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## CHAPTER XII

### THE SHERIFF KEEPS FAITH WITH THE MOB THOMASVILLE, THOMAS COUNTY, GEORGIA

ON THE AFTERNOON of September 24, 1930, an attempted assault on a nine-year-old white girl was reported at Thomasville, Georgia. At eight o'clock next morning the accused Negro, Willie Kirkland, a trusty convict at the county stockade, was taken from the sheriff and his deputies. After being riddled with bullets, his body was dragged through the business section of Thomasville. The members of the mob were unmasked, as were the men in the procession of cars which followed the corpse through the streets. Three days later Lacy Mitchell, Negro, the state's star witness in the case of two white men charged with raping a Negro woman, was shot to death at his rural Thomas County home. There was no connection between the two incidents other than the probability that Kirkland's lynching emboldened Mitchell's white avengers.

#### THE LYNCHING

*Crime Which Resulted in Lynching.* On the afternoon of September 24, as a nine-year-old white girl was returning from school, she was dragged from the road and severely bruised about the throat, requiring the care of a physician. She gave a brief description of her assailant; she said he was a Negro, and that he ran with a limp.

The child's home, on a hill opposite the county convict stockade, was within a mile of the city limits of Thomasville. Each day she walked past the stockade on her way to and from the city school.

On the day of the attack she had been sick, and her mother was watching for her. When she saw the child coming down

the road from the stockade toward the creek, the mother resumed her house work. After several minutes, however, when the little girl had not come in, the mother became anxious. She feared the child had fainted and fallen by the road. Hurrying out, she heard the little girl screaming. The mother in turn began screaming and ran in her direction. She saw no assailant, but on reaching the child found that her throat was severely bruised. A physician was called immediately. The father, appearing presently, ran to a telephone and reported the incident to his landlord, who in turn notified the county sheriff.

*Willie Kirkland Suspected.* The father then hurried to the stockade and asked the warden if any of his "trusties" were absent. The warden reported that all were present and assured the father that it could not have been one of his prisoners.

When asked if she had ever seen her assailant before, the girl said that about a week previously she had seen him at a nearby Negro farm cabin where she had gone to buy turnip greens, and that she heard him called "Tom." Several suspects were quickly picked up. In the meantime, a great crowd had gathered. Bloodhounds had been brought from Camilla. From the scene of the crime the bloodhounds circled up the hill to the gate of the stockade barn, which is across the public road and more than a hundred yards from the building which houses the prisoners. The dogs followed the same route to the barn a second time, but did not pick up a trail between the barn and the stockade itself.

Later when the warden learned that the attack had occurred a half hour or more before the father's visit to the stockade, instead of immediately before it, as he first supposed, he reported that a trusty said he had seen Willie Kirkland, another trusty, come in by a side gate about fifteen minutes before the father's appearance. Noticing that Kirkland was wet with sweat the trusty asked him where he had been, whereupon Kirkland is said to have replied, "Out there in the cotton patch," pointing to the field lying between the barn and the stockade. Along with the other suspects, Kirkland was held at the stockade to await further developments.

*Death Sentence Precluded by Nature of Crime.* People continued to congregate about the stockade and by late afternoon one side of the road was lined with cars for a mile or more. In the meantime a great crowd had gathered at the jail in Thomasville, and demanded to know whether the girl's assailant was there. Officials assured them that he was not. The chief of police further assured them that if the man were there, they would be allowed to take him. This did not satisfy them, and upon their urgent demand the officers permitted a committee of six to go through the entire jail. This committee returned and reported that they found no Negro there answering the girl's description. At about nine o'clock the crowd left the jail to swell the multitude already massed at the county stockade, a mile away.

From nine o'clock until after midnight there were a thousand or more people around the stockade. The fact that attempted rape is not punishable by death was generally discussed. It was assumed, however, that only the unexpected approach of the mother saved the little girl from actual assault. Aware that the Negro, if left to the courts, could get nothing beyond a penitentiary sentence of twenty years, many quite frankly advocated that he be lynched.

*Sheriff's Promise to Mob Leaders.* From the outset the crowd demanded that the girl see if she could identify her assailant among the suspects. This she tried to do. When she first looked at Kirkland she positively denied that he was the man; upon turning to leave, however, she got a side view and noticed a scar on his face, which she said, was similar to one she had seen on her assailant's face. She later identified him a second time by picking him from a row of suspects placed before her, and again a third time, at about two o'clock in the morning when mob members took him over to her home. The sheriff regained custody of the prisoner only by persuading mob members to let the matter rest until daybreak, that he would have the girl look at Kirkland again at eight o'clock. When someone complained that the sheriff might not keep his promise, he assured them that he was a man of his word. An influential citizen standing by put his hand on the sheriff's shoulder and

further assured the crowd of the latter's integrity. Whereupon the mob yielded the Negro to the sheriff and dispersed.

At about this time, two o'clock in the morning, the county health officer was called to relieve the little girl of strangulation caused by the swelling of her bruised throat. The physician stated that she was breathing very heavily, and doubtless could have been heard the distance of two city blocks.

*The Unbroken Promise.* At six-thirty o'clock that morning a reputable citizen walked into a cafe in Thomasville to get his breakfast. He noticed men sitting informally about the tables, and wondered at their somber appearance. One of the men near him looked at his watch with some such remark as this: "Well, it's nearly seven o'clock, and we were to be back out there by 7:30."

By 7:30 the crowd was reassembling at the stockade. With her mother and father, the latter carrying a shot gun, the girl was brought to the stockade shortly before eight, and for the fourth time identified Kirkland, who this time was with three other suspects. Immediately someone reported to the crowd that she had identified him again. Soon after this the sheriff appeared in the doorway with Kirkland and the three others and started toward a Lincoln car which was at the stockade gate, approximately a hundred yards away. The stockade yard was literally filled with people. The front gate stood open, and the wire fence had been cut. Upon seeing Kirkland, the father raised his gun. A leading citizen called to another, a county commissioner, to knock the barrel up, which he did just as the gun was fired. The load went into the air. "Ah, let the little girl's father have him," was the comment of a Thomasville official. Then the mother screamed, "Get him, get him. Are you men going to let that nigger go?" Immediately the mob surged in and took Willie Kirkland.

