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THE ELAINE RACE RIOT

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study has been to investigate the interracial disturbances which took place at Elaine, Arkansas in October, 1919 from an impartial and unprejudiced view - to ascertain the conditions which made possible such happenings, to give the opinions of both races, and by a careful study arrive at unbiased conclusions as to the cause of the trouble.

All available literature - newspapers, magazines, literature of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union, and court records - were studied to obtain information. Personal correspondence was resorted to where information was not otherwise available. Many personal conferences were held with both negroes and whites.

Chapter one deals with the geography of Phillips County, showing the influence of nature on the systems of agriculture existing in the county. This partly explains why the southern part of the county was more favorable to the schemes of propagandists than the northern part.

In chapter two, the tenancy system as it exists in Phillips County is discussed bringing out the advantages and disadvantages to the landlords and tenants.

The third chapter takes up the origin, purpose, literature, leaders, and activities of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America.

The fourth chapter discusses the so called Elaine Riot from the respective views of negro and white people. The composition, work, powers, and duties of the Committee of Seven are stated. The supposed connection of the law firm of Bratton, Bratton, and Casey, with the disturbances and a summary of the legal cases which grew out of the trouble are presented.

The conclusion attempts to present unbiased opinions reached as a result of the study. It was found that while there was a high correlation between the accounts of the trouble given by the negroes and by the whites, the variations were too great to use either by itself as a reliable basis of conclusion.

The appendix contains material which is helpful to a better understanding of the subject, but is too voluminous to be included in the body of this report.

## Chapter IV

### THE ELAINE RIOT AS VIEWED BY WHITE PEOPLE

In the discussion of the Elaine riot there are certain things which must be carefully kept in mind. Racial prejudice which normally exists at all times was enhanced a thousandfold during and following the trouble. Negro and white newspapers alike carried accounts of the disturbances written from their respective points of view, in order to make a good front page story. Undue excitement prevailed and crimes were committed in the heat of passion, which under due deliberation would have been avoided. In such crises there is a certain lawless element that welcomes the occasion as a pretext to commit crimes which they would hesitate to perform during normal conditions. The material obtained from personal conferences with members of both races has merits and demerits. Eight years have elapsed since the happenings. Excitement which existed at the time has subsided and saner and more logical views are taken. On the other hand many details have been forgotten either conveniently or due to the lapse of time and memory.

Some time during the afternoon of September 30, 1919, Sheriff F. F. Kitchens who had been ill for some time received a message from Elaine requesting that he send officers to arrest John Payton Clem (white) an alleged

bootlegger, who was reported to have "gone on a rampage" and to have threatened the life of his brother's wife and others. (1)

Deputy Sheriff Charles Pratt, accompanied by Special Agent W. A. Adkins of the Missouri Pacific railroad and a Kit Collins, a negro trusty from the Helena jail, were dispatched to Elaine by the sheriff to take Clem into custody. The three men left Helena in an automobile via Hoop Spur. Reaching Hoop Spur about eleven o'clock at night, the party stopped on the roadside near a negro church to repair their car. The occupants of the car that escaped say that while engaged in this work a fusillade of shots from the darkness killed Special Agent Adkins and shattered Deputy Pratt's knee. Kit Collins escaped uninjured. Pratt states that after he was shot, several negroes appeared from bushes along the highway and kicked him to see if he were dead. Upon satisfying themselves that he was, they disappeared across the road into the darkness. Pratt then managed to crawl down into the ditch beside the road and under a wire fence into bushes and scrub cane which grows (2) along the Missouri Pacific tract at this place.

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(1) Bernard, Arthur - - Elaine Arkansas.  
(2) Commercial Appeal, October 2, 1919, Memphis, Tennessee.

Within half an hour after Adkins was killed, W. K. Monroe, a civil engineer and a member of the Engineering firm of Monroe and Parmelee of Helena, on his way south to a surveying camp which he had established near Elaine, arrived at the scene of the tragedy and found Adkin's body lying in the road beside an unoccupied automobile. In the darkness he could not tell from his car if the person was dead or drunk. Stopping to investigate, he was fired on from the roadside. Some small shot struck him in the face and arm. Mr. Monroe then took cover in the ditch beside the road, waiting until all was quiet; when he cranked his car and was fired upon the second time. He succeeded, however, in reaching Elaine two miles away where he had the shot removed from his face and told of the attack made upon him. (3)

Subsequent developments disclosed the fact that more than one hundred negroes were holding a secret session of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America in the Hoop Spur church near where Pratt stopped for car repairs. Participants in the meeting were armed, and armed guards were patrolling the vicinity. It was these sentinels that killed Adkins and wounded Pratt and Monroe. The officers sent to arrest Clem say they were fired upon

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(3) Monroe, W. K. - - Helena, Arkansas.

without provocation on their part. The negroes state that they were peacefully assembled and that these white people fired into their church, wounding some of the members, putting the lights out and in general creating disorder. Who actually fired the first shot will probably never be known as each race has held to their respective statements.

