

Sheriff W.T. Cate and the Knoxville Riot of 1919:

Breaking Social and Racial Barriers through Courageous Service

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Sheriff W.T. Cate and the Knoxville Riot of 1919:  
Breaking Social and Racial Barriers through Courageous Service

1919 was a year of pivotal, unprecedented change in Tennessee. Most of the 100,000 veterans of The Great War had returned home. A staggering 3,500 Tennesseans died in the European conflict, but more than twice that number perished as a result of the flu pandemic that swept the globe at the war's end, decimating communities with a power unrivaled since the 14<sup>th</sup> century's European Black Death. Within a year, Tennesseans would face a new battle – for the ballot – when the state would make history, ratifying the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment and enfranchising women. Brighter times seemed inevitably on the horizon. Knoxville, the state's third largest metropolis, was heralded as the gem of the New South.<sup>1</sup> A town proclaimed as exemplar for racial harmony and peacefulness, Knoxville reigned as a model Southern city – that is, until racial tensions led to the Knoxville Riot of 1919. One man, Sheriff W.T. Cate, courageously stood against racial terrorism, providing a bulwark of strength and honor in the midst of turmoil. During the Knoxville Riot of 1919, Sheriff Cate's actions broke social and racial barriers imposed by the Jim Crow South when he put himself in danger in order to fulfill his oath to protect and serve. His actions inspired others in the future to follow his lead in rejecting racial discrimination and demanding civil equality.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles W. Cansler, quoted in “Black and White: Knoxville in the Jim Crow Era.” (2020).

The ratification in 1865 of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment ended chattel slavery, but it didn't rid the nation of the vestiges and biases centuries of slave-mindedness left in its wake. Even with the assistance of the Freedmen's Bureau, former slaves often found themselves slaves to perpetual debt. They were given no land, no financial support, and, as a result, were slaves of economic disparity. During Reconstruction, many people didn't want to share equally with individuals they'd once enslaved. Like a phoenix, Jim Crow laws rose from the ashes of slavery to further ensnare Freedmen, criminalizing a multitude of trivialities and permitting continued subjugation. Peonage, the act of forcing someone to labor until debts are fulfilled, was outlawed as early as 1867 with the Anti-Peonage Act, but it wasn't deemed illegal by the Supreme Court until *Bailey v. Alabama* in 1911,<sup>2</sup> forty-six years *after* the ratification of the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment and a mere eight years prior to the riotous events that took place in East Tennessee. It was into this juxtaposition of uneven balance and underlying racial tension that the Knoxville Race Riot flared, one of the Red Summer insurgencies that plagued the United States a century ago.<sup>3</sup>

The Red Summer Riots began in Washington, D.C., where drunken white soldiers, returning from World War One, began rampaging and assaulting black neighborhoods. Black soldiers and citizens armed themselves in protection against these racist attacks. Between April and November, 97 lynchings and over 25 riots were recorded, along with the rebirth of the Ku

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<sup>2</sup> *Bailey v. State of Alabama*, 1911.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, 2019.

Klux Klan.<sup>4</sup> Many of the racial insurgencies that occurred in metropolitan areas were rooted in tensions between returning white and black servicemen.<sup>5</sup> A report from the Equal Justice Institute notes “Because of their military service, black veterans were seen as a particular threat to Jim Crow and racial subordination.”<sup>6</sup> Many historians assert that Knoxville’s race riot was affiliated with the Red Summer attacks, though some argue that it was a separate event, given that the focus in Knoxville was a lone individual, as opposed to a reaction to a group of returning black soldiers. Regardless of impetus, Knoxville was engulfed in race-based turmoil during the final days of August 1919.

In the early morning hours of August 30, 1919, white Bertie Lindsey was murdered by a “mulatto man.”<sup>7</sup> Charged with the crime was biracial Maurice Mays, the illegitimate son of white Mayor John McMillan and his black maid.<sup>8</sup> Mays had been reared by his foster father, a former slave,<sup>9</sup> but Knoxville’s mayor financially supported Mays, although he didn’t publicly acknowledge paternity. Around Knoxville, Mays was referred to as “Uncle John’s bastard son.”<sup>10</sup> Mays, in his part, campaigned for McMillan, winning the black vote for his white, biological father. Mays was known as an outgoing and attractive man, a womanizer who courted both black and white women – a fact that had

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Higgins, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> “Targeting Black Veterans,” 2017, 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Polk County News*, 1919.

<sup>8</sup> Mills, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Lakin, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Dennis, 2019.

won him a cadre of envious male enemies. Even before the riot, Mays faced social and racial barriers. Blacks saw him as an “Uncle Tom.” Far more menacing, however, the white community saw him as an interloper and threat to their social hierarchy.