*The Lynching and Dragging.* The pastor of one of Thomasville's largest churches, one of a half dozen leading citizens called there by the sheriff to help uphold the law, stated that the rush happened in an instant, that it looked like a great football scrimmage, that one could see only the backs of people.

As Kirkland was seized by the onrushing mob, the other three suspects disappeared and have not been seen since.

The mob with its prey went directly to Magnolia Park, a beautifully wooded retreat belonging to the Thomasville Woman's Club, a half or three-quarters of a mile away. There Kirkland was riddled with bullets. A white man who heard the shots from his home nearby estimated that about fifty were fired. It was generally reported that Kirkland was told to run, and that the girl's father was given the first shot.

No sooner was Kirkland dead than his body was tied behind a car and dragged from Magnolia Park down Broad Street past the courthouse and the Confederate Monument, then west on Remington Avenue, and thence two blocks north to the west side of the courthouse, where the body was "left for the authorities." Following the body there were several cars in funeral-like procession. A prominent white woman, not knowing what was going on, narrowly missed being struck by the dangling corpse, as she crossed the street. When the procession halted and the body was cut loose, the driver of the car to which it was attached looked round and said, "Huh, I didn't know I had anything back there." A reputable white citizen who operates a business on Remington Avenue, replied, "Well then, you are a fool!" The occupants of all the cars were unmasked and many of them were recognized—some as Thomasville people, some from the rural parts of the county, and some from outside the county.

*Unsuccessful Efforts to Prevent Mob Violence.* The better element of Thomasville's citizenry frankly acknowledged that the sheriff, his deputies, and the police handled the case very poorly. It should be mentioned here, however, that the sheriff called upon a half dozen or more leading citizens to report at the jail and stockade and help quiet the crowds. Among those who responded were two pastors, a physician, a local member of the state judiciary and four business men, one of them a local Associated Press correspondent and another a county commissioner. These citizens were asked to go through the crowd and help convince the people that it would be best to



let the law take its course. Kirkland would doubtless have been lynched earlier had it not been for these efforts.

*One Fearless Officer on the Scene.* A federal officer who lived in Thomasville virtually saved Willie Kirkland from the mob on the afternoon and evening of the twenty-fourth. Several times when the people surged in and demanded Kirkland, this officer, who has a reputation for courage and bravery, kept them from their purpose. It is believed by many that the Negro would never have gotten into the hands of the mob had this officer remained at the stockade. He was called to Valdosta that night on a federal case and left Thomasville feeling that the crisis had passed. Next day he was greatly surprised to learn of the lynching and expressed regret that he had not remained.

*Further Comments on Peace Officers.* Grave question might be raised as to the wisdom of permitting a committee from the mob to search the jail. Even less excusable was the police chief's expressed willingness to surrender the prisoner, had he been there. Since the accused person was not in the jail, it may possibly be that these concessions were made only to appease the mob. But while temporarily they may have done so, their ultimate effect could only have been to add to the mob's boldness and determination.

Another doubtful procedure was the repeated identifications, which had the effect of adding successively to the popular frenzy. The sheriff may be condemned also for bargaining with the mob leaders, a procedure which he justified as necessary to provide opportunity for positive identification. Some feel that he should have called the National Guard; others point out that the nearest unit was at Albany, sixty miles away, and that a report of its coming would have precipitated immediate mob action, with three victims instead of one.

*Mob's Victim "An Outsider."* By local whites and Negroes alike, Willie Kirkland was referred to as "an outsider." Shortly after coming to Thomas County from an adjoining county, he had been sentenced for theft and concealing stolen goods, having accomplished the latter by the unique device of painting a black mule white. It is reported that he had served

a sentence in another county for raping a Negro woman. He had been consorting regularly with a local Negro woman who bears a very bad reputation among the Negroes. It was near the scene of their trysting place that the little girl was dragged from the road. Shortly after the crime, this Negro woman was found at their accustomed rendezvous nearby.

#### REACTION OF THE COMMUNITY TO THE LYNCHING

The fact that Willie Kirkland was taken from the sheriff in broad daylight by a group of unmasked men before one or two of his deputies and a half dozen leading citizens, and that nobody was indicted, indicates the general reaction of the community to the lynching.

*Pro-Lynching Position of Local Paper.* The local evening paper, the *Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, a daily with a circulation of about 1,500, carried news stories and editorials about the lynching, the coroner's investigation, and grand jury hearings. The editorial position of the paper was one of compromise, with distinct leaning toward the pro-lynching side. The day of the lynching the following "I told you so" editorial pronouncement appeared: ". . . There was an effort made to prevent any drastic and unlawful action. This was carried out on the part of a number of officers, citizens, and ministers of this county. They were futile. . . . It has been said by the *Times-Enterprise* on many occasions that this is the one crime in which there seems to be no possible means of preventing such an affair."

On the day following there was an editorial captioned "A Calm City." It is a perfect example of fence straddling. One sentence is in defense of the lynchers and the next in defense of law and order. Of fourteen sentences, seven were as follows:

"We can truly say that Thomasville seems to be the calmest and most deliberate community that can be found anywhere. . . . The Negro's body was brought to the courthouse and left there for the officers to take the necessary processes. There was no excitement on the streets. People learned that they could do nothing about it and very few sought the morbid reaction that comes from

close contact to or actual participation in the scenes of that character. It was no different from any other day or any other time. . . . The fight was over and the battle lost but there was nothing they could do. . . . Thomasville people were not involved or at least very few of them were, if rumor is to be believed. . . ."

