

PERSONAL INTERVIEW 10/17/60

SUBJECT: DR. J. W. BUTTS

"My own part in this is simply this. I returned from the Army ~~and~~ about August 1st, 1919, and resumed my practice in Helena, Arkansas. In the middle of September my father called me to his office and told me to get ready for trouble because they had information that some trouble was going to occur sometime in October between the negroes and the whites, and to be ready. I was astounded on the morning of October 1st to receive a telephone call from my brother at approximately 7 o'clock telling me that trouble had already occurred at Hoop Spur and he was going down to Elaine with a group of other men, who had been deputized, and there they would search the trains and aid in guarding Elaine. I went down later in the day, approximately 12 o'clock, with Dr. W. R. Orr, and Dr. Aris Cox, and Mr. Joel Higgins. We were very much afraid that we would have trouble on the way down because the road, which was a dirt road, led through a number of thickets, a very thick growth of cane on each side of the public road, down from Wabash to Elaine. We got to Elaine, however, without any trouble and there we stayed until the next afternoon -- the afternoon of Oct. 2nd. There was no trouble in Elaine at any time, while we were there. We knew of the killing of Pappan, of Adkins, the wounding of Proctor, and the killing of Clinton Lee, and the wounding of W. K. Monroe. We that night formed a cordon around the town of Elaine to repel any invasion which might come from the woods around, where we knew a world of negroes were. No incident happened during the night, though I was scared as hell when several cows came wandering through the cotton patch where I was stationed, and resisted the impulse to shoot. The next morning at 7:15, about, Gov. Brough came from Little Rock on a special train at the head of 500 U. S.

troops, members of the 3rd Division. They deployed into the woods and shortly after the deployment one of the soldiers was killed, two were wounded, and the soldiers immediately laid down a field of fire ~~and~~ in front which prevented any further opposition. They captured many negroes, and undoubtedly killed many negroes in the woods who were resisting them.

Now on Oct. 1st, the afternoon of Oct. 1st, I saw O. S. Bratton brought from the building of Bob Carpenter, in chains, to the Helena train, where he was guarded by L. R. Parmalee, and he was sent from Elaine to Helena, where he was put in the county jail. Mr. E. C. Hornor advised that there be no violence at Elaine, a For that reason Bratton was not killed by the members of the armed forces at Elaine because we thought it would be a bad thing to start a disturbance in Elaine itself. So we let Bratton go. Had any attempt been made to hurt Bratton it would certainly have succeeded, because by this time, the afternoon of Oct. 1st, there were approximately 250 armed men in Elaine, and had we not listened to Mr. Hornor's advice ~~that~~^{he} would certainly have ~~been~~ had violence because we all felt that he was to blame for the insurrection, which was then going on, and which had resulted in the loss of life. There were no incidents at all in Elaine, nobody was shot, there ~~was~~^{were} no shots fired, nobody was harmed, in Elaine, the prisoners were simply brought in from the woods and confined there. There was never any evidence of violence and, so far as I know, no attempt was made by the negroes to invade Elaine. The women and children were evacuated on a train sometime Oct. 1st. I left Elaine in the afternoon of Oct. 2nd, returned to Helena, and kept in touch with matters here in Helena. At no time was there ever any ~~mob~~ violence in Helena, there was never any evidence of a ~~mob~~ forming to lynch O. S. Bratton or the negroes who were confined to the county jail. The U. S. soldiers were in Helena,

##3 J. W. BUTTS (PERS.INT.)

it is true, but at no time did they have to repel a mob,
and this I must insist on.

INTERVIEW OF HENRY H. BERNARD
at 727 Highland Street, Helena, Ark.
Wednesday, December 7th, 1960
by
Dr. J. W. Butts and Dorothy James

Mr. Bernard:

My name is Henry H. Bernard. I am 69 years old. I was living at Elaine in 1919. There had been rumors that there was going to be trouble. One night one of Charlie Bernard's favorite negroes came in and he wanted to know where Mr. Charlie was. It was late and he had retired for the night, and we told him that. He said that he had been forced to join the organization that they had and it was at that time going on over in what was known as the "quarters" for the negroes. He said he skipped out. He paid his \$10, but he wanted to come over and tell Mr. Charlie that there was going to be trouble. So we told him it was too late to get him, that we would tell him about it in the morning, and we decided to go over to this church, which we did. There was a cotton patch in behind this church, and a man by the name of Buford and I crawled through the cotton and got under the church to see what was going on. We could tell there was a white man in there, we could tell by his voice, but we didn't know who he was, and never did know. They were telling each one to get rid of the "boss man", which meant that each "boss man" was to be killed by somebody that lived on the place and they were to get so many acres of land. And also, while we were under there, we heard them say "What are those guards doing out there?" And they said, "Some of them are out there and they have your orders." The orders, they said, were to kill anything white, even if it was a white dog. We stayed under there quite a while and we couldn't hear everything that was going on, so we crawled back out and went back and we decided to call the landowners, which we did, which were Mr. Will Cragg, John D. Crow, K. P. Alderman, and Charlie Bernard.