One of the deputies (Andy White) who arrested Mays had previously vowed revenge on Mays after the woman they both were courting chose Mays over White.<sup>11</sup> On the night of the murder and arrest, White claimed that the gun in Mays’ dresser was “hot” (a fact that White later recanted).<sup>12</sup> Mays was taken to the city jail downtown. Once word spread that the alleged perpetrator was arrested mob mentality took hold of Knoxville.<sup>13</sup> Sheriff Cate recognized the threat and immediacy for decisive action, moving Mays to the larger county jail, further from downtown. Cate also stationed armed guards outside of Mays’ cell. Hoping to further protect Mays, Cate obtained permission to transfer Mays to Chattanooga, 90 miles south.<sup>14</sup> Disguised as a woman, Mays was escorted by Cate to the train station and delivered to the Hamilton County (Chattanooga, Tennessee) jail.<sup>15</sup>

Cate was justified in his concern for Mays’ safety, though perhaps his choice of Chattanooga as a safe haven was questionable. Since 1900, Tennessee had seen four rabble-led, race-based lynchings.<sup>16</sup> In 1906, in

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<sup>11</sup> Dennis, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Dennis, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> “Knoxville Mob,” 1919.

<sup>14</sup> Wheeler, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Tabler, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> White, 1918, and “Lynchings,” 1901.

response to the Supreme Court's only criminal case,<sup>17</sup> Hamilton County's Sheriff Joseph Shipp "not only made the work of the mob easy, but in effect aided and abetted it" when he let a mob enter the jail, remove the accused black prisoner, and publicly lynch him.<sup>18</sup> Historian Carrie Russell notes that "Although local and state governments were tasked with protection of Black citizens . . . from mob lynching, . . . vigilante violence was rarely countered by local White community leaders or the White police force."<sup>19</sup>

As the fury over Lindsey's murder boiled into tumult, Cate's decision to thwart citizens' demands to "give up Mays" won the sheriff no support.<sup>20</sup> After failed attempts to find Mays, the fervor turned its attention to Cate, ransacking his home, stealing personal items, and threatening the sheriff's kin.<sup>21</sup> (Fortunately, word had reached Cate that his family was in danger, and he had them rushed to Morristown, a city northeast of Knoxville.)

Rioting resulted in numerous fatalities, looting (specifically, firearms and confiscated liquor), machine-gun barrages, and National Guard intercession.<sup>22</sup> Knoxville's streets ran red with blood.<sup>23</sup> Mays commended Cate's efforts on his behalf, but, referring to the actions of White and others in positions of authority, Mays asserted, "if the case had been handled with justice, a race riot

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<sup>17</sup> *USA v. Shipp*, 1906.

<sup>18</sup> Curriden, 2001, 335.

<sup>19</sup> Russell, 2010, 136.

<sup>20</sup> Lakin, 2000, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Lakin, 2000, 17.

<sup>22</sup> "Scores Dead," 1919.

<sup>23</sup> Lakin, 2000, 18. Historians debate the number of fatalities. Two white Guardsmen and five black citizens comprise the official tally, though personal anecdotes claim a far greater number of deaths (Paine, 2002).

would have been averted and several lives would have been saved.”<sup>24</sup> Cate acted bravely in putting himself, his private property, and his family in danger in order to construct a protective barrier around Mays while simultaneously working to erode the barrier of Knoxville’s racist social response.

Cate didn’t stop at physically shielding Mays, however; when Mays’ case came to trial, Cate publicly testified on his behalf, offering evidence pointing toward his innocence, evidence that was ultimately dismissed in both the original trial and retrial.<sup>25</sup> As a result of Cate’s stance, “many influential white people” became interested in the case, beginning the process of breaking the racial barrier Mays faced in his quest for justice.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, Mays’ father, Knoxville’s mayor, initially did nothing to defend his son,<sup>27</sup> although he did petition for a retrial; after his son was executed by electrocution, rather than

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<sup>24</sup> “Maurice Mays Makes Statement,” 1919.

<sup>25</sup> “Motion,” 1919. In 1926, white Virginia resident Sadie Brown Mendil confessed to murdering Bertie Lindsey, saying she dressed as a black man in order to murder the woman with whom her husband was having an affair. Although Virginia authorities deemed her confession credible, Tennessee authorities dismissed her confession (“Victims of the State”). Ms. Mendil’s confession wasn’t the only evidence that indicated Mays had been erroneously convicted. Two years after Lindsey’s murder, a biracial man by the name of Frank Martin was arrested for attacking a white woman (“Lynches Fall...,” 1921). Once again, the Knoxville jail was stormed; this time, however, the state police were prepared and guarded the jail with six machine guns, ready to avoid a repetition of the dynamite-invasion experienced during Knoxville’s Race Riot of 1919. Some historians point to Martin as being the perpetrator of Lindsey’s murder, not Mays. The newly chartered (earlier in 1919) Knoxville chapter of the NAACP worked to exonerate Mays, based on additional attacks on white women in Knoxville after Mays was incarcerated (“New Evidence to Show Mays is Innocent,” 1921, and “Black and White: Knoxville in the Jim Crow Era,” 2020), but Governor Taylor refused to pardon Mays or hear the evidence in support of his innocence.

