A Union in Hoop Spur

HOOP SPUR HAS LONG since disappeared from the maps of Phillips County, Arkansas, and even in 1919, when it could be found on such a map, it consisted of little more than a railroad switching station and a small store. But the cotton fields surrounding Hoop Spur were speckled with cabins, each one home to a family of sharecroppers, and on September 30 of that year, shortly after sunset, the black farmers began walking along dirt paths and roads toward a small wooden church located about one-quarter mile north of the switching station. For most, the church was a mile or two away, or even farther, and as they expected their meeting to run late into the night, they brought along sweaters and light coats for the walk back home. Many had their children with them, and a few, like Vina Mason, were carrying babies.

By 7:00 P.M., the first of the farmers had arrived, and they lit three lamps inside the Baptist church. The wooden benches began filling up rapidly. Sallie Giles and her two sons, Albert and Milligan, reached Hoop Spur around 8:00 P.M., and by then the "house was packed," she said. Paul Hall was there, and so too were "Preacher" Joe Knox and Frank Moore, along with their wives. At last, Jim Miller and his wife, Cleola, pulled up in a horse and a buggy. Miller was president of the Hoop Spur Lodge of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union, which for the past several months had been signing up sharecroppers throughout southern Phillips County.

The one person still missing was the lodge's secretary, Ed Ware.

He was, as he later admitted, thinking of quitting. The previous Thursday, September 25, sharecroppers in Elaine, a small town three miles to the south, had held a Progressive Farmers meeting, which he'd attended. The next day, white planters had singled him out and warned him not to go to any more such gatherings. He had reason to be afraid, but at last his wife, Lulu, insisted that they go, reminding him, as he later recalled, that "I had those [union] books and papers." Although they lived only one mile to the west of the church, they had to swing around to the south in order to get past the Govan Slough, a ditch lined by a thicket of trees, and it was nearly 9:00 P.M. by the time they arrived. Ware nodded at the nine or ten men milling around front, and then he shook hands with Lit Simmons at the door, both men twisting their fingers into the lodge's secret grip.

"We've just begun," Ware whispered.

That was the union's password, and everyone who had entered that night had uttered the same thing. Although the meeting was now in full swing, with, as one sharecropper put it, "two hundred head of men, women and children" inside, Simmons and the other men in the front yard remained where they were. William Wordlow, John Martin, John Ratliff, and Will Wright stood together in one group, about fifteen feet away from the door, while Alf Banks Jr., Albert Giles, and the three Beco brothers—Joe, Boisy, and Ransom—sat in Miller's buggy. At first glance, it all seemed so peaceful. The church lamps cast the yard in a soft glow and the men were speaking in low voices, or saying nothing at all. But not too many yards distant, the light petered out, and everyone had his eyes glued to the road that disappeared into that darkness. Route 44, which ran north 22 miles to Helena, the county seat, was a lonely county road, bordered on both sides by dense patches of rivercane. In the buggy, the Beco brothers fiddled with shotguns draped across their laps, while several others nervously fingered the triggers of their hunting rifles. Martin was armed with a Smith & Wesson pistol.

At the door, Simmons was growing ever more nervous. This was only the third time that the Hoop Spur lodge had met, and at the previous meeting, which had been Simmons's first, he'd asked why it

was necessary to have men stand guard. "White people don't want the union and are going to get us," he'd been told. And on this night, Simmons knew, rumors were flying that whites "were coming there to break up the meeting, or to shoot it up."

The minutes passed slowly by. Everyone listened for the sound of an approaching car, but the only noises that Simmons and the others heard, other than the chirping of field crickets, rose from inside the church. Nine-thirty passed without incident, then ten and ten-thirty. The road remained dark and quiet, and yet, to Simmons, it seemed that this night would never end.

"The whites," he muttered, "are going to kill us."

MOST OF THE HOOP SPUR farmers in the church that night were middle-aged, in their thirties, forties, and fifties, and their religious faith was such that they began all of their meetings with a prayer. They all had migrated here during the past decade, as this was about as deep in the Mississippi Delta as you could get, the cotton fields having been a tangle of swampland and dense hardwood forests only ten to fifteen years earlier. Southern Phillips County was a floodplain for both the White and Mississippi rivers, and as a result it had been about the last stretch of delta land in Arkansas to be drained and cleared. It remained an inhospitable place to live, the woods thick with fever-carrying mosquitoes, and yet it offered the black families a new hope. The two rivers had deposited topsoil so rich in minerals that geologists considered it perhaps the most fertile land in the world.

