

CLIPPING: Chicago Daily News, Oct. 18, 1919, NAACP MSS.

ARKANSAS RACE RIOTS LAID TO BAD SYSTEM / Exploiting of Tenant Farmers Causes Ill Feeling;  
Massacre Plot Doubted / by WALTER F. WHITE

(The following dispatch gives the result of an inquiry made by representatives of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)

Away from the state of Arkansas, the scene of severe fighting during the early days of October, where passions run high and it is dangerous to life and limb even to attempt to discuss rationally the rioting and its causes, one can tell of that section of our country where thousands of negroes are held in the bonds of debt-slavery and peonage of the most flagrant sort.

It is difficult for those who live in northern states to imagine conditions so barren of hope and of robbery so flagrant. The attempt of a few negroes to free themselves and their fellows from this condition and the resulting attempts to check such efforts on the part of the whites resulted in the deaths of at least twenty-five negroes and five whites--although some give the figures as high as 100 negroes and twenty-five whites.

The world at large was informed that the negroes had planned a general massacre of whites, had formed an organization for that purpose, and had set a day for the uprising. But, as in so many cases the world at large knows little of the real facts.

Facts Discovered on the Ground / The facts discovered on the ground are these:

In August certain negroes of Phillips and surrounding counties had formed what was known as the "Progressive Farmers' and Household Union of America." This was incorporated under the laws of the state of Arkansas and the articles of incorporation were drawn up by Williamson & Williamson, white attorneys of Winchester, Ark., who are themselves ex-slaveholders. These articles were filed with the county clerk and judge at Winchester in the due legal form. The organization was chartered in the form of a fraternal organization or lodge, this being done, as was explained, because the fee for an organization of that kind was much lower than for any other. Each male member was to pay \$1.50 and each woman 50 cents. The sums thus

numbers of

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obtained were to be paid into a common fund, to be used to employ a lawyer to carry into court and make a test case of one of the tenant farmer cases where the farmer had been unable to secure a settlement from the owner of the land which he worked.

A knowledge of the vicious system of economic exploitation of negroes in Arkansas and other cotton states will show the reason for such a step. Most of the land is owned by whites and is worked by "share croppers" and tenant farmers. Under such an arrangement the owner furnishes the land ~~the~~ and the supplies and the tenant the labor. The crop when gathered is to be divided share and share alike, but rarely is this done. The tenant farmer must buy his supplies from the owner at a plantation store or from a merchant generally designated by the owner. At the end of the year the tenant in most cases is not given an itemized statement of what he has secured, but only a statement of the total.

The chances for overcharging and actual robbing of negroes with little or no education is obvious. There are thousands of cases easily found where negroes "took up" during the year goods valued at not more than \$200, made a crop of which their share was \$1,000 or more, and when the time came for a settlement were told that their bill for the year's supplies was \$1,200., leaving them in debt the next year to the extent of \$200.

Cannot Leave While in Debt/ There is an unwritten law that no negro shall leave the place of an owner as long as he remains in debt--thus the owner is assured of his labor for the coming year, so long as the negro remains in debt.

The system shows the hopeless condition under which negroes are robbed of millions of dollars annually in the south. While in the south the writer talked with many white men and numbers of them brazenly admitted that these cases are not at all exaggerated, but are only typical of the way the system is carried out. It was in protest against these conditions that the trouble arose.

The trouble started when W. A. ~~Adkins~~ Adkins, a special agent for the Missouri Pacific railroad, and Charles Pratt, a deputy sheriff, were fired upon near a negro church at Hoop Spur, killing Adkins and wounding Pratt. One of the colored people in the church declares that Adkins and Pratt fired without provocation into the crowd and then the negroes returned ~~the~~

the fire. Whatever the details, this started the general fighting, which lasted for five days. White men from Arkansas, Mississippi and Tennessee rushed into Elaine and Helena, armed to the teeth, and pitched battles caused the number of deaths mentioned above.

When questioned as to whether or not there was any definite proof that the negroes had formed an organization to massacre whites, the proof invariably given was that Adkins had been fired upon and that the negroes had an organization.

"Massacre" Not Advocated / I read carefully all of the literature of the organization and was unable to find anything at all that could lead one to believe that any massacre was found. A committee of seven men appointed by Gov. Brough declares that several of the negroes under arrest have confessed, but none of the details of these alleged confessions have been published as so far as I was able to learn.

Gov. Brough, who was interviewed, declared that the entire trouble was caused by publications such as the Crisis, the organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in New York, and the Chicago Defender, a weekly newspaper published by colored editors. In the former case, the association mentioned is fighting against mob violence and is seeking to remove the causes which lead to racial clashes like the Arkansas affair.

While not seeking in any way to whitewash the part played by negroes, the reports sent about a general massacre seem to be only a figment of the imagination of Arkansas whites and not based on fact. A significant phase is that William Hill, the negro who is supposed to be the prime mover in the organization, is an ignorant, illiterate country farm hand, without brains enough to engineer so big a movement. The backers of the system of exploitation seem to be troubled by their consciences and are fearful that their methods are about to be revealed. It is certain that negroes are not going to remain in a land where they are subjected to such treatment and already many are leaving, and more will leave.

One white farmer has 300 acres of fine cotton and not a negro to pick it. Many more will experience the same situation unless some means can be found, and that soon, of giving the negroes in Arkansas a fair chance and ending the exploitation, flagrant and extensive, of negroes there and in other southern states.