And the other seven like this:

" . . . Early yesterday a Negro was shot to death at the hands of a crowd of white men seeking to avenge an attempted crime. . . . The general regret over the incident could not be misunderstood. Citizens had volunteered to attempt to stay the hands of the mob. They had worked through the night but unsuccessfully. . . . They have left it in the hands of the law to settle and there must be an accounting. What shall that be? . . . It happened near this city and we cannot as citizens of Thomas County shake the responsibility that rests with us despite the form of crime and the abhorrence that it will eternally create in the minds of all men."

From this on-the-fence position of September 26, we find the following editorial of October 21 on "Judge Thomas' charge:"

"Judge Thomas delivered a very sane, sensible and forcible charge to the grand jury this week. He had a chance to use a lot of pyrotechnics of oratory and legal injunction. He could have created no little comment and publicity. He could have aroused a great deal of feeling and factionalism, if he had desired.

"Instead he left it off but he followed and tracked the law and his duty to the letter. He told of conditions that should exist and he pointed the way of the jury to the solution of the problems that come before them for consideration and action.

"Judge Thomas has always been a practical judge, not a sensationalist. He has always used his judicial power to right wrongs as well as to establish peace and good will. He has been a factor in the limitation of unruly and disordered actions for it is



well known that when there is a wilful disregard of decency and order he is relentless in the effort to see that the community shall not suffer as a result thereof and the victim of that disorder shall suffer the full penalty."

The reader's attention may well be focussed on the last sentence of the above editorial, which is consistent with the editor's remark to a lawyer, a friend of his, immediately after hearing Judge Thomas' charge to the grand jury: "Well, they won't dare to indict anybody after that charge."

*This Lynching Not Spot News in Georgia.* Little attention was given to the Thomasville lynching by the leading papers throughout the state and the South, with the exception of the *Macon Evening News*, which carried a full page red-letter headline, "Negro Attack Suspect Is Lynched." The *Atlanta Constitution* had only a brief news item, while the *Atlanta Journal* devoted but a half-dozen lines to it. It is obvious that by the time of the Thomasville lynching, which was the fourth in Georgia during the year, an ordinary lynching was no longer considered important news.

*Only One Witness Before Coroner's Jury.* The coroner's jury examined only one witness, the county sheriff, though a number of leading citizens were present when Kirkland was taken. The following statements of the sheriff concern the two o'clock incident, the agreement between the sheriff and the mob leaders to leave final identification until daylight, the futile attempt to move the suspects to a place of safe keeping, and the mob's taking of the prisoner:

"I had quite a time then (two o'clock A.M.) getting them (members of the mob) to turn the Negro back over to me. I promised them that I would keep the Negro in custody until this morning when it was light and the little girl could see better and have a better opportunity of being sure whether this was the right man or not, and this morning at seven o'clock I had three other suspects placed in the stockade with this Negro and sent for the little girl and she came together with her mother and father and they

were permitted to go into the building where the four Negroes were and she again did not hesitate to point out Willie Kirkland as being the man. . . .

"The crowd had enlarged quite extensively by this time, but was very orderly, and I did not see any signs of a gun except in the hands of the girl's father. Everything was very quiet and orderly and I decided it would be a good time to transfer the Negro to a place of safe-keeping. I had the doors opened and the four Negroes brought out together, and with my deputies started to my automobile with them. We had gone possibly thirty feet when I turned for a minute toward the girl's father, who was carrying the shot gun to warn him not to make any effort to shoot, then I turned and looked back toward the prisoners when it seemed that possibly fifty men had rushed in and picked out this Negro from the four. We did everything possible to get the Negro to the car without killing someone or getting killed ourselves, but it was impossible. I do not know the party or parties who made the rush or carried the Negro away or who is responsible in any way for his death."

Following is the final paragraph of the report of the coroner's jury:

"We, the jury wish to commend our sheriff for the quiet and orderly manner in which he was able to handle the angry crowd at the jail and stockade, and prevention of other bloodshed. We feel assured that he did his duty in every respect."

*No Indictment by Grand Jury.* For some reason the grand jury called only a few of the dozen witnesses suggested by a leading citizen who had ascertained the facts about the mob leaders. The foreman of the jury summoned the most prominent men on the list, but later reported that the jury was unable to determine whether the alleged mob leaders named by the witnesses were trying to lynch Kirkland or to help the sheriff protect him. In view of this, he said, the jury thought it needless to summon others. The jury's official presentment said:

"Many investigations not contained on your docket were made by us, we would especially call your attention to our investigation of the killing of one Willie Kirkland, after an examination of many witnesses many of whom were prominent men of Thomas County, it was necessary to close this investigation without an indictment for lack of evidence."

Among those not called were several persons generally believed to have been the actual mob leaders, and certainly eye-witnesses. It was reported about town that the grand jury did not have the power to summons witnesses before it in this kind of case.

The unmasked lynchers and corpse-draggers went free. A few people hung their heads in shame, while a larger number seemed relieved that "their courts" were so "practical."

*Some Facts About Eight Probable Mob Leaders.* The driver of the car which dragged the corpse through town is an itinerant drunken roustabout who worked in a local garage. His employer, the son of a south European immigrant, who had been arrested on a liquor charge, is known to have taken an active part in cutting the wire fence at the stockade to admit the mob. His brother-in-law is generally reported to have grabbed Willie Kirkland from the sheriff. He lives in a rural section of Thomas County. Some months after the lynching, he was in a liquor-transporting party which wounded the federal officer mentioned above as having stood off the mob.

Two others, a man and his grown son, are reported by neighbors as having been at Magnolia Park. The wife and mother, proud of the fact that her husband and son had participated in the affair, boasted of their participation to neighbors across the street. They are home owners and traders in livestock; neither has more than a common school education. A youth of less than twenty implicated himself by his own statement. He was a problem child in school, and more recently has been involved in several thefts and attempted burglaries about town.