The Hoop Spur farmers were mostly from Mississippi and Louisiana, although a few hailed from as far away as North Carolina. Their journeys here had been much the same. Most had arrived during the winter months, just after the end of a harvest, as this was moving season for sharecroppers throughout the South. The black farmers almost always ended the year in debt, and so, hoping that it might be different someplace else, many packed up their meager belongings every couple of years and moved to a distant county or to another state. Most of those who'd come to Hoop Spur had

arrived—as a local scholar named Bessie Ferguson wrote in 1927—with "nothing of their own with the exception of their makeshift household furniture, a few ragged clothes, a gun, and one or more dogs, sometimes a few chickens or a hog."

They'd moved into cabins that were, even by the dismal housing standards of the time, a sorry lot. Plantation owners threw up cabins made from rough lumber for their sharecroppers, each one surrounded by the plot of land that was to be worked by a family, and typically they were so poorly constructed that, as the joke went, the sharecroppers "could study astronomy through the openings in the roof and geology through the holes in the floor." A sharecropper's cabin usually consisted of one large room, perhaps 18 by 20 feet in size, where the entire family would live and sleep, with a shed attached to the back. The main room would have a fireplace for heat and a couple of windows—with wooden shutters but no glass—for light. Because southern Phillips County was so vulnerable to floods, the landowners had erected cabins that were particularly flimsy, since they needed to be "so cheap that the loss from floods is small," Ferguson said.

During the winter months, the Hoop Spur sharecroppers did what they could to survive. Occasionally it would snow, and with nighttime temperatures regularly dipping to near freezing, they struggled mightily to stay warm. They patched up the drafty walls of their cabins with newspapers, and they collected firewood from the Govan Slough and other nearby stands of trees, although at times they grew so desperate, Ferguson wrote, that "garden or yard fences are used for fuel." Fortunately, there was plenty of fish and game to be had, which complemented whatever vegetables they had grown in their gardens the summer before and canned. The woods were filled with deer, wild turkeys, rabbits, squirrels, doves, quail, and geese, and those hunting with dogs could chase bears through the canebrakes. At last, March would come and the rains would turn the fields into bogs, and the sharecroppers would pray that the levees on the White and Mississippi rivers would hold and keep away the floods that could destroy their cabins.

Once the fields began to dry, usually by the end of March, the men began breaking up the soil, leaving their cabins before the first light of day to hook ploughs to their mules, their work hours stretching, as they liked to say, from "can see to can't see." This was particularly true for the Hoop Spur farmers, as most were working 15 to 30 acres, which were large plots for sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta. After they finished turning up the soil, which took a couple of weeks, they would run a "middlebuster" over it to form furrows and mounds. By early May, they were ready to plant. They would dig a narrow trench in the mounds and, every 18 inches or so, drop in cottonseed.

As soon as the plants sprouted, they would work the fields with long-handled hoes, chopping the weeds that grew fast and thick in the humid air. Everyone in the family would help with this chore, even the younger children spending long hours in the hot sun. Daytime temperatures regularly soared into the nineties, and night brought little relief. Malaria was a constant problem in the delta, and at dusk, in order to drive off the mosquitoes and flies, the cabins had to be smoked or sprayed with insecticide, and with the doors and windows shuttered to keep out the pests, no one slept well in the stifling air.

The cotton plants, however, flourished. Early in the season, they produced a light-hued blossom that darkened, wilted, and dropped within a couple of days, which was all the time it took for pollination. A tiny green pod soon appeared at the base of the flower, and during July and August it swelled into a boll packed with seeds wrapped in willowy fibers, until at last, in late August, the bolls split open and the fields would be painted white.

Although the plants grew waist high, many of the bolls hung close to the ground, and so the sharecroppers moved through the rows stooped over or even on their knees. They fixed their fingers into claws to pluck the cotton from the bolls, and while one hand was plucking the other hand would be stuffing the cotton into a canvas sack they dragged behind them. The best sacks had tar covering the bottom to reduce the friction, but still, as the bags filled with a

hundred pounds of raw cotton, the strap slung over the picker's back would cut into his or her shoulder. "Pulling the cotton out of the boll can work your fingers too," one sharecropper remembered. "The husks of the cotton boll are sharp and brittle." After years of picking, sharecroppers regularly ended up with arthritic hands, their fingers crippled at the joints.