Deputy Sheriff Pratt though painfully wounded, crawled several hundred yards up the railroad track and toward morning flagged a passing freight train. When he told the train crew of the tragedy at Hoop Spur, the conductor ordered the train backed to Wabash. From here Pratt called up Helena and told the story of the killing of Adkins and the wounding of himself. Pratt states that at this time he thought the bootleggers whom he had started out to arrest had fired upon his car. Kit Collins after escaping was lost in the woods and spent the rest of the night and the early part of Wednesday morning finding his way out. As soon as he possibly could, he returned to Helena and told of the attack made upon the sheriff's party. His account  
(4)  
corroborated Pratt's story in full.

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(4) Arkansas Gazette. October 2nd, 1919. Little Rock, Arkansas.

Sheriff Kitchens sent a posse of ten men to Hoop  
r to investigate the killing of Adkins, and called  
volunteers to assist them. The first posse in  
rge of Chief Deputy Dalzell reached Hoop Spur on the  
ning of October the first. They were fired upon by  
armed force of negroes. The posse fought its way  
rough to Elaine without anyone being injured. When  
Dalzell and his men reached Elaine an urgent message  
s sent to Sheriff Kitchens asking for reinforcements.  
ese were dispatched immediately by a special train,  
plied by Assistant Superintendent J. D. Moore of the  
ssouri Pacific railroad. Additional forces were  
nt in automobiles. (5)

Men from Elaine and the surrounding country hurried  
o the scene of the trouble. In addition to these,  
Citizens from Helena, many of whom were members of the  
Richard L. Kitchens post of the American Legion, lent  
their assistance to quell the trouble. The Legionaires  
ere in charge of Herbert Thompson, late Captain of the  
A. E. F. Other posses were headed by Chief Deputy Dalzell,  
Edward Bevins, J. G. Myers, late Major of the Arkansas  
National Guard, and Amos Jarman, former Sheriff of Phillips

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(5) Ibid.



County. Sheriff Kitchens was too ill to accompany any of these deputized officers.

The number of armed negroes in the vicinity of Hoop Spur indicated an insurrection. The literature found in the Hoop Spur church strengthened this theory. Prisoners were taken who testified that an insurrection for October the sixth had been planned, but the firing into the church on the night of September the thirtieth had started it prematurely.

Before noon on Wednesday, October the first, reports of bloody engagements with negro insurrectionists were spread over the entire county. Exaggerated estimates of killed and wounded flew about and excitement was at fever heat. Telephone and telegraph wires between Helena and Elaine were in constant use by deputies working under the Sheriff and it was impossible to get a connected report of the situation. During the fighting on the first day in section thirteenth, nine people were killed. Clinton Lee and James A. Tappan were both shot by negroes who were in the woods hiding. They were taken to the McCoy house (white), where Lee died within a few minutes. Tappan was removed from Mr. McCoy's to the Helena hospital where he lived but a few hours. Both of these men were members of the American Legion and were well known and liked in Phillips

county. Their untimely deaths stirred the white peoples' determination to end the affair at any cost. Seven negroes whose names were never published also lost their lives on the same day. Before night over one hundred prisoners had been taken and placed in the basement of the white school of Elaine.<sup>(5)</sup>

After the meeting of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America at Hoop Spur on the night of September the thirtieth was broken up, the "Paul Reveres" (couriers of the union) rode from plantation to plantation spreading the signal "The time has come." Members of the Union who had not attended the Tuesday night meeting testified in court that they were awakened before daylight Wednesday and ordered by the couriers to get their guns as the trouble had begun. The first fight at Hoop Spur was unpremeditated in so far as the negroes were concerned. They had a few ex-soldiers among them who tried to show them how to organize their forces so as to capture Elaine. When runners informed the leaders that white men were entering the woods at Hoop Spur, they decided to go up and chase them off before entering upon the more serious task of attacking Elaine. They underestimated the number of white men entering the woods and canebrakes. After this first fighting the

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(5) Helena World. October 2, 1919.

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negroes hid in the woods waiting for Hill's <sup>(7)</sup> army. They were in easy range of the automobiles going to and from Hoop Spur and could easily have fired into them. They desired to remain quiet and wait for Hill to bring re-inforcements.

The white people realized that something unusual had taken place to make the negroes take up arms. Investigations were begun to determine the cause of such a condition if possible. Some of the negroes captured confessed that on October the first, the Ratio negroes were expecting an attorney O. S. Bratton (white) from Little Rock to meet with them. They discussed hiring him to represent them in court against their landlords. Fearing that another uprising was being planned several white men hastened to Ratio to make investigations. They found O. S. Bratton, an agent of his father O. S. Bratton, collecting fees from a group of negroes. Investigations led the white people to believe that Hill had previously arranged the meeting. <sup>(8)</sup> When captured, young Bratton had several hundred dollars of money and Liberty Bonds which he had collected from his clients.

(7) See Appendix, for material concerning Robert L. Hill other than that included in Chapter III.

