers.com/red%20summer%20riots.htm

⁹ *The Negroes of Nebraska*, 19-45.

¹⁰ Williams, *Anatomy of Four Race Riots*, Appendix A, 103.

¹¹ *Ibid.* See also, "The Race Riots of 1919-1920," www.blackwallstreet.freeservers.com. The lynchings and race riots of the "Red Summer" were not isolated outbreaks of violence. Motivation and patterns of causation are discernable and their consequences similar. Michel Pfeifer contends that the redress is a form of "rough justice." Impatient with legalisms and due process, mob redress was justice achieved through direct action, a form of exercising popular sovereignty. Michael Pfeifer, See *Rough Justice: Lynchings and American Justice, 1874-1947* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

¹² Orville D. Menard, *Political Bossism in Mid-America: Tom Dennison's Omaha, 1900-1930* (Lanham, Md.: The University Press of America, 1989), 245-48, and Menard, "Tom Dennison, the *Omaha Bee*, and the 1919 Omaha Race Riot," *Nebraska History*, 68:4 (Winter 1987), 154-65, and Swiercek, "Stoking a White Backlash."

¹³ The editor of the *Omaha Bee* was Victor Rosewater, son of Edward Rosewater. See Menard, *Political Bossism*, 65-91. Less than a month before the Omaha riot, the *Monitor* carried a story about a Negro soldier lynched in Louisiana on August 21, 1919, a preview of what was to happen in Omaha in September. Accused of raping a white woman, the soldier was lynched before a crowd of some 1,000 observers, then his body was dragged behind an automobile through the principal street before being burned in front of the house of the putatively attacked woman. No arrests were made. "The Real Causes of Two Race Riots," *The Crisis*, IXX (December 1919). The Gilder Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at the McMillan Center, Yale University. www.yale.edu/glc/archive/1136.htm/

¹⁴ Louise E. Rickard, "The Politics of Reform in Omaha," *Nebraska History*, 53:4 (Winter 1972), 419-45.

¹⁵ *Omaha Evening Bee*, September 27, 1919.

¹⁶ George Leighton *Five Cities* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 210-13. See also "The Glory Is Departed," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (August 1938).

¹⁷ Harrison J. Pinkett was the first African American attorney in the United States admitted to the bar of the U.S. Supreme Court. Educated at Howard University and Columbia, he was the first university trained black lawyer to open an office in Omaha. He was recognized as one of Nebraska's outstanding Negroes. *Negroes of Nebraska*, 28, 36-37. See <http://memory.loc.gov/amem/wpaintro/necat.html>. Lawrence H. Larsen and Barbara J. Cottrell, *The Gate City: A History of Omaha* (Lincoln: University

of Nebraska Press, 1982), 169. See also Larsen and Cottrell, Harl A. Dalstrom and Kay Calamé Dalstrom, *Upstream Metropolis: Omaha and Council Bluffs* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 219.

¹⁸ Hoffman was indignant all his life about the stories of his being a cripple. He related that as a child of three years he broke a leg that never properly healed and left one leg shorter than the other. As a result, for the rest of his life he wore a brace and built-up shoe. Hoffman insisted, "I had a disability," and was not a cripple. Interview with Milton Hoffman by Orville D. Menard, November 14, 1979, Omaha, Nebraska.

¹⁹ Nethaway was tried in January 1919, "for conspiracy to murder." He was found not guilty.

²⁰ Letter to Emmett C. Hoctor from anonymous, Omaha, Nebraska, May 25, 1919. Copy in possession of Orville D. Menard. And see Voogd, *Race Riots*, 113.

²¹ See "Omaha's Riot in Story and Picture" (Omaha: Educational Publishing Company, 1919 (?). The writing on the riot is extensive. One of the best is Lee E. Williams II, *Postwar Riots in America 1919 and 1946*. See also the *Monitor*, November 21, 1919.

²² See http://wapedia.mobi/en/Omaha_Race_Riot_of_1919. See also "Omaha's Riot in Story and Pictures."

²³ *Evening Omaha World-Herald*, September 29, 1919.

²⁴ Douglas R. Hartman, *Nebraska's Militia: the History of the Army and Air Guard* (Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company Publishers, 1994), 97.

²⁵ The *Monitor*, December 18, 1919.

²⁶ The *Monitor*, November 21, 1919.

²⁷ Hoffman Interview. During interviews with Hoffman, he was willing to talk about his pre-riot years, but would not discuss the riot. The marriage was apparently circa 1923, the year the Denver City Directory included Milton and Agnes M. Hoffman. Agnes died in 1966, Milton in 1982. His death certificate records his profession as "Executive Secretary, City of Omaha."

²⁸ Dennison and Chucovich had worked together at the "Arcade," a noted gambling house in Dennison's western days. Interview with John Ragan, Dennison's grandson, conducted by Orville D. Menard, September 26, 1979, Omaha, Nebraska.

²⁹ See Menard, *Political Bossism in Mid-America*, 245-48, and Menard, "Tom Dennison, the *Omaha Bee*, and the 1919 Omaha Race Riot," *Nebraska History*, 152-65. Also Swiercek, "Stoking a White Backlash."

³⁰ Interview with Herman J. Creal, August 9, 1979, Henry J. Walsh, October 3, 1979, and William Maher, October 30, 1979, conducted by Orville D. Menard, Omaha, Nebraska. Jan Voogd presents four categories of race riots: cultural boundary crossing, labor related, military, and local politics, where she places Omaha. Voogd, *Race Riots*, 14.