I remember Mr. Cragg said "This won't do. Let's stop this, it'll ruin our labor." In the meantime we walked out on the street and we saw a light coming, and we went over to Charlie's house and waked him, and in the meantime W. K. Monroe drove up and he fell out of the car and said he was shot. We took him in the house and turned the lights on, and he had two or three bird shot in his nose and his face somewhere. Charlie said "I'm worried about Sally", his wife, Sally and Sid Stoaks and his wife, and Lamar Rogers' wife, had come to Helena to the picture show. We didn't know what to do - there was nothing we could do, because he said there was a whole gang at this church at Hoop Spur that had shot at him. In the meantime, Amos Rogers came in, and his car was shot up in the back, an old Model T Ford, and he said that he saw a dead man lying in the road. After that we called all the boys that had been in the service, got them together and we decided we wouldn't do anything until daylight. In the meantime, Sid Stoaks and his crowd came by and evidently they had dispersed because they didn't shoot at them.

At daylight we went to Hoop Spur, we were all loaded and ready, and the American Legion met us there. From there it started. With all of the ex-service men they formed platoons, and a man by the name of Ames that lived on Section 14 rode up on his horse and he says "There's a big gang over there in that cotton field." We went over there, and they took to the woods. And he said "There's another one down this bayou," said there were some 45 or 50. So we got in the corn field and went down this bayou to flank the house. When they saw us, they got in this bayou. That's where Jimmie Tappen and Ira Proctor were shot. We saw at least 100, or maybe 150, that were coming. They were all lined up in a COMPANY FRONT. They were coming to us. Almost everybody was out of ammunition. I crossed this bayou. Dr. Parker drove up in his car and they put Jimmie Tappen and Ira Proctor in this car and they crossed back across the railroad to a house. I crossed this bayou and I saw some 6 or 8 bodies in there, dead ones. And we went on to this house. In the meantime there was some more people in Helena came in cars. I helped Dr. Parker with Jimmie Tappen, his eyeballs had been punctured with buckshot. In the meantime the negroes crossed below this house and got in the cornfield, and there were two or three log cribs out in this barn lot and a good many of us went out there. I had a high-powered rifle, a 250,3000 Savage that was very high-powered. They got in this corn patch, but they never did come out, but occasionally one would show himself. I got in this corn crib, with Jim Austin and Isey Bernard, but my rifle barrel wouldn't go through kum between the logs, and I took my knife and whittled out a place, and when one would show himself, one of us would get him, but they never did attack us from there.

From this house they had a telephone there and they called Little Rock and wanted them to send some troops down there, and they were told that they would, they'd called the Governor. Then they telephoned up there that they were going to take Elaine, and we had all these cars up there from Elaine and we had to get them back. At that time there was a freight train doing some switching there, and they took two gondola cars and backed them up there and ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ a bunch of them got in these cars and went on back to Elaine. I rode with Mr. Crow in his car.

That night quite a number of people from Mississippi came over, they crossed the river and came over there, and people from Helena. The next morning they brought the troops in, and the Governor came with them. He went out with them to the battle the next morning. That just about ended it after that.

Dr. Butts: The night that you heard this talk in the church was the night - This church was at Elaine, is that correct?

Mr. Bernard: That's right. It was in the negro quarters.

Dr. Butts: But it was the same night the killing occurred at Hoop Spur?

Mr. Bernard: No - Yes, yes, it was in the early part of the night, the earlier part of the night.

Dr. Butts: How many people approximately, Mr. Bernard, were living in Haine at that time?

Mr. Bernard: Oh, I would say 250.

Miss James: Was there any fighting in Haine itself?

Mr. Bernard: No - no fighting that I ever knew of.

Dr. Butts: What do you believe caused this insurrection? Who was behind it?

Mr. Bernard: Oh, there was - some white person. There was some white person in that church.