(8) Stayton, E. O. (Mayor) Elaine, Arkansas.

was brought to Elaine and questioned by many of the Phillips County people. Bratton denied any connection whatever, with the negro organization, "The Progressive Farmers and Household Union." He remained calm and self-possessed during the entire time, his calmness and that a few Elaine people saved him from being lynched. He was carried to Helena under a heavy guard and confined in jail on a charge of first degree murder.

By noon of the first day of the fighting things had become so serious that Governor Brough was advised of the situation. The first message received by the governor advising him of the disturbances came from C. W. L. Armour and Sid Stokes of Elaine. They wired: "Having race riots here in Elaine and need some soldiers at once. Several white men and negroes killed last night and this morning." (9) Later in the afternoon two more messages arrived at Little Rock from Helena describing the situation at Elaine as very serious and appealing for military forces. The gravity of the situation may be realized from this message: "Circuit and County Judges, Sheriff, Mayor, and leading citizens request immediate dispatch of five hundred troops with machine guns to Elaine. - Situation

intense. One hundred and seventy-five negro prisoners  
are expected to arrive at any moment among white men.  
Presence of troops is earnestly desired on account of  
moral effect. Two dead and from five to twenty-five  
wounded." (10)

On Thursday, October the second, the four Johnston  
brothers (negroes) were seen down below Elaine. They  
were armed and, when questioned concerning their business,  
said they had been hunting. They had been down in the  
territory around Melwood for two days on their hunting  
trip, and had started back to Helena the home of Dr.  
A. E. Johnston. When they reached Elaine white people  
told them of what had happened at Hoop Spur and advised  
them to turn back. They went back as far as Ratio and  
left their car and boarded a train for Helena. When the  
train reached Elaine they were taken off by an officer  
and charged with distributing ammunition to the in-  
urrectionists. Their feet and hands were securely  
fastened and they were placed in an automobile which was  
to carry them to Helena. Accompanying the negroes as  
wards were O. R. Lilly (Alderman of Helena), Amos  
Lilly (former sheriff), and Deputy U. S. Marshall W. L.

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Molitor. The Johnstons occupied the rear seat of the car. The guards sat in front of them. White people who participated in the riot state that when the car had gone four or five miles from Elaine on its way to Helena, that one of the Johnston negroes snatched Lilly's pistol from its holster and shot him to death. The guards and white men in another car then riddled the Johnstons with bullets and piled them by the wayside. The negroes say that it is not plausible that a man bound hand and foot could have gotten Mr. Lilly's pistol and shot him in the breast while seated behind him. If the prisoners were attempting to escape, the officers were justified in killing them. If only one made the attempt it was surely cowardice to kill three other persons who were bound and possessed no means of defense. Dr. D. A. E. Johnston was a dentist in Helena. The records of the police court show that he was several times up before that body on charge of violating the prohibition law and minor offences. The office of D. A. E. Johnston was searched and several high powered rifles were found. This is not conclusive proof that the Johnston brothers were involved in the insurrection. The home of many a Phillips County sportsman if searched would bear resemblance to a young arsenal.

Upon receiving calls for Federal troops, Governor

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ough phoned Secretary of War Baker, requesting that he  
ve permission for Federal troops to be sent to the scene  
trouble from Camp Pike. He received permission to use  
many soldiers as he needed. The War Department also  
nt instructions to the camp and within a few hours a  
ocial train had been equipped. Twelve machine guns and  
sufficient supply of ammunition was included to quiet  
e situation no matter how serious. There was a delay  
the dispatching of the troops occasioned by the  
ailure of formal orders from the War Department to reach  
mp Pike. Major General Sturgis, commanding General, re-  
used to allow the troops to leave until confirmation of  
he governor's conversation with Secretary Baker was  
eceived. This was obtained about eleven o'clock at  
ight by Adjutant General Lloyd England who talked with  
rigadier General P. C. Harris, Adjutant General of the  
rmy over long distance. General Harris said that per-  
ission for the use of troops had been given. General  
turgis accepted this as authority to allow the train to  
roceed. The troops were commanded by Colonel Jenks of  
he third division of the Fifty-seventh Infantry. Governor  
~~...~~ (11) ...  
Brough accompanied the troops. He is to be commended  
for choosing to obtain his own information of the trouble

and taking a personal hand in ending it as quickly as possible.

The five hundred troops arrived in Elaine October 2, 1919. They were equipped with twelve machine guns and plenty of ammunition. As is the custom when Federal soldiers are called upon to assist civil authorities, martial law was declared. Elaine was fortified and troops patrolled the district of the insurrection. Negroes were made to stay at home and could not go about the town or vicinity unless a pass was furnished them by military authority. Colonel C. Jenks immediately upon arrival in Elaine, ordered a battallion under the command of Major N. E. Callen to deploy and start a search of the canebrakes west of Elaine. Other detachments were sent to Mellwood, and smaller settlement nearby. A company was also dispatched to Helena to stop any trouble which might arise there. The negroes had such faith in Hill that when the United States troops detrained, the news spread among them that Hill's troops had come to their aid. The detachments of troops sent out to search the canebrakes sent back prisoners as they were taken. Negroes were told that if they would not resist they would be protected. Many innocent negroes were taken prisoners and held for their own protection. Military and civil authorities cooperated in rounding up the negroes and guarding against further

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breaks. The houses of the negroes were searched and  
guns and ammunition where found were confiscated. After  
the riot the guns were burned.