<sup>26</sup> “Electricuted” (sp), 1922, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Hays, 2019.

attempt to seek exoneration, McMillan committed suicide.<sup>28</sup> Governor Alfred Taylor “expressed sympathy for Mays but, fearful of damaging his chances for re-election, ultimately refused to intervene.”<sup>29</sup> Mays decried Taylor’s “apathy,” stating, on his way to his execution, “I would not be going to my death today if the man who sits in the governor’s chair had any backbone,”<sup>30</sup> further claiming that “Governor Taylor has been told he would lose 20,000 votes if he interceded for me.”<sup>31</sup>

Mays argued his innocence and the travesty of justice from the beginning of his ordeal until its end:

Had the officers been honest in their duties, they would have arrested several suspects filling the description and kept the arrest secret, then they would have allowed the lady to come in a composed condition and pick out the guilty party. As it is, it looks like bad management based on oppression and prejudice. I believe the court will believe me....<sup>32</sup>

In the end, Maurice Mays was executed,<sup>33</sup> protesting his innocence until his final breath.<sup>34</sup> Over the past century, Mays’ conviction has been argued several times in attempts to exonerate his name using the evidence and testimony of Sheriff Cate, most recently to now-former Governor Bill Haslam, but no governor has agreed to reopen the case, leaving the indictment of Maurice Mays one of Tennessee’s besmirched bits of history. <sup>35</sup> Indeed, Lindsey’s cousin, Ora Smyth, whose accusation of Mays on the night of the murder led to his

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<sup>28</sup> Paine, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Lakin, 2000, 27.

<sup>30</sup> “Maurice Mays Pays...,” 1922.

<sup>31</sup> Mays, quoted in Paine, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Mays, quoted in “Negro Denies Murder...,” 1919.

<sup>33</sup> “Negro,” 1921.

<sup>34</sup> “Death,” 1921, “Negro Denies,” 1919, 2, and “Negro Pays for Murder,” 1922.

<sup>35</sup> Booker, 2011.

conviction, later recanted her statement, but her changed testimony was never taken into account.<sup>36</sup> As reporter Robert Booker asserts, “The description of the events before, during and after the murder in no way pointed to him as the perpetrator, yet the 1919 mentality was obligated to convict him of something to permanently remove him from society”<sup>37</sup> because, although he was quite likely innocent of murder, he was guilty of a far more threatening crime, that of dating a white woman during the Jim Crow years of segregation and racial disparity. Mays asserted, “the case is one of oppression and injustice.”<sup>38</sup>

A century ago, cities in the South were segregated by social laws designed to prevent racial “mingling.” Mid-century, “white flight” to the suburbs left many inner-city black communities with socio-economic challenges and stigmas. Nearly fifty years after the Knoxville’s race-based riot, more than 125 racial riots erupted across the United States;<sup>39</sup> like the Red Summer riots, these demonstrations hinged on inequality and were spurred by veterans (specifically, Vietnam War veterans) returning home where the freedoms for which they had fought still were not extended equitably across racial divisions. The bipartisan Kerner Commission, appointed by President Johnson, issued a public report that analyzed the causes of the racial riots of 1967:

White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities. ... Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate but unequal.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Watts, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Booker, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> “Maurice Mays Makes Statement,” 1919.

<sup>39</sup> Smiley, 2014, 88.

<sup>40</sup> *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.*

Advocates for equality who stand in a position to be heard have historically worked to break barriers of division. Cate began this process in East Tennessee in 1919; it was echoed by Paul Turner in the mid-1950s when neighboring Anderson County integrated the first public southern high school.<sup>41</sup> White pastor Turner was brutally beaten by the White Citizen Council who shouted, “Kill him!” when he protected the black students as they walked to school. Receiving hate mail and death threats, Turner stood firm, preaching his powerful “No Color Line at the Cross” sermon stating, “we are positively and defiantly against the disintegration of our community.”<sup>42</sup> His courage led to a total defeat of all pro-segregationists seeking election, proving, as Cate did, that one person’s courage can break social and racial barriers.<sup>43</sup>

Events such as the Knoxville Riot of 1919 and the summer riots of 1967, corroborated white communities’ perceived fears and distrust of blacks, exacerbating a cycle that is still felt today. For instance, the shooting death of (black) Trayvon Martin in 2013 by (white) George Zimmerman – and Zimmerman’s eventual acquittal – prompted the Black Lives Matter movement,

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<sup>41</sup> Clinton, Tennessee, saw the integration of the first public white high school in the South. Clinton is located approximately 20 miles northwest of Knoxville and abuts Knox County.

<sup>42</sup> Blount, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Another example of a “regular person” who broke racial barriers but who isn’t readily recognized as a name in the pantheon of Civil Rights activists is Viola Liuzzo. In 1965, (white) Mrs. Liuzzo bravely spoke out against racial injustice. Liuzzo fared worse than Cate, however, as her life was abruptly ended at the hands of the KKK in retaliation for her activism alongside the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., after she participated in Selma’s Edmund Pettus Bridge march (Civil Rights Digital Library).

which pursues legal, judicial, and social justice, regardless of race.<sup>44</sup> The BLM movement's mantra is not unlike that of the NAACP in 1919. The latter spoke out on behalf of black citizens, seeking the reality of rights promised in the U.S. Constitution without the pretense of equality marred by Jim Crow's segregation. In 2014, when unarmed black teen Michael Brown was fatally shot in Ferguson, Missouri, by white police officer Darren Wilson, that city was roiled by riots when the grand jury didn't indict Wilson.<sup>45</sup> Hate crimes in the United States today are disproportionately race-motivated,<sup>46</sup> demonstrating that the promise and hope of a "New South" was a pipedream that has yet to become a reality. The inequitable treatment by the legal system in regards to deaths perpetrated by whites on blacks compared to those of blacks on whites has led to violent protests around the nation in recent years, hearkening back to the Red Summer and Knoxville's race riot of 1919.