Dr. Butts: You saw a white man in the church?

Mr. Bernard: I didn't see him, I heard him. I could tell from his voice that he was a white man.

Miss James: And he was telling them to "get rid of their bosses"?

Mr. Bernard: Oh, yes, we heard that distinctly. And to kill anything white, even if it was a white dog.

Dr. Butts: Did you see O. B. Bratton carried from Bob Carpenter's building to the railroad in chains?

Mr. Bernard: No, I didn't see him at all. I heard that he was over there, but I never did see him.

Dr. Butts: Do you have any idea where Bratton was captured?

Mr. Bernard: No. I think he was taken off the train.

PERSONAL INTERVIEW

Subject: J. M. Countiss, planter and land owner at Elaine:

"I was 11 years old. At my father's store, below Elaine, a car stopped on the morning of Oct. 1st. This car was occupied by four negroes and had many guns -- I remember this so well -- stuck in the car. My father flagged them down and told them not to go to Elaine for there had been a killing the night before and people in Elaine were excited and might hurt them. He advised them to turn back, go over into Mississippi, and then on to Chicago, where they said they were from. One of the men said he was Dr. Johnson, a dentist of Helena, and the other men were his brothers. On the 2nd of October, Dr. Johnson and his brothers were taken off the train at Elaine, sent to Helena, and on the way up to Helena they shot the white man in the back of the car with them, and were, in turn, killed by the men in the front seat. Dr. Johnson's building on Walnut Street in Helena was searched later that day and 27 rifles with a large supply of ammunition were found."

NOTE: See acct. in Helena World, Oct. 2nd, 1919 - "Bulletin: The building on Walnut Street owned by Dr. A. A. E. Johnson, negro dentist killed by County Treasurer Amos Jarman today after Johnson had shot and killed Alderman O. R. Lilly, was surrounded and searched this afternoon. More than a dozen high-power rifles and several cases of ammunition were found." In Helena World, Oct. 3rd, 1919 - number of rifles found changed from a dozen to 27.

NOTE: Above covers more than he knew from personal experience.

PERSONAL INTERVIEW

SUBJECT: Miss Hazel Lee, sister of Clinton Lee, killed Oct. 1st, 191

"R.L. Brooks was with my brother at the time he was shot. Brooks told me that after Jim Tappan was shot and Proctor was wounded, Clinton cried like a baby and was still crying when they got back into the car after carrying Tappan to the McCoy house. While the car was standing still, but everyone was in the car, the shot was fired which killed Clinton."

Note: Miss Lee is an employee, and has been for many years, of the firm operated by R. L. Brooks, now deceased.

PERSONAL INTERVIEW

SUBJECT: J. R. Miles, head of the City Sanitation Dept., Helena, Ark who states:

That he was with the first group of cars to get down to Hoop Spur. As the bridge on the public road had been torn up, they had to make a detour which took them down the side of the road almost in front of the McCoy House. They backed toward the McCoy house to give other cars a chance to pass them. As they started to get out, two shots were fired from a high-powered rifle about 200 yards away. The ricochet from the second shot hit Lee, who was sitting on the left side of the car, under the left arm, and he was dead in a few minutes. The squad advanced toward the thicket, after taking the body of Lee into the McCoy house. Near the thicket, they were met by a volley which mortally wounded Tappan and wounded Proctor in the head. Tappan was also carried to the McCoy house and from there brought to Helena, where he died in the hospital.

PERSONAL INTERVIEW

Subject: Charles W. Straub, graduate of the University of Virginia Law School, former Deputy Prosecuting Attorney of Phillips County, Former Special Assistant to the Secretary of Labor in the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, and now retired and living at Helena, says:

"I was a 14 year old boy when I accompanied my father, Sebastian Straub, to Chicago, where he engaged the services of a firm of detectives to send a negro detective down to Helena to find out just what the union plans were, since we had heard rumors of impending trouble. I was present at the interview when it was decided that this man from Chicago was to go to Elaine, join the Union and report to my father. At this time, about the 1st of Sept., 1919, my father was the acting Sheriff of Phillips County due to the illness of F. F. Kitchens. This man from Chicago reported to my father that the plan of the union was to kill a number of planters in the Elaine vicinity on or about October 6th. They were assured by Robert L. Hill, the organizer, that he would see to it that the United States Government would give to each member of the union 40 acres of land and a mule after the planters were killed (this was in the detective's report). I saw and read the report of the detective engaged to do this work and remember very well that I saw it about the middle of September, 1919. After this report it was arranged that should any report of trouble come from Elaine the telephone operator at Helena would notify a number of designated citizens of Helena and ask them to report to the Acting Sheriff. When the affair at Hoop Spur caused a premature eruption of trouble, these men were called to the Court House, deputized, and sent to the Hoop Spur area to restore order. Out of this group Jim Tappan and Clinton Lee were killed and Ira Proctor was wounded.