Governor Brough accompanied a detachment of troops  
to a canebrake where several negroes were hiding. He  
asked that the troops not fire saying that he would go  
out and talk the matter over with the leaders. While  
advancing into the canbrake he was fired upon. Troops  
then used machine guns and were ordered to shoot all who  
would not halt. Prisoners were taken, both men and women,  
and placed in the Elaine school with previous captives  
(12)  
to be detained until they could be questioned.

Corporal Earls of the United States troops was killed  
on October the second while searching a canebrake for  
negroes on the Yellowbanks plantation. The story is told  
that Earls stepped upon a fallen tree behind which a negro  
was hiding and was shot by the fugitive. At the close  
of the two days' fighting after Adkin's death, the death  
of O. R. Lilly and Corporal Earls brought the number of  
the dead white people to five with five wounded. A con-  
servative estimate of the negroes killed up to this date  
is given as eleven. The negroes claim that an exact  
count of their dead was never given, and that many were--

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12) Crow, John - Elaine, Arkansas

... killed whose bodies were never found. Two hundred  
... eighty five prisoners were taken by October the  
... th, two hundred and twenty five of these were kept  
... Elaine and sixty were sent to Helena. Ed Hicks and  
... er leaders of the Union were among those taken.

The negro church at Hoop Spur was destroyed by fire  
... e day after the soldiers arrived. The white people  
... y that it was burned by soldiers under orders of the  
... mmanding officer of the troops. The negroes charge  
... at it was destroyed so that it could never be proved  
... at Adkins and Pratt fired into their meeting.

The conditions improved after the troops took charge.  
... overnor Brough returned to Little Rock on October the  
... hird after one day's investigation. By October the  
... lxth, things were well in hand, negroes were back in  
... he fields working and conditions were rapidly approaching  
... normal. The trouble had been quieted and conditions were  
... such that on October the ninth Colonel Jenks and all the  
... soldiers with the exception of thirty five returned to  
... Camp Pike. On October the twelfth Captain Layne departed  
... taking the troops that had remained in Elaine to guard  
... (13)  
... against fresh outbreaks.

## THE NEGROES VIEW OF THE ELAINE RIOT

On the night of September 30, 1919 the members of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union met in the Hoop Spur Church. They were peacefully and lawfully assembled with no harmful purpose in view. While they were so assembled several automobiles of white persons began firing guns from the outside into the church. This broke up their meeting, the lights were shot out, and a stampede followed. Women and children were among those present, some of which were wounded by bullets fired from the outside of the building. When the shooting subsided they climbed through the windows leaving behind parts of their clothing, families becoming separated in this melee. They state that white persons firing on their church came there in automobiles, for the purpose of molesting a peaceful gathering of negroes. Adkins was killed either by members of his own party or some other person not known to the negroes; this party of whites sent word to Helens, the county seat, that they had been fired upon by a armed body of negroes and Adkins had been killed. This caused great excitement in Helens and Phillips County, which spread all over the state of Arkansas and into the state of Mississippi. Early the next day a posse of armed white men rushed to Hoop Spur and nearby regions to begin a ruthless and indiscriminate hunting down and killing of negroes. Within a few hours armed bands of

whites from neighboring counties and from Mississippi rushed to the scene of trouble and began, particularly the posse from Mississippi, a more indiscriminate slaughter killing both men and women. Highly inflammable articles were published in the press of Arkansas, and especially of Helena and even throughout the United States, in which the trouble was styled a "Race Riot," "An Uprising of the Negroes," and a "Deliberately Planned Insurrection Among the Negroes Against the Whites." Phillips County officials called upon Governor Brough, and the Governor called upon the commanding officer at Camp Pike for the United States troops to quell the trouble. These were furnished and stopped the slaughter.

The negroes further state that the ones who were carried to jail, both men and women were incarcerated and charged with murder and that the Committee of Seven was selected to investigate the situation. This committee assumed charge of the matter. Negroes were brought before it and questioned regarding their own connections and the connection of others in the trouble. If satisfactory evidence was not given, false statements were extracted from them by force.

Nearly all the farming land in Phillips County is owned by white people, some is rented out to share croppers to be farmed on shares, one-half to the tenant

and the other half to the owner. A system has grown up by which the land owners furnish the negro tenants supplies. This deprives the tenants of all interests in the crops. They charge that the merchants refuse to give them an itemized statement of their indebtedness and refuse to let them sell any share of their crop, but they themselves sell it at the price they please and give the negroes the part they desire. This system they claim (14) keeps them poverty stricken.