Cate broke barriers when he stood in the thin line between white expectation and black subjugation in the Jim Crow-dominated South, fulfilling his sworn oath to protect and serve *all* citizens. Cate never publicly explained his motivation; perhaps he was altruistic in his selflessness, but, more likely, he had in mind the greater good of breaking racial and social barriers – for the South, still recovering from the emotional ravages of Civil War and Reconstruction; for East Tennessee and Knoxville, specifically; and particularly for the rights and safety of those he had sworn to protect and serve, regardless

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<sup>44</sup> "Trayvon," 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Buchanan, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> FBI, 2018.

of racial or social barriers to equal justice. In the immediate scenario, Cate disregarded the voices of the citizens who elected him in order to ensure one (maligned and marginalized) individual's safety. In the long-term, he ignored the overwhelming cries to crucify Mays and, rather, pled on his behalf, seeking justice. Today, Cate's actions are largely forgotten. During his lifetime, they were protested and vilified. Nevertheless, Cate courageously stood for what he deemed right and good and just.

Cate's response to Mays' arrest altered the course of race relations in Knoxville and East Tennessee, ultimately uniting blacks and whites throughout the region to campaign to the governor for Mays' exoneration. Cate's actions began the process of slowly chipping away at the barrier imposed by society's legally endorsed and enforced race-based segregation. As noted, when the Supreme Court handed down its mandate to integrate public schools, for instance, it was East Tennessee's response that was an anomaly in the South. Clinton High School desegregated without the deadly brouhaha and political posturing seen in other southern states such as Mississippi or Arkansas. Cate's actions were indicative of an emerging changing attitude toward race relations in East Tennessee. As Julian Bond, one of the co-founders of the 1960s' Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, asserted, "Rosa sat down, Martin stood up and the white folks saw the light and saved the day."<sup>47</sup>

Although Mays' story still has no resolution, its impact has had a ripple effect in changing the course of regional history. In a society that today

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<sup>47</sup> quoted in Izadi, 2016.

continues to feel racial friction – especially in the South where Jim Crow lurks behind a sometimes thin façade of equality – role models such as Sheriff W.T. Cate are beacons of hope that someday we truly will be able to live in peace and harmony, devoid of race-based accusations and violence, a society free of social and racial barriers.

## Primary Sources

### Archives & Collections

“Black and White: Knoxville in the Jim Crow Era.” (2020, March 12). Rogers-Claussen Feature Gallery, East Tennessee Historical Society, Knoxville, Tennessee.

This exhibit traced the influence of Jim Crow laws and social barriers from the end of the Civil War through Constitutional amendments designed to eradicate the inequalities of Jim Crow through the 1990s. One section of the exhibit is dedicated to the Knoxville Race Riot of 1919. Although by the time the exhibit opened and I visited it, I had already moved beyond the regional contest, I found the contextual history I learned from my visit to add depth to my understanding of how the injustices and social and racial barriers impacted Knoxville and specific families whose stories are traced through generations.

Knox County (Tennessee) Archives. (2020, January 16).

I visited the archives in order to access primary source information about the Riot. I also looked for photographs and maps.

McClung Historical Collection. (2020, January 16). Knoxville, Tennessee.

I visited the archival collection to read accounts of the Riot and to find photographs of Maurice Mays, Mayor John McMillan, the street route that the rioters took in downtown Knoxville, and Bertie Lindsey.

Tennessee State Library and Archives. Nashville, Tennessee.

I worked with an online archivist to search the state collection for information about the Knoxville Race Riot.

#### Documentary & Recording

“Knoxville’s Red Summer: The Riot of 1919.” (2019). Produced by PBS and Black in Appalachia.

Although the narration of this documentary was voiced by scholars who didn’t personally experience the riot in Knoxville, the documentary includes many, many photographs and video coverage of Knoxville and the surrounding area from the Jim Crow era and during the 1919 riot, which is why I’m including it as a primary source. Some of the images included in the documentary were horrifying.

Layman, E. (1973). Transcript of recording provided by Marilyn Layman Mascaro.

Earl Layman was 18 at the time of the riot. He witnessed the storming of the jail and its destruction by the angry mob in search of Mays.

#### Legal Decisions & Federal Reports

*Bailey v. State of Alabama*, (1911, January 3). Retrieved March 7, 2020, from <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/219/219.html>

This is the Supreme Court case that federally spoke out against peonage.

I reference it in my paper to show contextual history. That is, Jim Crow

laws were so intrinsically entrenched, especially in the South after Reconstruction, that, even though certain actions were illegal according to the Constitution, socially and civilly many such rights were not experienced to certain factions of society, based on race.

*Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.* (1968).

Washington: U.S., Kerner Commission. Retrieved February 2, 2020, from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/8073NCJRS.pdf>

This report shed light on the ongoing racial unrest experienced in our nation, even after *Brown v. Board* and legal desegregation. I used it in my thesis argument to help draw connections between the events of 1919, mid-century, and today.