The younger children, of course, had smaller sacks, and as the Hoop Spur families moved together through the fields, they would sing:

> I'm down here in this cotton field
> With a sack that's ten feet long
> Well my poor back is killin' me
> I'll be glad when this cotton's all gone.

A good picker could fill a hundred-pound bag in the morning, break for lunch, and then fill a second one by the end of the day. The cotton would be dumped onto a mule-drawn wagon, packed down, and taken to the nearest gin. There it would be vacuumed from the wagon through a suction pipe and run through a machine that, by means of narrowly spaced teeth, removed the seeds from the fiber. The cotton would then be funneled into a compressing room, where it was pressed into bales, wrapped in burlap, and tied together with steel bands.

The fertile fields around Hoop Spur yielded at least 1,500 pounds of raw cotton per acre, and that translated into one 500-pound bale of ginned cotton, ready for the market. A sharecropper who worked 10 acres could expect to produce ten bales of cotton, and the seeds could also be sold—the protein-rich hulls were fed to cattle, and the cottonseed oil was used in foods and cosmetics. However, the sharecroppers would have to make several passes through their fields to fully reap what the land had to offer, as not all of the cotton bolls ripened at the same time; thus it was late in November before the plantation owners and sharecroppers met to settle their accounts.

It was then that the sharecroppers' lot, at least from the black farmers' point of view, turned most unfair.

SHARECROPPERS THROUGHOUT THE MISSISSIPPI Delta proudly declared to census workers that they were "working on their own account" and were not plantation "employees." However, from the first moment of spring planting, their wishes conflicted with their landlords' desires. They wanted to plant large gardens, raise hogs and chickens, and grow both corn and cotton. However, the landowners, who often had overseers run their plantations, wanted their sharecroppers to keep their gardens small, and at times would insist that cotton be planted right up to the cabins' front porches. Not only did this maximize the cotton harvest, it minimized the amount of food the sharecroppers could grow, and that created an opportunity for the landowners to keep them in debt. The black farmers would be forced to buy most of their goods on credit at plantation commissaries, or at stores in nearby towns where the landlords had an account for their tenants, and in either case, the sharecroppers would be charged exorbitant amounts.

Many of the Hoop Spur families shopped at Dowdy and Longnecker's in Elaine, a town of four hundred people 3 miles to the south, and they paid 25 percent to 100 percent more than whites did for the same goods, the higher prices said to be a "carrying charge." A gallon of molasses that normally cost 85 cents was sold to the sharecroppers at $1.25 on credit. Work shoes that normally sold for $2.50 cost the sharecroppers $4. When it came time to settle, the plantation owner would deduct these expenses from his tenant's half share of the cotton crop, and more often than not, after he was done with the arithmetic, he would scribble a balance-due figure on a scrap of paper and hand it to the bewildered farmer.

"They didn't give no itemized statement," recalled one Arkansas sharecropper, Henry Blake. "No, you just had to take their word. They never give you no details. They just say you owe so much. No matter how good account you kept, you had to go by their accounts. . . . It's been this way for a long time."

The black families in Hoop Spur had a song for this moment as well:

> Nought's a nought
> An figger's a figger
> All fer de white man
> None fer de nigger.

Although they were regularly kept in debt, the Hoop Spur sharecroppers would usually return to their cabins with $50 to $100 in their pockets, as the landowners—most of whom lived in Helena—typically gave their tenants half of the money from the sale of the cotton seed. The landowners hoped this small amount of cash would suffice to keep the sharecroppers around until the following spring.

Five or so years earlier, the sharecroppers—even if they had been fairly treated—couldn't have expected to earn a great deal more than that. In 1914, cotton sold for 7 cents a pound, and at that price, it did not take much creative bookkeeping by a plantation owner to come up with a negative figure at settlement. But since then, the demand for cotton had steadily risen, largely because of World War I, and so had the price. By 1917, when the United States entered the conflict, cotton was fetching 24 cents a pound. At that price, a sharecropper who harvested fifteen ginned bales, which was a good crop for any one family, was due a half share of $900 before deductions, and his commissary bill, even given the inflated prices, should not have run much more than $200. That meant the sharecropper was due at least $700, which was a fair amount of money, given that a new Model T sold for only $350. But few sharecroppers in Phillips County—or anywhere else in the Mississippi Delta—received anywhere close to that amount in 1917. Indeed, since it was no longer so easy for plantation owners to turn that profit into a negative figure, many didn't bother settling their sharecroppers' accounts that fall, instead waiting until the spring to hand them their usual balance-due note, as that way it was too late for the sharecroppers to move to a new plantation. "The negro is then bound

hand and foot and must accept the landlord's terms," the U.S. Department of Labor reported.