For the purpose of protecting themselves against such practices the negro farmers organized the "Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America" in view of combining their financial resources to hire legal counsel to prevent this exploitation. The land owners when they learned of this ordered the meeting stopped. U. S. Bratton, attorney of Little Rock, had been employed by some negroes to represent them in procuring a peaceful settlement from the landlords, if this could not be done to institute legal proceedings. Bratton or his representative was to be at Ratio on October the first to discuss such proceedings. The union held a meeting on the night of September the thirtieth to consider the possibility of all members engaging this attorney. The white people appeared while this meeting was in progress, and as a result Adkins was killed.

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(14) Booker, Joseph, A - President of Arkansas Baptist College - Little Rock, Arkansas.

The Circuit Court of Phillips County convened on October 27, 1919. A Grand Jury was organized composed wholly of white men, one of whom T. W. Keese was a member of the Committee of Seven. Many sat on the Grand Jury who took part in the fight.

They state that the court arbitrarily appointed counsel to defend them and gave them no opportunity to hire an attorney of their choice. The trials were speedy and verdicts were returned without due deliberation, in five to seven minutes, and that they did not get a fair trial due to mob spirit which predominated  
(15)  
the court.

All in all their trials were farces as the real trials were before the Committee of Seven. The cry of discrimination was raised since all judges, and grand and petit juries have been white men for more than thirty years, although the negro population exceeds the white five to one in Phillips County.

There are a few negroes who try to look at the whole affair broad mindedly, and honestly make an effort to see the faults and weaknesses of both races. Eliza Miller, an aged negro woman of Helens, a leader of her race, who

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(15) Jones, Scipio - Lawyer for defense in the legal cases which grew out of the "Riot." Little Rock, Arkansas.

represents all that is honest and upright lived in the County during the trouble and states her opinion of the riot as follows:

"The World War was just over, everybody was in the air with money so plentiful. The colored people were easy prey for money grafters, while on some plantations they may have had raw treatments or settlements. I think they were misled by some mischievous person in trying to make things right, the wrong way. If some thoughtful men with good judgement had gone to these people and explained to them that they were wrong as a teacher would do in a school room, and left the powder and corn whiskey behind, we would have had no Elaine Riot that we would like to forget. We know in a time like that men lose all sense of reason and think of nothing but revenge.

I have lived in Helena forty years yet it could have been worse."  
(16)

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(16) Eliza Miller during a recent contest promoted by leading citizens of Helena for the election of the best citizen of Phillips County came within three votes of receiving this honor. She owns a large amount of property in Helena including a motion picture show for negroes. She states that after the Hoop Spur trouble was over a free show was given each Saturday evening for several months, to the negroes from the rioting district. This furnished them with some recreation and gave Eliza Miller a better opportunity to help restore the feeling of harmony and cooperation which had previously existed between the races of Phillips County. The fact that in 1926 a \$50,000 negro high school was erected in Helena and named for Eliza Miller goes to show that she is respected by white people as well as members of her own race.

## THE BRATTONS

The law firm of Bratton, Bratton, and Casey of Little Rock, Arkansas had established a branch office in Helena. Casey was formerly employed as a train dispatcher and telegraph operator. When the trouble started Casey was absent from Helena. His office was searched and much literature of the union was found. As can be seen from that quoted, it alone was insufficient grounds for indictment.

After the trouble had begun at Hoop Spur, U. S. Bratton issued a statement to the press in which he attempts to justify the purpose of his son's presence in Phillips County. The statement follows: "In the first place I want to say that there is absolutely no grounds for anyone to believe, when they have coolly investigated the facts, that he(O. S. Bratton) had anything to do either with the murder or the inciting of riots. He was not in the county at the time of the killing of Adkins and had only gone to Ratic Wednesday morning on strictly legal business. His mission had nothing whatever to do with any organization of negroes. If they had any organization he had absolutely no knowledge of it. As to his having been in that county for some time previous, the facts are he had not been in the county for several years, that being when he was clerk to the United States attorney office and went to Helena in attendance upon U. S. Court.



"Some two weeks ago, at a time when I and my son and  
law partner Guy were in Heber Springs attending court, a  
negro from Ratio came into the office to see us and employ  
us to represent him and a number of other negroes. I told  
him as to fees that would have to be arranged. Last Saturday  
another negro came in and brought us a portion of the fee  
and made arrangements for us to investigate claims. He  
represented that the plantation on which they were share  
croppers was owned by some northern man and was handled  
by some manager, but whose name I have forgotten, but  
whose name I took and gave my son when he had arranged  
the retainer fees with the understanding that additional  
fees were to be paid. While there we advised him that  
one of our men would come down and meet them Wednesday and  
get the facts from all of them after which he would take  
the matter up with the manager and see if some amicable  
settlement could not be made. O. S. Bratton left Little  
Rock Tuesday evening at nine o'clock over the valley route  
via McGehee. He spent the night there and took the morn-  
ing train for Ratio to meet his clients. They stated to  
him it was impossible to secure statements of accounts or  
statements at all. The manager was preparing to ship  
cotton in which they had one half interest without settle-  
ment, or allowing them to pay accounts. Fees which O. S.  
Bratton had on him were those paid by negroes to represent  
them in court. We were to represent sixty-five or seventy

negroes. "If it is a crime to represent people in an effort to make honest settlements then he has committed a crime. If this is a crime in a country where we have been spending our money and the lives of our boys to  
(16)  
make the country safe for Democracy, we do not understand what the word means."