*The United States of America v. John F. Shipp, et al.* (1906, December). 203 U.S. 563 (27 S.Ct. 165, 51 L.Ed. 319). Retrieved November 19, 2019, from <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/203/563>

This trial is the only criminal trial argued at the Supreme Court. It examined the legality of trying blacks with all-white juries.

#### Site Visit

Tour of pivotal locations in Knoxville. (2020, January 17).

Although many of the buildings are no longer standing, it was interesting to me to both walk and drive the path of the rioters. When I imagine the machine gun embankments that the National Guard stationed and the

“cordwood bodies” (according to Lakin’s article), I am aghast that so few people remember this event in Knoxville’s history.

#### Magazine Article

White, W. (May 1918). “The Burning of James McIlherron: An N.A.A.C.P. Investigation.” *The Crisis*. pp. 16-20.

This article recounted one of the travesties of justice incurred by a black man during the Jim Crow era of inequitable “justice.”

#### Photograph

“Interior of Jailer’s Room, Morris (i.e., Maurice) Mays Lynching, Knox County, Tennessee.” (1919). Retrieved March 7, 2020, from Lib. of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2001701778/>

This photograph was taken after the rioters ransacked the jail, hunting for Mays. It shows the destruction left in the path of the looting and mayhem.

#### Newspaper Articles

“8 Die in Race Riot at Knoxville, Two White Guardsmen.” *The Washington Herald* (Washington, D.C.). (1919, September 1). Retrieved March 8, 2020, from *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045433/1919-09-01/ed-1/seq-2/>

This article stated that Mays had been arrested a few days prior to Lindsey's murder on an accusation that he had been "loitering" near the home of a white family. He was released and charges were dropped.

*The Camden Chronicle* (Camden, TN). (1921, April 8). Retrieved November 23, 2019, from *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89058013/1921-04-08/ed-1/seq-2/>

This article is about the retrial granted to Mays by the state supreme court based on the fact that the original judge "failed to charge the jury to fix the punishment in the event of finding the defendant guilty of first degree murder."

"Death for Maurice Mays." (1921, November 2). *Grainger County*

*News* (Rutledge, TN). Retrieved November 23, 2019, from *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn99065781/1921-11-02/ed-1/seq-2/>

Local newspapers covered the arrest, trial, and execution of Mays. Most of these accounts were not sympathetic to his case. (Grainger County is located in East Tennessee.)

"Electricuted" (sp). *Morgan County Press* (Wartburg, TN). (1922, March 17).

Retrieved March 8, 2020, from *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn99065839/1922-03-17/ed-1/seq-1/>

This article, which recounted the fact that Mays was electrocuted after two appeals of his indictment, noted that during the process of his legal arguments and appeals, “many influential white people” became interested in his case and attempted to help exonerate Mays. This statement reinforces my argument that Cate began the process of breaking the racial barrier that Mays faced in his attempts to seek justice.

*Grainger County News* (Rutledge, TN). (1921, December 7). Retrieved March 7, 2020, from *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn99065781/1921-12-07/ed-1/seq-1/>

This article notes that unless the governor of Tennessee granted Mays clemency, he would “pay the extreme penalty” for Lindsey’s murder. Mays was not granted clemency, nor has he been exonerated of the crime in the century since his conviction, despite numerous requests over the decades.

“Guards at Court House.” *The Daily Gate City and Constitution-Democrat* (Keokuk, IA). (1919, September 30). Retrieved March 8, 2020, from *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87057262/1919-09-30/ed-1/seq-8/>

This article tells how Judge T.A.E. Nelson commanded that guards were to be set around the courthouse and the doors to the courtroom locked during Mays' trial. 500 men comprised the jury pool. The events of the Knoxville Race Riot of 1919 made national news.

“Gunners & Sheriffs Guard Knoxville Jail.” *The Commonwealth* (Scotland Neck, NC). (1919, September 9). Retrieved March 8, 2020, from *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn92073908/1919-09-09/ed-1/seq-1/>

This article discussed how machine gunners were being used more than a week after the riotous events in Knoxville to guard 50 people (both men and women) who were in the jail as a result of their attempts to drag Mays from the jail after Lindsey's murder and the resulting destruction and riot.

“Jury Convicts Negro Murderer at Knoxville.” *The Pensacola Journal* (Pensacola, FL). (1919, October 5). Retrieved March 8, 2020, from *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87062268/1919-10-05/ed-1/seq-1/>

The jury that convicted Mays deliberated a mere eight minutes after his trial.

“Knoxville Mob Storms Jail, Hunting Negro: Attack State Officers and National Guardsmen – Several Wounded on Both Sides.” (1919, August 31). *New York Times*.

National news reported on the riot. The article was written with the assumption that Mays was guilty.

“Knoxville Woman is Attacked by Negro.” (1919, Sept. 25). *The News Scimitar* (Memphis, TN) p.15. Retrieved March 7, 2020, from Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn98069867/1919-09-25/ed-1/seq-15/>

This source covered the arrest of Mays. Although the murder of Lindsey took place in East Tennessee, the events in Knoxville were news throughout the state. (Memphis is in West Tennessee.)