NOTE: Mr. Straub's story is further borne out by the statement of the operator on duty at Elaine that night (Sept. 30, 1919) who says that she was not surprised when a call for help was put through the exchange, for she had been warned by the District Supervisor of the Company to be on the alert because trouble was brewing. (Mrs. Ables, pers. Comm.)

10-15-60-

PERSONAL INTERVIEW:

SUBJECT: J. R. Cappenter, former mayor of Elaine, and a prominent merchant and planter, of Phillips County, tells me:

"I knew several weeks before the riot that trouble was brewing, due to reports made to me by some of the older negroes who did not approve of the plot against the planters. There were, at the time, only two small sawmills in Elaine -- a hoop mill and a stave mill. At no time, to my positive knowledge, was there any attempt made by the sawmill hands to keep their women folks from doing any work for the white people. I would have known of this had it been so. The negroes in the Elaine territory were always rather prosperous and any planter who refused to ~~make~~ a settlement or give a statement of account to any of his tenants was never known by me. During the riot, there was never a shot fired in Elaine, nor was any negro harmed or shot, so far as I know, and I was in the fighting. The seed money was never withheld from any tenant no matter how large his debt. In some cases there was at times of harvest an advance made in cash or groceries to be paid out of the seed money, which proved to be very satisfactory to both planter & tenant. I believe that this whole thing was a money making scheme thought up by at least one white man and the organizer, Robert Hill. "

10-15-60 (J.R.C.)

Mr. W. K. Thomas - 10-12-60

J. R. Cappenter - 10-15-60

PERSONAL INTERVIEW

Subject: W. C. Chavey, former Commander of the Richard L. Kitchens Post, American Legion, Helena, Arkansas, and now Supervisor of the Box Shop at the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company, West Helena, states:

That he was assigned to duty at the Court House and that at no time was any effort made to lynch any prisoner. (see the case of Moore vs. Dempsey U. S. Sup. Ct. 1923?). The utmost order prevailed in Helena throughout the two days of tension.

Note: Do we need more interviews of people in Helena as to sentiment & actions of people in Helena? Was there a mob?

INTERVIEW OF LYNN P. SMITH,
FRI., OCT. 28th, 1960
by Dr. J. W. Butts and Dorothy James

Mr. Smith:

At the time of the Elaine trouble I was living at Lundell - the postoffice was Lundell -- on Bee Bayou Plantation. Jos. C. Meyers of Helena was interested in this plantation, and practically every Sunday I would come to Helena. It was well-known, or commonly known, that there was trouble brewing among the negroes, not only on the plantations, but in Helena. As well as I remember there was a committee formed here, and Joe Meyers was one of the committee, and they employed negro detectives - more than one. They had them at different times, in order to let one check on the other. The reports from these detectives were in writing, and were mailed to Jos. C. Meyers in the Solomon Building under a fictitious name. On Sundays I would be up there, and I saw a good many of these reports. They hadn't organized any below Mellwood, all of them were from Mellwood on up to about Hoop Spur, or Wabash, That was about the territory they covered. There was a number of these planters slated to be killed in these reports and they were notified, and some of the names of the negroes were known, as who was to kill who. They wouldn't believe it. Then, I believe, that was when these folks up here quit spending any money because they couldn't make those folks down there believe there was anything like that going on. I think that was about the last - I don't think they had any detectives here for maybe two or three weeks, or a month, before this trouble broke out.

Dr. Butts: When did you know that the detectives came down here first? Approximately what time?

Mr. Smith: Dr. Butts, I would say that they had a man in here ~~near~~ a year, before that, but not all the time. They had some, a few, darkies here that gave information along all the time, but in order to, what they thought, make it "stick", they got these detectives, to come in here and see what they could find out. And it all just worked in together. There was trouble going on among the negroes - it was being agitated - and you could see - you didn't have to be a smart man to see that there was just a big change in the negroes not only down there but up here. There was just a big change in the negroes attitude towards different people. That was the reason that got the Straubs interested because they were big furnishing merchants - they furnished negroes all over the country.