When O. S. Bratton, son and agent of U. S. Bratton arrived in Ratio October the first, he was met by a group of negroes who were members of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union. While he was engaged in conversation with these people he was arrested and barely escaped being mobbed. Bratton was carried to Elaine and after severe questioning he was taken to Helena to jail and held on a charge of murder. On October the thirty-first he was indicted on a charge of barratry, which an almost forgotten statute describes as stirring up strife and contention in court or out. When released with this charge against him, he was advised by officials to keep off the streets and leave the town secretly or there would be danger of his being mobbed. The County Judge went with Bratton to the station in West Helena five miles away and stayed there with him until his train left.

Some of the leading white citizens of Phillips County

feel that U. S. Bratton was the instigator of all the trouble. No evidence has ever been found to prove this suspected guilt. Mr. T. W. Keesee, one of the committee of seven, gives in his own words the things told him by the negroes concerning the work of Bratton.

"According to the negroes' testimony, U. S. Bratton, an old Carpet Bag Republican of Little Rock, had organized a society with initiation fees to be paid to the said Bratton, in the sum of one hundred dollars. Where the negroes were able to pay the initiation fee in full, it was collected and where they were not able to pay in full, he took such amounts as they could pay in cash, with their promise to pay the balance later. In consideration for such favor, he would secure from each member of the society forty acres of land, and also undertake to see that they got the full price for their product. He also promised to investigate the books of the planters for the past years to see that the negroes had received a full price for all cotton which they had previously sold." (17)

It is very doubtful if Bratton ever intended to bring these cases to court. It would not have been any too safe a task to bring sixty or seventy such suits in the courts of Phillips County.

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(17) Keesee, T. W. - Helena, Arkansas - A member of the Committee of Seven.

## THE COMMITTEE OF SEVEN

As the lines of soldiers and deputized civilians began to draw closer around the canebrakes and woods where the negroes were in hiding, they began to surrender. As the result of the rapid surrendering the school house, at Elaine and the Helena jail and courthouse were rapidly filled.

Some way had to be devised to conduct a preliminary examination to determine the guilty negroes and liberate the others. The Committee of Seven was appointed by Governor Brough when he came to Helena and made personal investigation of the circumstances surrounding the insurrection. The Committee was composed of the following:

- Sebastian Straub - Acting Sheriff (Chairman)
- J. G. Knight - Mayor of Helena
- F. F. Kitchens - Sheriff
- E. M. Allen - President of the Chamber of Commerce
- H. D. Moore - County Judge
- T. W. Keeseæ - Planter
- E. C. Hornor - Planter

They met at the courthouse in Helena during and after the insurrection. The Committee remained in existence until after the trials of the men convicted by the Grand Jury. Information was obtained by examining witnesses in the presence of citizens of Elaine, who were familiar

with the conditions that led up to the trouble.

Knowing most of the negroes personally, E. K. Allen was sent to conduct preliminary examinations at Elaine, and obtained confessions from several of the ring leaders, notably Frank Hicks, who shot Clinton Lee, Ed Hicks, Parson Hayes, and several others. These preliminary examinations were held in the school house at Elaine without any force or pressure and in the presence of the officers in command of the Federal troops.

"The Committee sat continuously night and day during the period of the riot. All negroes who were arrested were brought before the committee and questioned. The policy of the committee was to liberate as many of the prisoners as possible; even though we knew they were guilty of participating in the riot. It was our intention to punish only the leaders, while many others were just as guilty of overt acts, we felt that they had been unwittingly led."  
(18)

Citizens of the county both black and white were called upon to volunteer information which showed that the Progressive Farmers and Household Union was a propaganda spreading society led by Hill for mercenary purposes. The Committee gave advice through the papers of

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(18) T. W. Keesee, Member of Committee of Seven, Helena Arkansas.

the county to white people and negroes alike to go to work and stop their agitation. The following is a copy of a circular issued by Sheriff Kitchens and the Committee of Seven:  
(19)

"To the Negroes of Phillips County:

The trouble at Hoop Spur and Elaine has been settled. Soldiers now here to preserve order will return to Littler Rock within a short time.

No innocent negro has been arrested, and those of you who are at home and at work have no occasion to worry. All you have to do is to remain at work just as if nothing had happened."

"Phillips County has always been a peaceful law abiding community and normal conditions must be restored right away.

STOP TALKING

STAY AT HOME

GO TO WORK

DON'T WORRY

Signed by F. F. Kitchens (Sheriff) and The Committee of Seven."