“Lynches Fall as Hot Lead Checks Their Onslaught” (sp). *The Bystander* (Des Moines, IA). (1921, August 25). Retrieved March 8, 2020, from Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85049804/1921-08-25/ed-1/seq-1/>

This article recounted the arrest of Frank Martin, a “mulatto man,” who was arrested for the attacking a white woman in Knoxville two years after Lindsey’s murder. Once again, the jail was stormed by an angry mob, but this time the state police guarded the jail with six machine guns. Some

historians argue that Martin, not Mays, was responsible for Lindsey's murder.

"Lynchings." (1901, January 5). *Grenada Sentinel*.

This source examines the frequency of public lynchings at the turn of the last century. I used the information for context regarding racial barriers during the Jim Crow era.

"Maurice Mays Makes Statement." *The Dallas Express*. (1919, October 4).

Retrieved March 8, 2020, from Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress,

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025779/1919-10-04/ed-1/seq-8/>

This article quoted Mays' statement of innocence and assertions that he was framed by Deputy Andy White. Mays claims that the riot could have been avoided if "the case had been handled with justice" rather than an attempt to incite racial tensions.

"Maurice Mays Pays Death Penalty: Long Fight to Save the Life of Man Charged

with Murder which Caused Knoxville Riots Fails; Goes to Death Protesting Innocence." *The Dallas Express*. (1922, March 25). Retrieved March 8, 2020, from Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress,

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025779/1922-03-25/ed-1/seq-1/>

This article discusses how Cate rallied both blacks and whites to petition for Mays' exoneration. It states that Governor Taylor was "apathetic" to Mays' plight and that Mays was a "victim of circumstance."

"Motion for New Trial in Maurice Mays Case: Negro Convicted of Murder of Mrs. Bertie Lindsay Asks for Another Trial." (1919, October 10). *The Chattanooga News*. Retrieved November 20, 2019, from *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85038531/1919-10-10/ed-1/seq-9/>

Mays petitioned for a retrial immediately after his first trial convicted him of murder. He had the support of the NAACP and a few prominent Knoxvilleians, but many people (both black and white) did not support Mays. Some historians argue that the reason some of the socially prominent and wealthy black citizens refused to help fund Mays' appeals was due to fear of reprisal by the white community.

"Negro Denies Murder, Criticizes Police Work." (1919, September 1). *The Tennessean*. (Nashville, TN). p. 2.

Mays vocally protested his guilt and asserted his innocence from the first night he was detained. Once he realized Deputy Andy White was pointing the finger his direction, he knew he was being framed.

"Negro Pays for Murder." *Capital Journal* (Salem, OR). (1922, March 15).

Retrieved March 8, 2020, from *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress,

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn90066132/1922-03-15/ed-1/seq-8/>

This article recounts Mays' execution. He was shocked with 2800 volts of electricity at 6:10 and pronounced dead six minutes later. He was in the middle of restating his innocence when the switch was thrown.

“Negro to Die for Attack.” (1921, October 30). *Richmond Times-Dispatch*.

Retrieved November 23, 2019, from Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress.

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045389/1921-10-30/ed-1/seq-9/>

Despite support from some prominent people, Mays' second trial also resulted in a guilty sentence and a sentence to execute him.

“New Evidence to Show Mays is Innocent.” *Richmond Planet* (Richmond, VA).

(1921, August 20). Retrieved November 23, 2019, from Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress,

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84025841/1921-08-20/ed-1/seq-3/>

This article tells how the NAACP worked to exonerate Mays. It describes other attacks on white women in Knoxville in the weeks and months after Mays was incarcerated.

*Polk County News*. (1919, October 9). Retrieved November 23, 2019, from Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress,

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86071278/1919-10-09/ed-1/seq-2/>

Many area newspapers covered the murder and events in Knoxville, as well as Mays' trial.

“Scores Dead in Knoxville Riot.” (1919, August 31). *Washington Times*.

National news reports covered the riots' results. Initially, it wasn't clear how many people were killed and wounded. (These numbers are still debated, 101 years after the riot.)

“Strengthened Jail Guard.” *The Washington Herald* (Washington, D.C.). (1919, September 1). Retrieved March 8, 2020, from Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress,

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045433/1919-09-01/ed-1/seq-2/>

When Mays was relocated to Chattanooga, Tennessee, the sheriff there, Sheriff Bass, added armed reinforcements to guard the jail out of fear that armed whites from Knoxville would travel the 90 miles south in an attempt to capture and lynch Mays.

“Whites and Blacks Engage in a Riot.” *Alexandria Gazette* (Alexandria, D.C.).

(1919, September 1). Retrieved March 8, 2020, from Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress,

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1919-09-01/ed-1/seq-1/>

This article examined the racial aspect of the Knoxville Riot, recording that both whites and blacks were armed, shot at one another, and were killed during the riot. It noted that the whites killed were National Guardsmen who were “accidentally placed in the line of fire,” but the slant of the article implies the black deaths were no accident, further indicating the racial nature of the riot and the bias against the black community in Knoxville a century ago.

## Secondary Sources

### Books & Dissertation

Curriden, M. & Phillips, L. (2001). *Contempt of Court: The Turn of the Century Lynching that Launched a Hundred Years of Federalism*. Garden City: Anchor Books.

Reading about lynchings – especially “legalized” lynchings helped inform my understanding of how prevalent the notions of Jim Crow’s inequalities were in the national mentality in terms of (in)justice.