Dr. Butts: Is it true that only a small percentage of the negroes in that area belonged to the union, as far as you know?

Mr. Smith: Yes. That is true. These 12, sentenced to death, were the big leaders, you see, and they were agitating the other negroes

Dr. Butts: You all knew their names?

Mr. Smith: Yes, we knew their names before the insurrection.

Dr. Butts: Was the insurrection brought on prematurely, before the day it was supposed to start by the killing of W. A. Adkins?

Mr. Smith: Yes.

Dr. Butts: Did you all know approximately the date it was going to start?

Mr. Smith: That says there on Oct. 6th, and I think that's right. It started a week before it was scheduled to start. I believe in this article it says that these two officers stopped there to shoot up that church, doesn't it?

Dr. Butts: Yes, it says that.

Mr. Smith: Well, of course, that's false too, because they didn't know thing about it. Those two officers, Charley Pratt and Adkins, didn't know a thing about these reports.

Dr. Butts: Did they know anything about the condition of the road down to Elaine? They didn't know that this bridge was defective?

Mr. Smith: Undoubtedly they didn't.

Dr. Butts: Did you have any trouble on your farm?

Mr. Smith: No, I didn't.

Dr. Butts: How many negroes did you have on that farm?

Mr. Smith: There were around 30 families, I guess.

Dr. Butts: And none of them had any trouble, or got into any trouble?

Mr. Smith: No, they didn't.

Dr. Butts: Did you ever hear of any unarmed negro being killed?

Mr. Smith: When I got back home, I put a negro hostler on a horse, and told him to notify every negro on the place to bring his gun up and put it in the commissary, and they did. Every one of them brought their guns up there and put them in the commissary.

Dr. Butts: Did you ever know of any work stoppage down there due to the fact that the negroes at Elaine had forbidden their womenfolk to work for the white people under any condition?

Mr. Smith: We found this, up here too, for instance, there were several times that a lady would lose, say, a washwoman or a cook,

#3 Interview with Lynn P. Smith

Mr. Smith - cont'd

and she would go down in colored town and say, "I want to get a washwoman, do you know where I can get one, or a cook?" and they got to where some of them would say "I'm looking for the same thing." That's when they knew very well that something was agitating the negroes to stop them from working, for white people. One would stop at a store where they used women window washers, negro women, (they would get good money for it, and the men were getting bigger money for working in timber, and cotton, and the mills, and so forth) and some negro would come in the store and ask for "Mrs. Jones" - the negro windowwasher, a thing unheard of previously. They never before asked a white person about a negro as "Mr." or "MRs."

Dr. Butts: To get back to this question of crop settlements - As a rule did your tenants make a little money every year?

Mr. Smith: Yes, sir. Dr. Butts, as far as I know, it was customary, to make about 2¢ a pound on the cotton - about \$10 a bale. But they got the seed money - that was an unwritten law. The ginner was to pay the tenant when he brought a bale of cotton in, to give them the gin ticket and the money. And he would turn that gin ticket, (and he had a copy) in, and he still got the seed money. The gin ticket of course, went with the cotton and it came to the compress. That is the gin ticket came to the compress.

Dr. Butts: Did you know Robert L. Hill?

Mr. Smith: No, I never did.

Dr. Butts: Did you know Ed Ware?

Mr. Smith: Yes, I knew him.

Dr. Butts: Do you believe it is true that he was offered 46¢ a pound for his cotton and his landlord refused to let him sell it for over 34¢?

Mr. Smith: Well, Dr. Butts, at that time I don't believe there was any cotton sold that cheap. Of course, I wouldn't say what he was offered, or whether he was offered anything, I know we settled at the sale price, less about 2¢ a bale, and I think most of the farmers did the same thing. You had this to contend with, if you beat your negroes, they knew right well who was paying more money and you just lost that family.

Dr. Butts: Did you ever hear of any case of peonage down in that area?

Mr. Smith: There never was any peonage here.

Dr. Butts: Did they ever made any attempts to get a settlement - a crop

#4 - interview with Lynn P. Smith

Dr. Butts - cont'd

settlement? That you ever heard of?

Mr. Smith: Only thing I ever heard of - they were always settled with.
I never heard of anyone ever having any trouble getting
a settlement.

End of interview.

NOTE: The "article" referred to in foregoing interview was by O. A.
Rogers, Jr., and appeared in Arkansas Historical Quarterly,
Summer, 1960, issue.