This statement of E. M. Allen is typical of the opinions arrived at by the committee:

"I cross examined and talked to at least one hundred prisoners at Elaine. They belonged to different lodges of that section. The stories they told are almost identical as to the promises and representations made by Hill. He even told them that probably some of the negroes would be called upon to die before "Equal Rights" would be assured, but they must look upon themselves as crusaders and die if necessary to secure their freedom and that of other members of their race. A remarkable thing about the development was, some of the ring leaders were found to be the oldest and most reliable negroes whom we had known for the past fifteen years. Hill had made them believe that he had been entrusted with a sacred mission which had to be carried out regardless of the consequences. As far as oppression was concerned, many of the negroes involved owned mules, horses, cattle, automobiles, and cleared money every year on their crops after expenses were paid." (20)

The men who composed the Committee were among the leaders of the county. They have always fostered every public enterprise which would further the interest of the country or their community. They regretted the

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(20 E. M. Allen, Helena, Arkansas - Member of Committee of Seven.

terrible affair as did the rest of the law abiding citizens of Phillips County. Their desire was to restore as soon as possible the spirit of harmony between the races which had previously existed in the county. The record of their work and public statements indicate an honest effort by outstanding citizens to meet a grave situation. Of over three hundred prisoners examined only one hundred and fifty were held over until the Grand Jury met October 27, 1919. The rest were turned loose pending their good behavior.



## CONCLUSIONS

Robert L. Hill attended a meeting of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union at Hoop Spur on Friday night September 26, 1919. From the evidence of those present it was a very stirring meeting with more than one hundred members present. Hill spoke against the white people and mentioned October the sixth as the day when they were to arise against their white oppressors and take over their land. Hill was to bring his troops from Winchester to assist in the insurrection. The Hoop Spur Union met again the next Tuesday, but Hill was not present. Ed Hicks, the president, presided, assisted by the Secretary Ed Ware. The house was crowded, both men and women being present. The fear of being molested led to a double ring of guards armed with shot guns and rifles being posted around the church, while the meeting was in session.

It will probably never be known just who fired the first shot that started the trouble at Hoop Spur. The church was burned, thus destroying evidence which might have helped solve the question.

The testimony given by one of the Union guards, Will Wordlaw, during the trial of the prisoners probably represents as near as it is possible to determine, the truth of the beginning of the trouble. "I went to the meeting about seven or eight o'clock. When I got there Ed Ware was on the

outside talking. When we all got in the church, he told me to go out there and help guard. I was a guard. He said if any body came up to defend them on the inside. I presume that meant shooting. I didn't want to go out there, and he says, "This is Uncle Sam's law and we have to be ruled and governed under it. He says you will have to go out, we can make you go out. He says you are called a slacker, you ain't made a noise for two or three nights. He says he was going to put a fine on me and that is the reason I came out there that night."<sup>(22)</sup>

The killing of Adkins started four days of fighting between the white people and negroes, and a much longer period of unsettled conditions. Five white men were killed and at least five times as many negroes is a conservative estimate. The negroes were killed because they resisted the authorities. The result would have been the same if white people had resisted officers of the law and government troops.

The negroes rightfully charge but greatly exaggerate the indiscriminate killings which took place. A party of twelve men from Mississippi equipped with eleven guns and an axe created havoc wherever they went. One instance of their brutality being the murdering of a harmless crazy negro woman, Frances Hall. Such slaughter was not sanctioned by the authorities. Barbarism such as cutting off the ears or toes of dead negroes for souvenirs and the dragging of their

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(22) State of Arkansas vs. Martin, Banks, and Wordlow.  
Circuit Court of Phillips County, Arkansas, Oct. 28, 1919

bodies through the streets of Elaine are told by witnesses. Heinous crimes such as these cannot be justified on any ground under any circumstances. Authorities who were honestly trying to quiet the trouble were at the same time endeavoring to stop such atrocities. The negroes have just cause to complain of these crimes, yet they must bear in mind that these were committed in the heat of passion in retaliation of the dastardly scheme of wholesale murder deliberately planned by the Progressive Farmers and Household Union. From investigation and close examination of all available evidence it is almost positive that the leaders of this organization never intended that the plans should materialize. Their plans were to get all the money they could and change their program so that actual violence would not take place. So much faction was worked up that in the absence of the Councillor Hill the thing took place almost spontaneously. As long as ignorance is predominant in a race, its people will be preyed upon by propagandists, and grafters of the vilest sort.

In-so-far as incendiary publications are concerned, the negro papers carried more inflammatory material in a day's publication than all the material published in the white papers about the Elaine Riot. Papers such as the Crisis and Chicago Defender seem to have for their sole purpose the creation of racial antagonism. They print only that part of the truth which will best serve

to create distrust and hatred on the part of the negro for the white race. Most of the space in each issue of the Chicago Defender is devoted to the exaltation of the negro and the abuse of all white people in general and a few in particular who have recently been connected with race trouble. In practically every case the negro is excused and the white man wholly to blame. The negro race has accomplished enough that the negro press could at least confine itself to the truth, without printing propaganda for the purpose of stirring up racial strife.