Russell, C. *Reckoning with a Violent and Lawless Past: A Study of Race, Violence and Reconciliation in Tennessee*. Dissertation (Aug. 2010), Vanderbilt Univ.

This dissertation had a lot of statistics on race-based, violent crimes dating back over a century. It helped me form my argument regarding the inequitable “justice” experienced by blacks during the Jim Crow era.

Smiley, T. *Death of a King: The Real Story of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s Final Year*. (2014). New York: Little Brown.

This source provided excellent context about the final year of MLK’s life and the turbulence in our nation during the late 1960s. The author based his text on interviews, sermons, speeches, and newspaper articles to piece together a very detailed account. I reference the racial events of the 1960s in my paper to demonstrate the pervasiveness of social barriers based on race in our society.

### Federal Report

“FBI Releases 2018 Hate Crime Statistics.” (2018). U.S. Department of Justice.

Retrieved December 31, 2019, from

<https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/hate-crime-statistics>

I used this source for statistical information on hate crimes that are racially motivated.

### Magazine Articles

Lakin, M. (2000). “A Dark Night’: The Knoxville Race Riot of 1919.” *The Journal of East Tennessee History*, 72: 1-29.

This article was particularly helpful. It included lots of photographs of the aftermath of the riot as well as a map of downtown Knoxville and the massing surge of the riot’s path.

Lamon, L. (1972). “Charles W. Cansler to the Honorable Tom C. Rye Governor of Tennessee, February, 1918.” *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 57.

Mr. Cansler, a friend of Booker T. Washington, wrote to then-governor Rye decrying the inequitable treatment of blacks by whites-in-power in Tennessee. He wasn’t a radical proposing an end to segregation; he merely requested improved segregated conditions. This writing exemplifies the atmosphere of “us v. them” mentality in the Jim Crow South.

Paine, D.F. "Race and Murder in Knoxville, 1919: The Trials of Maurice Mays."

*Tennessee Bar Journal* Vol. 43, No. 3. (2007, March). Pp. 28-32.

This article is a summary of the trial and retrial of Mays.

#### Personal Correspondence & Interviews

Isom, W. Personal correspondence. (2019, December).

Mr. Isom directed the PBS documentary on the Knoxville Riot of 1919. He kindly helped point me to sources and generate ideas for deeper research.

Mascaro, Marilyn. Personal interview. (2020, March 12).

Ms. Mascaro presented a brown bag lecture entitled, "Knoxville's 1919 Race Riot: An Eyewitness Account." After her lecture I spoke with her about her grandfather's experience. Her grandfather, Earl Layman, was 18 years old at the time of the Knoxville Riot and recorded a transcript of his memories and experiences.

Watts, J.K. (2020, January 16). Personal interview.

When I visited the McClung Historical Collection in Knoxville, I spoke with Ms. Watts initially merely to seek information about how to locate information about the Riot. Through our conversation, however, she shared memories of stories her grandfather (who was born in the 1890s and vividly recalled the event) had told her. She shared with me her grandfather's account of Mays' erroneous indictment and details that I haven't found in any published account.

### Broadcast News Reports

Florido, A. (2015, July 15). "In the Age of #BlackLivesMatter, the NAACP Tries to Reach a Younger Generation." *All Things Considered*, Nashville Public Radio. Retrieved March 14, 2020, from <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/07/15/423188063/youth-activists-criticize-naacp-for-falling-behind-the-times>

In my paper I make a connection between the BLM movement and the NAACP. This article explored the two organizations' similarities and how the BLM movement appeals to younger people, but that the goals of each are very similar.

Hays, G. (2019). "The Story of Maurice Mays and the 1919 Race Riots, 100 Years Later." WBIR-Channel 10 News. Retrieved November 18, 2019, from <https://www.wbir.com/article/news/the-story-of-maurice-mays-and-the-1919-race-riots-100-years-later/>

This was a reminiscence piece, showing photographs taken in the Knox County Jail after the riot.

"Trayvon Martin Shooting Fast Facts." (2019, December 9). CNN. Retrieved December 31, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/05/us/trayvon-martin-shooting-fast-facts/index.html>

I make a reference to current race-based reactions to inequitable justice meted out on blacks by whites. Trayvon Martin's case is one of the ones I examine.

### Newspaper Articles

Booker, R. (2011, October 4). "Robert Booker: Effort to Clear Name Falls on Deaf Ears." *News Sentinel* (Knoxville, TN). Archived December 2, 2013.

Retrieved December 29, 2019, from

<https://web.archive.org/web/20131202234357/http://www.knoxnews.com/news/2011/oct/04/effort-to-clear-name-falls-on-deaf-ears/>

Mr. Booker has worked tirelessly to exonerate Mays, but, thus far, his efforts have been unsuccessful.

Buchanan, L., F. Fessenden, K.K.R. Lai, H. Park, A. Parlapiano, A. Tse, T.

Wallace, D. Watkins, and K. Yourish. (2015, August 10). "What Happened in Ferguson?" *New York Times*. Retrieved December 31, 2019, from

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/ferguson-missouri-town-under-siege-after-police-shooting.html>

The events of Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, bear similarities to the events in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1919. I drew conclusions and comparisons between the two racial explosions after reading this synopsis.