As a result, the government conceded, a state of "acute unrest" had begun to develop among sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta. The conflict in Europe was creating a windfall opportunity for cotton farmers, and they were missing out on it. In 1918, the price of cotton rose higher still, to more than 30 cents a pound, and at the end of the year, black farmers in southern Phillips County and elsewhere in Arkansas became ever more insistent on claiming their rightful share. One sharecropper, having been told that he had no money coming to him, walked 122 miles to Little Rock to see if he could hire Ulysses S. Bratton, a former federal prosecutor, to sue his landlord. The sharecroppers, Bratton said, came "by the droves to my office, telling their stories as to how they were being robbed by the landlords, who took their crops at their own prices, charged whatever they saw fit for the supplies furnished, and as a final consummation of the whole thing, refused to make any kind of a settlement with them whatever." At the Theo Fathauer plantation in Ratio, which was 10 miles south of Hoop Spur, none of the sixty-eight tenants received a settlement in 1918, and when they finally did so in July 1919, the plantation manager, J. J. Petro, handed them a "statement, written upon blank tablet paper, showing 'balance due' in a lump sum," Bratton said.

Throughout southern Phillips County, sharecroppers in the summer of 1919 bitterly voiced the same complaint. Black farmers in Crumrod, Lundell, Mellwood, Ratio, Countiss, Elaine, Modoc, Lambrook, Wabash, and Hoop Spur all felt they had been cheated out of what had been due them from the 1918 harvest. Either they had not been given itemized accounts or their settlements had been deferred, and one way or another, the $1,000 and up they should have received from 30-cent-a-pound cotton had never materialized. This year, they vowed, would be different. The price of cotton was forecast to top 40 cents a pound, and to possibly even reach 50 cents a pound, and while many of the sharecroppers, having never had the chance to attend school, couldn't read or write, they could all

calculate what 50-cent-a-pound cotton would mean for them. Their half share would bring more than $100 per acre, and all you had to do then was multiply that figure by the number of acres you were working. Frank Moore and his father, James, had 51 acres planted—their share was going to be worth more than $5,000. Paul Hall and his brother had 40 acres in the ground. Alfred Banks had 32, John Martin 22, Albert Giles 20, and William Wordlow 16. They were all working large plots. Even old Ed Coleman, who'd been born a slave in 1841, was working 18 acres. None had ever dreamed they would see cotton selling at prices this high, and as they labored in their fields in July and early August, spending ten to twelve hours a day in the hot delta sun chopping weeds, they believed, as they later said, that "their chance had come to make some money for themselves and get out from under the white landlord's thumb."

And it was at that moment, when the cotton bolls were just about ready to burst, that a slight, twenty-seven-year-old man, Robert Lee Hill, showed up in Hoop Spur. He had been recently discharged from the United States Army, and he came bearing literature that stated, in big bold letters, "We battle for the rights of our race."

WHILE DETAILS OF HILL'S early life are sparse, his military records show that he was born on June 8, 1892, in Dermott, Arkansas, a small town in the southeastern corner of the state. It appears that he grew up on plantations in that area, his parents most likely sharecroppers. By the end of 1917, he was married and working as a common laborer for the Valley Planting Company in Winchester, a cotton-growing town 60 miles southwest of Elaine. Able to read and write, he had taken to heart the teachings of Booker T. Washington, who had urged blacks to run their own businesses and to become more self-reliant. In early 1918, he and three others—one of whom, V. E. Powell, was a thirty-one-year-old physician who'd graduated from Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee—organized the Progressive Farmers and Household Union, drawing up a constitution and bylaws that surely would have met with Washington's approval. "The object of this organization," they said,

"shall be to advance the interests of the Negro, morally and intellectually, and to make him a better citizen and a better farmer."