Any unprejudiced white person acquainted with the tenancy system of the South can truthfully relate cases of padding of negro tenants' accounts. The accounts of supplies obtained by the tenant is kept by the merchant, or whoever furnishes them with supplies. The fact that ignorant white tenants are cheated the same as negroes shows that the cheating of negroes is due to their ignorance and not because of their race. The psychology of the situation is the same the world over, that of the abuse of the weak by the strong. Peonage could not honestly be charged against planters in 1919 as the negroes were making more money than they had ever made in their lives. To allow tenants to sell cotton any place they desire when the planter has a mortgage on it

would surely be practicing bad business principles. There are a dozen planters who pay each year thousands of dollars to their tenants to one planter who robs them of their just earnings.

No person who is not familiar with the real facts taken from the testimony of those who participated in the affair can realize the seriousness of the consequences with which the people of Phillips County were confronted. It was indeed fortunate for all concerned that the trouble started before the day appointed. It is the age old story of grafters exploiting and hoodwinking the negro race for mercenary purposes. Hill's influence over his followers was nothing short of marvelous. His appeals were made through the superstitious and religious nature of the negroes. So great was his power over them that many of the most upright and law abiding negroes joined. An example of this is Ed Coleman who was past sixty years of age and who had always enjoyed a good reputation.

Racial antagonism was high during and following the fighting at Hoop Spur, but it is to the everlasting credit of the white leaders that mob violence was curbed. Had the white people of Chicago the same provocation as the people of Phillips County, there would have been few negroes left to tell their side of the affair.

While actual mob violence was curbed, mob spirit prevailed the court and it is highly probably that the negroes did not receive a fair trial in the Phillips County Courts. The prisoners were held from the time of capture until the Grand Jury met October 27, 1919. The cases were first tried before the Circuit Court of Phillips County, Judge Jimmerson Jackson presiding. Legal talent among the best in Helena was appointed by the Judge to defend the negroes. These attorneys certainly knew the feeling of prejudice that existed in the county, still they did not ask for a change of venue, or for separate trials for their clients. The petit jury contained men who took part in the quelling of the insurrection and T. W. Keesee, a member of the Committee of Seven was allowed to sit on the grand jury. The court was packed with an adverse crowd and verdicts were returned without due deliberation, so hasty in fact as to be worded wrong in the case of six negroes tried on a joint indictment for first degree murder. Had a jurymen wished to acquit one of these persons, the results would have made it at least unpleasant if not unsafe for him to remain in Phillips County.

The testimony given by the negroes was sufficient to convict them in any court, yet the numerous charges

on their part of the use of cruel punishments to extort testimony of this nature, partly discounts the court records as a source of determining the cause of the trouble.

The complaint that members of the negro race were excluded from the Grand and Petite Juries, although many were qualified for such service, does not prove that justice would not be rendered. In most cases the negro is safer with a white jury and judge, as they take into consideration his ignorance and weaknesses and give him the benefit of the doubt. Had a negro been allowed to serve on the juries at these trials, the mob spirit would have been uncontrollable and more harm than good would have resulted. It is true that poor people, generally negro and white alike, are apt not to receive justice because of their inability to hire properly trained legal talent.

Labor was hard to obtain in 1919 and many planters did not insist on the law being enforced. The negroes were allowed to violate and evade laws in many cases. There occurred frequent fights between the negroes. Gambling houses and other vices were permitted as long as they did not seriously disturb the peace. When a negro was hailed into court, the planter paid his fine and kept him from going to jail. True this was partly from a selfish motive, as a laborer was needed. Instances of such cases are plentiful even when labor is

abundant.

In the final analysis, the so-called "Elaine Race Riot" was an incipient insurrection put down by constituted authority. The Committee of Seven was appointed by the governor and was sanctioned by the county officials. United States soldiers and deputized civilians put down the trouble speedily. The fact that innocent negroes as well as those of malicious intent took refuge in the canbrakes and swamps added to the difficulty of stopping the trouble without killing or injuring innocent persons.

There is no sane minded southerner but wishes the negro the greatest prosperity and desires to see the best relations existing between the two races. Such a condition existed before the Riot and surely have ever since. To show their spirit of interest in the welfare of the negro the white people of Phillips County, within six years after this terrible bloodshed, erected for the negroes an Industrial School within one mile of Hoop Spur. The cost of erecting this school was about \$20,000, \$5,000 of which was secured from the Rosenwald fund and General Education Board. The negroes contributed only three hundred dollars. The school is maintained by funds from the Elaine School district. This school has been pronounced the best training school in Arkansas. The negroes enjoy the privileges of education given them with little or no expense to themselves since most of



the taxes are paid by white people. As long as the negro and white races produce such specimens as Hill, Powell, and Bratton, they will try to stir up strife and discord. The remedy to keep people from being led astray by such conspirators is education of the ignorant masses. This is a slow process but the results will justify our efforts beyond the greatest expectations.

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