The little girl's father, who was generally reported to have

been "honored" with the first shot, came to Thomas County from Mitchell County only a few weeks before the lynching. He arrived too late to put out a crop of his own, and was working as a plantation wage hand. His landlord stated that he had found him a hard-working and honest man of the landless, propertyless, shifting type. His nine-year-old daughter, very much under size, was in the first grade at school.

Several years ago a Negro charged with rape was being returned to Thomasville for trial. At that time Thomasville had a National Guard unit, which was called out to protect the prisoner. This it did. One bayonet drew blood—a man rushed in, grabbed the prisoner, and started off with him, whereupon a member of the National Guard jabbed him in the side. It is reported that this man, still wearing his bayonet scar, was prominent at Magnolia Park. Incidentally, the guardsman who used the bayonet was never able after that time to keep employment in Thomasville. Employers would hire him, but presently the white employees for one reason or another would force him to leave.

According to eye witnesses, something like fifty men went from the stockade to Magnolia Park. Not one of them was masked when he left the stockade, and not one was masked when the body was dragged through the streets. Outside of the persons mentioned above, the identity of the members of the mob was not specifically obtained. In discussing the types who take part in lynchings, Judge Hopkins, referred to later, stated that the mob was made up from the lowest elements of the white population. Then followed this interesting statement: "I'll give anybody a thousand dollars who'll find either a son or a grandson of a slave owner participating in a lynching."

*Lynching Deplored and Denounced by a Few.* The general run of people, including some of the leading citizens, felt that the lynching was inevitable, and the sooner forgotten the better. A considerable number, however, were shocked and provoked because the body was dragged through the streets.

There were a few who deplored the whole affair. Three prominent white ministers got together soon after the lynching to

determine what they would do. They were much distressed and shocked. As time passed, however, there was a tendency on the part of two of them to accept the lynching as inevitable, and to assume that very little, if anything, could be done about it. One of the three was persistent in his efforts to get grand jury indictments. Some of the leading churchmen of Thomasville as individuals were opposed to lynching, but the churches as such merely ignored the matter.

A short time after the lynching, the president of a Columbus men's Bible class, attending the principal men's class in Thomasville, mentioned as his greatest problem his inability to introduce into his class the "point system" of grading. When the visitor sat down the president of the Thomasville class asked his members to pray for the Columbus class on Tuesday night at eight o'clock when the adoption of the point system was again to be discussed. Inquiry revealed the fact, however, that the Thomasville class had taken no notice whatever of the lynching at its door!

*Indictments Desired by Leaders of Missionary Society.* The Thomasville Woman's Club was greatly disturbed over the affair, and especially because the lynching took place on its property, Magnolia Park. As a gesture of disapproval they discussed closing the gates of the park for a period. Other women's organizations discussed it, among them some of the missionary societies. At one meeting a woman advised that, as wives and mothers, those present should exert their influence to get their husbands and sons to give to the grand jury all possible information about the lynching. The president of the meeting liked the idea, and recommended that the spokesman be encouraged to give a similar message to all missionary societies in town. The president of the W. C. T. U. also made mention of the unfortunate affair.

*Anti-Lynching Few Quieted by Pro-Lynching Many.* From the very outset, tremendous pressure was brought by the pro-lynching majority upon the anti-lynching few to let the matter drop. One man who was active in protecting the Negro at the two o'clock identification, found himself at once under severe criticism as a "nigger lover," and threatened with boycott,



whereupon his expressed attitude was promptly modified. The easiest way for the anti-lynching few to get along in Thomasville was simply to be silent and let the matter drop.

*Lynching Justified by Prominent Jurist.* But not all of Thomasville's "leading" citizens had to be cowed into acceptance of the situation. Some of them have always defended mob activities. The chief of this group is a prominent jurist who several times before and since Kirkland was lynched has broadcast his convictions that lynchings are inevitable; that when certain crimes are committed by Negroes upon whites there ought to be a lynching, and will be a lynching so long as red blood courses through the veins of courageous men; that the organized courts should prevail, but when the very laws of all creation are wantonly violated good people become insane by reason of their God-given birthright as honorable men; and that as much as godly men might later repent for having done something in a fit of passion, they cannot undo what has been done and by all the rules of civilized and God-fearing people of all times and places such men are accounted champions of all that is pure and good. The above is a brief accurate paraphrase of a lengthy statement made to the investigator. This man, powerful in politics, is also an active religious leader, and a person of great influence in the community.

*General Acquiescence of Negroes.* It was reported by apologists for the lynching that a leading local Negro said he was glad Kirkland had been lynched and that he would have liked to help do it. How much of this was what the Negro felt and how much of it was what he wanted white people to think he felt, is a pertinent inquiry. Other prominent Negroes of Thomasville said little or nothing. Certainly those with property, like white people dependent upon the purchasing public, would not carelessly invite their own undoing. The colored ministers voted down a resolution proposed as a protest against the lynching. Negro leaders were dazed by the fact that a lynching had been permitted by the white officers and citizens.

The reaction of the mass of poorer Negroes, as gleaned from the servants, was that Kirkland ought to have known



that he would be lynched for such a crime. All elements of the colored population seemed to find some consolation in the fact that he was "an outsider"—obviously they felt more secure than if a local Negro had been lynched. There is, of course, the probability that all of these expressed sentiments are but part of the masks which Negroes wear for their white acquaintances to look at. There was unmistakable evidence that a number of Negroes, while afraid to be openly identified with such a movement, nevertheless sincerely hoped for the indictment and punishment of those who lynched Kirkland.

*Some After Effects.* What effects will the lynching have along economic, cultural, and ethical lines? The majority of the people feel that there will be no adverse economic results; that it has caused no great disturbance in the community; that the lynching did not violate any of the mores of the community; that it was a passing incident and will soon be forgotten. The more thoughtful people, however, are of the opinion that it will deter Northern people from coming to Thomasville and investing their money in plantations, hunting lodges, and other enterprises. Then, too, some of the most influential Negroes in the community have talked of leaving Thomasville, for they find themselves embarrassed within their own race when referred to as being from a "lynching town."