Secret fraternal organizations were extremely popular at the time, and Hill and the others adopted this model for their union. There would be a grand lodge in Winchester, they decided, with "chapter" lodges throughout the state. Members coming to chapter meetings would need to know a secret password and handshake, and there would be a doorkeeper to ensure that nonmembers were kept out. Every year the grand lodge would host a statewide meeting, which was to be marked by a great deal of pomp and circumstance along with the wearing of regalia, customs familiar to anyone who had ever attended a Shriners convention. All of the delegates from the local chapters would wear "the Grand Circuit badge, pinned in a conspicuous place on the Breast."

Hill and the other founders were also careful to ensure that their organization was properly registered with the state. They hired white attorneys from Monticello, Arkansas, to draw up the incorporation papers, which were dutifully filed with the county clerk and approved by a county judge. "We did all that the law required and was declared a legal body," Hill said proudly.

However, the war raging in Europe derailed the union's development in 1918. Hill was drafted into the army in June 1918, one of 17,500 Arkansas blacks to serve in the military during World War I, and it appears that he served overseas. "I lend my best services during the great war," he wrote. He returned to Arkansas in the spring of 1919, and since his mother was living in Ratio, in the southernmost part of Phillips County, he began his union-organizing efforts there.

The union, which by then had five officers, gave Hill the title of Grand Councillor, and paid him $2 for each chapter he organized. As a first step, Hill printed up a circular—one that broadcast a rousing call to change—to hand out to sharecroppers.

> O you laborers of the earth hear the word. The time is at hand that all men, all nations and tongues must receive a just

> reward. This union wants to know why it is that the laborers cannot control their just earnings which they work for. . . . Why should we be cut off from fair play? Hear us, o God, hear us!

Hill's circular advised the sharecroppers to "get 15 men and 12 women" together, and then he would come "set them up" as a union chapter.

Dr. Powell accompanied Hill to the organizational meetings and would sit at a table, registering members. It cost the men $1.50 and women 50 cents to join, and Powell would ask them questions to determine their moral fitness. Did they believe in the Almighty God? Did they give respect to all humankind? Did they obey the law at all times? Did they go to church? The younger men had to attest that they had properly registered for the draft, and all had to know their preachers' names. Finally, they had to declare themselves American patriots by responding yes to this question: "Will you defend this Government and Her Constitution at all times?" Powell would then attest to their fitness and hand them a membership card.

Initially, neither Hill nor Powell stepped forward with a plan for helping the farmers settle their accounts. Instead, Hill focused on building the union. Those joining were asked if they would like to buy shares in the union, at $5 a share, with the money to be used to build the Grand Lodge's headquarters in Winchester and to buy land. Anyone buying $50 in shares, Hill said, would have his name inscribed in the building and be invited as a delegate to the union's inaugural state convention. He provided everyone who bought shares with a stock certificate, which stated that income from the building and land would be paid back to the union members on a per-share basis, and he deposited the money he collected into the union's account with the Bank of Winchester.

At the end of meetings, Hill asked everyone to stand, and it was then that he most powerfully stoked their emotions, leading them in a song he'd composed, set to the melody of "Maryland, My Maryland":

Ye farmers of this mighty land,
Organize, oh organize!
To firmly stand against each wrong
Organize, oh organize!
Your only hope is union strong
Organize, oh organize!
To break the bonds of slavery
That bind you now from sea to sea
And from oppression to be free,
Organize, oh organize!
Your calling was the first on earth
Organize, oh organize!
And ever since has proved its worth
Organize, oh organize!
Then come ye farmers, good and true
The die is cast—it's up to you
Organize, oh organize!

Hill must have known that he was treading on dangerous ground with such lyrics, and in late July, he took his rebellious talk a step further. After the sixty-eight black families on the Theo Fathauer plantation in Ratio received balance-due settlements from the 1918 harvest, Hill promised that he would find an attorney to help them get a proper settlement at the end of this year's season. While 1918 may have been a lost cause, 1919 did not have to be, and Hill began offering this attorney-finding service to all of the union lodges in Phillips County. "It was a fact that the people could not get statements of their accounts and the custom in that section was the landlord would take the cotton and seed and ship them away," Hill said. "I did what I thought was right in the matter. I advised people to get the help of some honest white lawyers."