#### THOMAS COUNTY'S SECOND LYNCHING<sup>1</sup>

On September 28, 1930, three days after the lynching of Kirkland, a second Negro, Lacy Mitchell, was shot to death at his Thomas County farm home by a group of white men, incensed because he had testified against some of their friends in a serious case.

*Perhaps an After Effect of the Lynching.* A few days before the Kirkland lynching a preliminary hearing was given two

<sup>1</sup> Mitchell's death was classified as a lynching by Tuskegee's Department of Research and Records. It should be pointed out here that it was perchance wrongly classified, in that Mitchell's death was accomplished by a few people who executed a conspired plot in secrecy by private methods. In contrast with this secretly planned and gangster-like procedure, nineteen of 1930's lynchings were carried out in a public fashion in open defiance of the law with scores, hundreds, and even thousands of eye-witnesses.

rural Thomas County white men accused of raping a Negro woman who had a two-weeks-old baby. The two men under suspicion along with two others were placed before the Negro woman for identification. Each of the four disguised himself by the wearing of colored goggles, shaving but parts of his face, or having all or part of his head clipped. Among the four were a father and son. The father with a smooth shave and make-up looked somewhat like a boy, while the son with several days' growth of beard and make-up had the general appearance of an older man. The Negro woman failed to identify her assailants, but Lacy Mitchell, her neighbor, positively identified two of them as men he had seen in the vicinity of the Negro woman's cabin shortly after the alleged assault. Several nights later a few masked men went to Mitchell's cabin to punish him for testifying against white men. Refusing to submit to a flogging, Mitchell was shot to death in his home.

*One Year Sentences for White Rapists.* The two white men, bound over to the Superior Court on the basis of Mitchell's testimony, were tried at the term of court during which the grand jury investigated the lynching of Kirkland.

The two white men charged with raping the Negro mother were brought into court. The witnesses were called, the case was finished, the jury retired and remained out all night. At ten o'clock next morning it returned a verdict of guilty, and recommended sentences of one year each. Two of the jurors had held out for acquittal, but finally accepted the compromise of a sentence of one year. Thomasville was in a stir; while some people were humiliated at the mildness of the sentences, many more expressed disgust that a white jury should sentence white men at all on such a charge. At this same term of court Homer Taylor, Negro, plead guilty of assault with intent to rape a young Negro girl and received a sentence of twenty years.

*Mitchell's Murderers Sent Up for Life.* Then came the case against those accused of murdering Lacy Mitchell. A considerable number of the county's leading citizens were thoroughly aroused: white rapists getting but one year and lynchings going unindicted! Too much had been winked at already. Mitchell's murderers must be dealt with severely. The outcome of the

trial was life sentences for Jack Bradley and O. E. Allen. The former, a brother-in-law of one of the men found guilty of raping the Negro woman, told how he had gone to the home of his wife's father, where the women of the family painted his face and "dressed him up" as a disguise for his visit to Mitchell's home. He admitted that he went into Mitchell's house and was forced to kill him when Mitchell refused to submit to a flogging. Meantime, he said, Allen was at the door with a gun. Allen testified that he was drunk and did not know anything about the murder. His home was in Louisville, Kentucky; he had been in Thomas County but three days. By some it is believed that Bradley "framed" the newcomer to protect some of his own friends. Both had been drinking heavily.

The life sentence of these two white men is serving to some extent, at least, as an expiation of Thomas County's failure to do justice in the other two cases. Faced with these failures, the people of Thomasville are quick to mention that two white men were given life sentences for killing a Negro.

#### FACTS ABOUT THE COMMUNITY

*Early Population Elements.* When Thomas County was laid off from Irwin County in 1826, it was much larger than at present and had a population of less than 3,000, nearly half of whom were Negro slaves. Big cotton plantations had developed along the larger streams as people of means had come in from the older part of Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia. Of wealthy planters there were enough to afford a social life among themselves; many of their sons and daughters were educated in England. At the time of the Civil War there were two educational institutions of some repute at Thomasville, the South Georgia College for Males and the Remur Young College for Girls.

Whites of smaller means were coming into the county from the pine hills immediately to the northeast; in Thomas County they lived on the unfertile uplands, owned but little property, followed a self-sufficient farm economy, and maintained a general low plane of living. There was but little social intercourse between the families of wealthy planters and the poorer whites.

In 1850 the population of Thomas County was approximately 8,000, including 5,155 slaves.

By 1890, the county had a little more than 26,000 people, nearly sixty per cent of whom were Negroes. Meantime two additional social classes had come on the scene—the Northern tourist whites, and a scattering of Negroes who had acquired farm lands and other productive properties, enabling them to escape the dependence which characterized the Negro masses.

*Negroes Used by Plantation Owners and Northern Tourists.* The winter climate of Thomas County early attracted attention, and back in the nineteenth century, with the building of the railroads, vacationists came to Thomasville in great numbers to spend the winter months. Large hotels were hastily erected, and in the years following scores of winter homes were built. Thomasville was a fast-growing town.

Many rich Northern families have bought old plantations, which they now use in a few instances for general farming purposes, but usually for little more than hunting preserves. The general progress of Thomas County has doubtless been retarded considerably by the passing of these most fertile tracts of land into the control of absentee landlords, who, naturally, have had no sustained personal interest in the development of the local people. The wealthy families come to Thomasville to get something for themselves—sunshine, rest, and recreation—and have little interest in the slow and tedious task of developing local human resources. From the outset the wealthiest element of Thomasville and Thomas County, whether Southern planters or Northern game preserve owners, have had more dealings with the Negroes than with the poorer whites, and have been more concerned about them. In 1930, Thomas County had a population of 32,612, 48.6 per cent of whom were Negroes.

A little more than half of the county's people live in eight incorporated towns; Thomasville alone has nearly two-thirds of all town dwellers, the other seven towns being mere agricultural villages. For the most part the remnant of the landed aristocracy live in or near Thomasville, as do also most of the Northern rich. Besides these, Thomasville has shopkeepers,

business and professional men, artisans, and a great host of unskilled rural dwellers who have flocked into this urban community to find employment as casual day laborers, domestic servants and home laundresses. Because of rural and urban economic retrenchment caused by low-priced farm products, and a marked decrease in the winter tourist trade, Thomas County's total population decreased by 432 between 1920 and 1930.

*Rural Masses Dependent Upon Cotton.* Agriculture provides a livelihood for the major portion of the people, for even though approximately one-half of the population is in the incorporated towns, some of the town dwellers own land and many have shops and other business establishments directly and indirectly dependent upon farmers.

Of the crops produced in Thomas County, cotton is the most valuable, and then follow corn, tobacco, watermelons, pecans, and others. In 1929, 36,000 acres were planted in cotton, producing nearly 13,000 bales, while 52,000 acres were in corn, yielding approximately ten bushels per acre. In this same year over one-half million pounds of tobacco were sold at the warehouse in Thomasville, and from the county 2,543 cars of watermelons were shipped. Live stock farming, particularly the raising of hogs, assumes considerable proportions. With the possible exception of Early, Thomas County shipped more hogs than any Georgia county in 1929, forty-five shipments of one or more cars being reported. Cattle raising has been gaining impetus and now there are a few pure bred herds in the county. The watermelon, pecan, and stock raising industries, and to a lesser extent the tobacco industry, are limited to a relatively few of the larger and more closely supervised plantations.

The principal cash income of the typical farmer is secured from cotton alone. This is especially true of tenant farmers, who constitute approximately sixty per cent of all farmers in the county. From 1910-1914 the average annual production was a little over 21,000 bales; from 1925-1929 the average was but 7,240 bales. The number of farmers decreased by one-eighth between 1920 and 1930.'

*Measures of the County's Economic Rank.* In 1924, the per



capita value of farm crops was \$41.19, while the value of manufactured products, most of which were lumber and turpentine, amounted to \$104.24, making the total value of farm and manufactured products \$143.43 per capita, as compared with the state average of \$310.78. Another measure is the amount of money on deposit. Thomas County banks in 1929 showed an average of \$121.77 per capita, while the state as a whole averaged \$155.89.<sup>2</sup> Exclusive of corporation taxes, the per capita tax valuation in 1930 was slightly greater than for the state, being \$393.86 against the state's \$348.03. The taxable property values per person, however, are raised considerably by the generally high real estate values in Thomasville, and by the vast though unproductive landed estates of the Northern rich. In 1924, three hundred and seventy-six income tax returns were made in the county: Three hundred and twenty-seven for less than \$5,000, twenty-nine for \$5,000 to \$10,000, and twenty for \$10,000 and over. In 1929, two hundred and eighty returns were filed. It is significant that over ninety-five per cent of the returns were from persons living in incorporated towns. While there is a considerable element of well-to-do urban dwellers, the majority of the town dwellers eke out a living by irregular employment, inevitable because of the seasonal demands of a resort town and the prevalence of former rural dwellers, accustomed to but little and willing to work for a very low wage.

*Rural Thomas County Now and a Half Century Ago.* Except for an occasional plantation owner who still lives on his land, the countryside is populated by descendants of the slaves and the poorer whites. These rural dwellers make a living for the most part by tilling the soil with one-horse plows, brier hooks, and long-handled hoes. For getting wood, double-bladed axes are most common. The agricultural methods and tools of a half century ago are generally used. In many respects these rural dwellers have made but little advance since 1880. They produce but little more now than then; the price of things they buy has advanced more than the price of things they sell. They live in poor houses, many of them mere hells, which when they

<sup>2</sup> Two of the town's largest banks were closed in 1931 and 1932.



are a dozen years old have the appearance of having been built in slave times. The rural people send their children to one- and two-teacher schools now as in 1880; there were in 1928 eight one-teacher and eleven two-teacher white schools and thirty-four one-teacher Negro schools in rural Thomas County. They have preaching but once or twice a month, as was the case five decades earlier. More than half the rural white and Negro families are landless farmers and most of them now, as a half century ago, are dependent upon their landlords or merchants for the physical necessities of life while producing a crop, which in most cases does little more than settle the rent and pay back the "furnishings" advanced. Most of the rural Negro mothers and many of the poorer whites now, as a half century ago, are attended at childbirth only by midwives. The major advances made in Thomas County since 1880 have occurred in the incorporated towns, Thomasville in particular.

The general run of people, however, should not be looked upon as destitute. The population per automobile dropped from 13.5 to 7.5 from 1925 to 1929. The need for larger incomes is perhaps no greater than the need for a wiser expenditure of the present small incomes. It is a comment upon standards when a tenant farmer, white or Negro, with a total gross income of less than \$500 a year, owns and operates an automobile, not for making a livelihood, but for riding whither he will, while doing without such things as ceiled houses, fly-proof privies, screened windows, books, and daily and weekly papers, to say nothing of doctors. In most rural Georgia counties the percentage of tenant families who own autos is higher than the percentage who have doctors to attend their wives at childbirth.

*A Contrast of Urban and Rural Schools by Race.* As elsewhere, the children in the largest urban community in Thomas County have better teachers, better schoolroom equipment, and longer terms than the open country children. In 1928, the Thomasville schools cost \$78.22 per white child as against \$30.96 for the remainder of the county. The average amount spent per white child in the eight one-teacher schools and

the eleven two-teachers schools was doubtless below \$20.00, for just as Thomasville was much above the remainder of the county, the other seven incorporated towns were far above the average for the open country.