Hill threw himself into this new task. He'd previously taken a correspondence course to become a private investigator, and he now fancied himself the "detective on the case." He contacted Ulysses Bratton, who had opened a branch office in Helena, and in

mid-September, several of the Ratio farmers, acting upon his advice, traveled to Little Rock to confer with Bratton and to provide him with the balance-due stubs that documented their travails.

"They inquired of us as to whether or not they had any legal rights in the matter. We advised them that they did," Bratton said. He also told them how he would proceed. For a fee of $100 per farmer, with $50 up front, he would meet with Theo Fathauer or his agent and request an itemized account of their expenses in 1919. "If refused," he said, he "would immediately file suit in the Circuit Court of Phillips County."

News that the Ratio sharecroppers were planning to challenge their landlords in this way quickly spread to other union lodges, and on Thursday, September 25, Hill and Powell traveled to Elaine to talk to the members there about doing the same. It was declared an "open" meeting, with any farmer welcome to attend, and many of the Hoop Spur sharecroppers came. Hill, dressed as always in a frock coat, spoke in his usual animated way, and emotions rose as he called upon the men and women to rise up and "fight" for their legal rights. The sharecroppers tallied up twenty-one landlords who could be sued, and they discussed whether, on October 6, they would in unison ask their landowners for itemized accounts of their expenses. No one would give up his cotton until he received this information. Others spoke of holding back their cotton even longer. A World Cotton Conference was going to be held in New Orleans from October 13 to 16, and perhaps, with the federal government promoting cotton products to foreign buyers at that convention, the price of cotton would soar even higher.

"Let us see what Uncle Sam means!" Hill shouted. "Uncle Sam can help you when nobody else can!"

The Phillips County sharecroppers were thinking of doing the unthinkable. They were talking of holding back the cotton from their white landlords for days and even weeks. This was akin to going on strike, and perhaps a few even knew the history of how, in 1891, the Colored Farmers' Alliance, which claimed to have 1.2 million members throughout the South, had called for a national strike.

The labor stoppage mostly fizzled in the face of threats from white landowners, but about twenty-five cotton pickers in Lee County, Arkansas, just to the north of Phillips County, had gone ahead with it, and by the time the dust had settled, white posses had gunned down two of the men and lynched nine more, a killing spree that Southern newspapers applauded. "Negroes," the *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche* editorialized, "should be made to understand that they cannot commit these outrages with impunity, and that the penalty is very severe." Yet the sharecroppers in Elaine were now discussing committing just such an outrage, and the noise from the church, which was located on the far side of the colored section of town, adjacent to a cotton patch, carried all the way to the other end of town, where the whites—and several of the plantation owners—lived.

As the meeting drew to a close, Hill announced that the following Wednesday he would bring a representative from Bratton's law firm to Ratio. Bratton was ready to sign contracts with the sharecroppers. Hill and the lawyer would then come, either later that afternoon or early the next morning, to Elaine and Hoop Spur. Anyone wishing to hire Bratton could do so at that time. The sharecroppers' rebellion was reaching a point of no return, and Powell, as a final word of advice, told them that from now on they were "to keep their racks full." There was no mistaking what he meant: the guards, at all future union meetings, were to make sure their guns were fully loaded.

AFTER ED WARE ENTERED the Hoop Spur church that night of Tuesday, September 30, he sat at a table in front, just to the left of the pulpit, where Jim Miller was speaking, and facing the wooden benches. As the secretary for the lodge, he kept the membership lists and registration papers, and a number of farmers had come that night to join, queuing up in front of the table to hand over the $1.50 or 50-cent initiation fee. Ware, who had gone to school through the fourth grade, filled out the examination certificates for each of them, just as Dr. Powell usually did, asking them about their religious beliefs and their willingness to defend the Constitution, although he

had difficulty gripping the pencil, as two of his fingers were crippled from his many years picking cotton. At times, he appeared distracted, for he was deeply troubled by his own thoughts. On the way to the church, he'd told Preacher Will McFarland, who'd walked over with him, that he was "going to resign."