The 1928 expenditure per school census Negro child in Thomasville was \$10.24, in contrast with but \$3.13 for the remainder of the county. From the above figures, it will be seen that whereas the rural white school child gets a little less than half as much public money as the urban white child, the rural Negro child gets but one-third as much as the urban Negro child, one-tenth as much as the rural white child, and one-twenty-fifth as much as the urban white child. The difference between urban and rural school expenditures by race suggests in a general way the differences in training and pay of teachers and schoolroom equipment.

In Thomasville, where white and Negro schools are quite superior to those in the remainder of the county, and as good as can be found in any Georgia town of its size, the schools are being constantly improved. On September 24, the day before Willie Kirkland was lynched, Thomasville voted \$135,000 of bonds for the improvement of schools, something like one-third of which was to be used for Negroes.

*School Expenditures Above State Average.* In 1928, the total expenditure per school census child in Thomas County was \$43.61 for the white child and \$5.91 for the Negro child. Both figures were above the state average of \$36.88 per white child and \$5.07 per Negro child.

The total amount spent by the county for Negro education in 1928 was but three thousand dollars in excess of the amount allocated to it from the State School Fund at the rate of \$5.20 per school census child. The total amount spent for the white schools was \$190,881.13 more than the state per capita allocation. As poor as this showing is, it is far better than the state average, with one hundred and seventeen counties actually spending less money on Negro education than these counties receive from state funds on the basis of Negro school population.

The Allen Normal School, a private institution for Negroes

with courses from first grade through high school, is supported by the American Missionary Association and has an enrollment of near three hundred, twenty of whom are boarding students. The faculty consists of seven white and eight Negro teachers. Former Mayor Hopkins, one of Thomasville's leading citizens, gave the land for the school, when it was moved from Quitman. Some years ago, the county superintendent of schools stated that the graduates of this school stood better examinations than the graduates of any white high school in the county.

*Town and Country Church Organizations.* The Baptists and Methodists have approximately ninety-five per cent of the county's total church membership of both races. Of the 3,505 white Baptists in 1926, 3,272 were Southern Baptists, 40 were Free Will Baptists, and 193 were Primitive or "Hardshell" Baptists. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, had a membership of 3,076. The white Baptist church at Thomasville, with a membership of 1,463 and a total Sunday school enrollment of 1,104, had church property valued at \$148,500 and was served by a full-time pastor who received an annual salary of \$4,000. The other five white Baptist churches reported a total membership of 954 and a Sunday school enrollment of 474; they had property valued at \$12,700, and were served by pastors who conducted two services a month at three of the churches, and one service a month at the other two; the aggregate paid pastors by these five churches is but \$1,808 a year. The county's white Methodist churches present a similar picture. For example, the amount raised by the Thomasville Woman's Missionary Society in 1929 was \$2,484, as compared with a total of \$297 raised by the societies of all the other Methodist churches in the county.

The white Presbyterian Church in Thomasville has less than 500 members. The Protestant Episcopal Church has a membership of less than 250, but because of its unusual pastoral leadership, its select membership and the support of some of the wealthy Northerners, this church is more closely related to community welfare projects than either of the other churches.

The Negro Baptist membership of 4,541 in 1926 constituted

the county's largest denominational group of either race. The C. M. E. membership was 1,909; the A. M. E., 1,529. The county's best Negro churches are located in Thomasville. The Negro ministers of the town have a well-established interdenominational union. Many of the rural church houses are crude structures, some without window sash, many unceiled, several with benches made of unplanned boards. Only a few have preaching services more often than once a month.

In 1926, Thomas County had approximately 6,000 people over fifteen years old who were members of no church. Of this number nearly thirty-five hundred were whites, a considerable proportion of whom were farm tenants in the rural sections where incomes are lowest, schools are poorest, churches are farthest apart, and community life in general is least organized. These rural slums, along with the urban slums, were represented at the lynching of Willie Kirkland and the murder of Lacy Mitchell.

*A Revealing Case of a Decade Ago.* Because of the light it throws upon past and present political conditions in the county a brief résumé is made of a case which occurred nearly a decade ago. A Thomasville Negro taxi driver by the name of Smith was hailed late one evening by two white men "from over the river." He observed that they did not have the appearance of people who rode in taxis; he suspected foul designs, but feared to refuse their request. Accordingly, he took them in and, after picking up a Negro friend for protection, started up the road. Before they had gone ten miles the white men ordered the driver to stop. When he did so they shot him down. The second Negro jumped and ran, and although wounded, fell into a ditch in a nearby thicket. After the men had searched for him for half an hour they got in the car and went off. The wounded man made his way back to Thomasville and reported the incident. Within a few days the white men were apprehended and brought back to Thomasville. At the trial the defense lawyers argued that, being a Negro, the taxi driver was a potential rapist of white women. Capitalizing this and similar prejudices, they got the murderers off with a sentence of but five years each. One of these lawyers is now a

congressman, while the other holds an important county office.

*How the County Votes.* In Thomas County there were 2,146 votes cast for governor in the Democratic primary of September 10, 1930. This vote, though nearly twice as large as the combined Democratic and Republican vote for president in either 1920 or 1924, involved less than one-third of the white people of voting age. The vote is usually about ten Democratic to one Republican. In the 1928 presidential election, there were 1,240 Democratic votes, 558 Anti-Smith Democratic, 256 Republican, and one Socialist. The ballot is not attractive to landless, shifting white tenants, and is exercised by only a few Negroes. The latter do not make any aggressive efforts to qualify and participate in general politics, though their support is sought and used in local bond issue elections. Many Negroes voted in the Thomasville school bond election on the day before Willie Kirkland was lynched.

*Lawlessness Increasing, Especially Among Whites.* The white jail population of Thomas County increased from forty in 1921, which was 2.6 per thousand, to 277, or 16.6 per thousand, in 1929. The Negro jail population increased from 190 in 1921, or 11.4 per thousand, to 401, or 25.4 per thousand. In 1929 the jail population per thousand for the entire state was 12.5 for whites and 25.4 for Negroes. Of the first forty-five felons convicted in Thomas County courts subsequent to January, 1929, twenty-two were whites and twenty-three were Negroes.

The Thomasville jail is old and insecure. There have been several escapes, and the sheriff has had trouble getting an efficient jailer. Some months ago the jailer was discharged for allowing prisoners to escape. Recently a small separate building was erected for women prisoners. Though this may be good within itself, it is given as an excuse by many for delaying the permanent improvement of the old jail. The county stockade from which Kirkland was taken, like the jail, is insecure. It is a wooden structure, with a wire fence about it not strong enough or well enough constructed to hold or delay escaping prisoners. Besides, the gates stand open at all times.

*Old Klansman, New Klansmen, and a Penitentiary Crime.*



The Ku Klux Klan was active in Thomasville until recently. A few persons were threatened, and in one instance a fake doctor was chased out of town at high noon. However, the Klan failed to enlist some of the leading citizens of the town. Judge Hopkins, ex-mayor and ex-state senator, the only surviving member of the original Ku Klux Klan, was offered honorary membership. He asked who their local members were. When informed by the organizers that the membership was a secret, he firmly declined the proffered "honor."

In connection with the Klan in Thomasville, the following incident is of interest: On Broad Street a Negro chauffeur accidentally struck a white child as she ran from between parked cars. There was considerable excitement. The chauffeur was uneasy. When the child's parents stated that it was not the Negro's fault, things quieted down. Not many days later, however, the chauffeur got a note, signed K. K. K., advising him to put \$100 at a certain place or suffer the consequences. The money was put there. A week or ten days later he received a second note demanding \$50. Again the money was put on the spot. After a few weeks, a third note, signed K. K. K., was received. The Negro had no more money or credit. Almost frantic, he went to the girl's father asking why he was having to put out so much money, and protesting that he could not meet this last demand. The white man was surprised to hear the Negro's story. He advised that the money be put under the designated rock, while a concealed officer waited. A man reported for the money. It was a Negro. He was tried and is now serving a penitentiary sentence.

*Superimposed Welfare Agencies.* With the exception of Georgia's counties with the largest cities—Fulton, Chatham, Bibb, Richmond, Muscogee, and Clarke—Thomas County has more welfare agencies and institutions than any county in the state. None of the counties in the southwest part of the state has so many agencies, not even Dougherty, where Albany is located. Thomas County has a Farm Agent, Home Demonstration Agent, full-time health officer, social worker, Y. M. C. A., Salvation Army, county-wide library, and Red Cross.

There is evidence, however, that what seems to be advanced



social thinking is actually to a large extent outside standards superimposed upon the Thomasville community. For example, a few of the Northern people in the community have taken an interest in providing public health nursing and other community services, but without enlisting the coöperation of the local people.

One outstanding public institution in Thomasville, the product of Northern philanthropy, is the Archbold Memorial Hospital. This institution, though serving a great need and patronized extensively by the local people, is not a typical Georgia institution. It is unique, for example, in that it is the only general hospital in the state where a Negro medical student can serve as interne.

*Race Relations Modified by Presence of Northerners.* Relations between the two races in Thomasville are modified by the presence of the Northern element. Except for this element, the Allen Normal School would doubtless have been lost to South Georgia when it was evicted from Quitman upon the death of its Northern founder, who had established a Negro school in her palatial home in the heart of the little town. Soon after her death the "schoolhouse" burned. The school was without a home. Judge Hopkins, then mayor, offered to the American Missionary Association land on which to relocate the school in Thomasville. Throughout the years, the local citizens who have taken an interest in the Negroes have had the moral and financial support of wealthy Northern residents and visitors.

The Northern owner of one of the big estates not only provides recreational and amusement facilities for the Negroes on her place, but employs both a local Negro doctor and a dentist to care for the health and teeth of her workmen and their families, and, it is reported, pays them well. This is not without meaning, particularly as related to Negro leadership. The Negroes employed as domestics and caretakers by these wealthy people usually occupy a more favorable position than those working for local whites.

*Two Native White Classes.* The relations between the Negroes and the members of the local landed aristocracy have

been very cordial. The latter look upon the prosperous Negro with approval: "Why you know, that fellow's grandmother belonged to my mother's father." A kind of proprietary interest is obvious. Most of Thomasville's best educated and wealthiest Negroes confessedly move within the pliant wills of their white benefactors and friends.

The social distance has always been great between the white people who owned the big plantations and those who lived on the poorer uplands. Just as there has been a social cleavage between the cultured and more humble whites, so there has been a difference in their attitudes toward the Negro. The descendants of the poor whites take no pride in the creditable accomplishments of local Negroes. They look with disgust upon the white teachers at the Allen Normal School, while their attitude toward the Northerners who exercise most care for their Negro workmen is dismissed with the reflection that they are just "yankee nigger lovers," anyhow.

*A Number of Prosperous Negroes.* Because of the large rural area it serves commercially, no less than because of the liberal attitude on race relations of the local landed aristocracy and the Northerners, Thomasville has a number of prosperous Negroes. It is the district headquarters of several Negro insurance companies. Three Negro physicians and one Negro dentist have been very successful. Several own real estate of value, while an excellent drug store and several restaurants, pressing clubs, and barber shops are owned and operated by Negroes. In rural Thomas County there are nearly two hundred Negro farm owners. In all, there are about 500 home-owning Negro families in the county.

A discerning Negro leader expressed the opinion that the real cause of the two outbreaks in Thomas County were due to the hostile attitude which the urban and rural "poor whites" have developed toward Negroes. A few of the best established Negroes, he thought, may have aggravated the situation by "rubbing it in" on the "poor whites."