In many ways, Ware was in a different boat than the others. Forty-eight years old, he'd come here from Louisiana, where he and his wife, Lulu, had suffered one heartache after another—all four of their children had died from fever and other illnesses. But he'd done well for himself in Hoop Spur, having scraped together enough money to buy a Ford, which he'd turned into a taxi, shuttling others back and forth to Elaine and Helena. The taxi service in turn had provided him with money to rent 120 acres outright, and while he worked some of the acreage himself, much of it was farmed by other black families, including Sallie Giles and her two sons, who were now *his* tenants. He owned two mules, a horse, a Jersey cow, eight hogs, 135 chickens, a wagon, and all of the farming tools he needed, and he'd turned his cabin into a nice home, furnished with several dressers and a nice mirror. When he smiled, he showed off five gold teeth, evidence that he, unlike most of the union members, could afford to go to a dentist.

Ware had joined the Hoop Spur lodge in early September, shortly after it had formed, and he knew that it was risky to be one of its officers. Twice in the past week he'd run into trouble because of the union. The previous Wednesday he'd been in the Elaine post office when a white landowner he knew, a man named McCullough, had curled his finger and said, "Ed, come here."

"Do you belong to the union?" McCullough asked.

"Yes sir. I am secretary of it at Hoop Spur."

"Tell me, what is that thing?"

"You know as much about it as I do. It is called the Progressive Farmers Household Union of America, as I understand it. It is to make better conditions among the farmers and that is why I belong to it."

"I hear you are the leader."

"No, I'm not."

"We hear that you boys are making the lodge to make strikes."

"That's not so."

"You get out of that thing, because it is going to cause trouble here."

"I mean to do the square thing."

"Well, you get in the square and get out of that thing."

Although the conversation unnerved him, Ware spent the next night ferrying farmers from Hoop Spur to the union meeting at the Elaine church, taking advantage of an opportunity, he later explained, "to make money." On Friday, he brought a wagon of cotton into town to have it ginned, only to be confronted once again, this time by merchants insisting that he sell them the cotton he'd just baled. "They offered me 24 cents and then 33 cents [a pound] for it," Ware said. "I refused to take it, and they said they were going to take the cotton at that price. I rejected their offer and said I'd take my cotton to Helena to sell. They then said they were going to mob me, but I was warned about it. So when they tried to fool me into their store so they could get me I refused to go in and kept out of their way."

Ware—having been threatened with a lynching—waited for the weekend to pass, and then he drove to Helena and gave his "business over to an attorney." He also noticed that Helena merchants were "paying 44.5 cents a pound for short cotton," confirmation that the Elaine merchants had been trying to cheat him.

The threat of Ware being "mobbed" wasn't the only sign that trouble was brewing. A number of union members were complaining that their landlords, in the past couple of weeks, had tried to chase them off. While much of the cotton still needed to be picked, a landowner could always get day laborers to handle this chore, and they could be hired for as little as a penny a pound. There would be no need then to quarrel with sharecroppers raising a fuss about being owed half of 50-cent-a-pound cotton. Both John Martin and Will Wordlow had been told to leave, as had Frank Moore and his father. The Moores were living on a 200-acre farm, run by a white man named Billy Archdale, where nine of the thirteen families had been

forced to flee. Ware considered Moore, who was one of the leaders of the Hoop Spur lodge, "the bravest man" in the union, and yet even Moore was unsure of how long he could last now that Archdale "was threatening to run us away from our crops."

But Ware said nothing more about his worries during the meeting. Instead, he patiently stayed at the table, signing up new members, until at last, a few minutes before 11:00 P.M., the line of men and women waiting to join dwindled and came to an end. Ware closed the membership book and put away the examination forms. The money from the membership dues, he knew, would have to be sent to Winchester. Miller continued to talk, leading the discussion about what the lodge should do. Surely they had a right to hire Bratton, but did they dare? They all knew that there wasn't a plantation owner alive who wouldn't object to being called into court. And who were they to do such a thing? Most everyone in the church was dirt poor, and most were illiterate, and their own songs told everything you needed to know about their place in society—"None fer de niggers." Ware looked briefly at his friends sitting across from him—Frank Moore and Will McFarland and their wives and his wife, Lulu, were all together—and he was, as he later recalled, about to stand when he heard a knock on the rear window on the church's north side. It was Will Wright, and he had his face pressed up against the glass.

"A car has driven up and stopped," he said.

Outside, Lit Simmons and the others looked up the road, toward a small bridge about 40 yards away. A moment earlier, the car had pulled up before the bridge, turned off its engine, and cut its lights. And now it was just sitting there, in the darkness, waiting.