Izadi, E. (2016, April 19). "Black Lives Matter and America's Long History of Resisting Civil Rights Protesters." *The Washington Post*. Retrieved February

3, 2020, from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/04/19/black-lives-matters-and-americas-long-history-of-resisting-civil-rights-protesters/)

[fix/wp/2016/04/19/black-lives-matters-and-americas-long-history-of-resisting-civil-rights-protesters/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/04/19/black-lives-matters-and-americas-long-history-of-resisting-civil-rights-protesters/)

This article recounted the role of white Freedom Riders and other white Americans since the 1960s, who have stood up for racial equality. I used

this information to support my idea that sometimes barriers – such as racial or social – must often be broken by the people in a position – often political, but sometimes social – to change laws and perceptions. Just as women campaigned for their right to vote yet depended on white men to grant that privilege with the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, so, too, has it often necessitated the involvement of white individuals to change laws, stereotypes, and perceptions of black citizens. Especially during Jim Crow, when poll taxes in the South often prevented many blacks from exercising their rights to vote, it was people like Sheriff Cate who began the process of breaking barriers and altering the trajectory of history.

Lakin, M. (2012, February 26). “Maurice Franklin Mays: Died Claiming Innocence but Conviction Stands.” *Knoxville News Sentinel*. Retrieved November 10, 2019, from <http://www.knoxnews.com/news/local/maurice-franklin-mays-died-claiming-innocence-but-conviction-stands-ep-361162321-357180621.html>

This article covered the attempts to exonerate Mays.

#### Websites

“Aug. 30, 1919: The Knoxville Riot.” Zinn Educational Project: Teaching People’s History. Retrieved March 8, 2020, from <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/knoxville-riot/>

This article examined the impact of the Knoxville Riot and the role of Sheriff Cate. It included a final plea and prayer by Mays published on the day of his execution.

Blount, H. "The Clinton 12's Story: Tennessee's Green McAdoo Cultural Center." (2020, March 10). Retrieved March 11, 2020, from <https://backroadplanet.com/clinton-12-story-green-mcadoo-cultural-center/>

I wanted to demonstrate that Cate's actions were not anomalies in terms of racial barrier breaking in East Tennessee. I sought to give examples of other East Tennesseans who were "normal, everyday" folks who also courageously stood up for what was right, even when it meant putting themselves in harm's way. I examined the role of Reverend Turner in Clinton, Tennessee, during desegregation of the first public high school in the South.

Brown, C. "What You Need to Know about the Red Summer 1919." (2019, November 18). *Medium*. Retrieved March 8, 2020, from <https://medium.com/@ghostwriter.cheryl/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-red-summer-1919-8ce7485c163d>

This article provided an overview of the Red Summer race riots of 1919 and President Wilson's lack of intervention on the part of returning black servicemen. It examined the role of the Knoxville Race Riot. During an eight month period, over 200 blacks were killed as a result of race-based rioting.

Civil Rights Digital Library: Documenting America's Struggle for Racial Equality. Retrieved January 28, 2020, from

[http://crdl.usg.edu/people/1/liuzzo\\_viola\\_1925\\_1965/?Welcome](http://crdl.usg.edu/people/1/liuzzo_viola_1925_1965/?Welcome)

I used this site for statistical information to support my thesis.

Dennis, A. (February 1, 2019). "Maurice Mays and the Knoxville Riots: A Tragedy Forgotten." Retrieved December 29, 2019, from

<https://medium.com/@AngelaDennisWrites/maurice-mays-and-the-knoxville-race-riots-a-tragedy-forgotten-d3c5c107f3fa>

With the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Knoxville Riot acknowledged last summer, a few researchers and reports covered the event again to broaden awareness so that it wouldn't become a piece of the forgotten past. I read this article for background information and context.

Higgins, A. (2019, July 26). "Red Summer of 1919: How Black WW1 Vets Fought Back Against Racists Mobs." History.com, Retrieved December 29, 2019, from <https://www.history.com/news/red-summer-1919-riots-chicago-dc-great-migration>

The Red Summer riots were the result of racial tensions when WWI black soldiers returned from serving the United States only to realize that, despite fighting for freedom's preservation, they were not the recipients of the freedoms and liberties for which they fought. Many whites, who found themselves without jobs after returning from war, harassed blacks; the black soldiers defended themselves.

Lewis, F. "The Red Summer of 1919 in U.S. Cities." ThoughtCo, (2019, September 30). Retrieved November 11, 2019, from [thoughtco.com/red-summer-of-1919-45394](https://www.thoughtco.com/red-summer-of-1919-45394)

This article gave me a summary of the widespread nature of the Red Summer racial uprisings.

Mills, D. (2016, March 20) "Knoxville Race Riot (1919)." Retrieved November 22, 2019, from <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/knoxville-race-riot-1919/>

This article provided background information about Mays' young adult years and social interaction in Knoxville prior to his incarceration.

Tabler, D. (2015, August). "Knoxville's Red Summer of 1919." *Appalachian History*. Retrieved November 12, 2019, from <http://www.appalachianhistory.net/2015/08/knoxvilles-red-summer-of-1919.html>

This article argued that the Knoxville Riot was part of the nationwide Red Summer of 1919 insurgencies.

"Targeting Black Veterans: Lynching in America." (2017). Equal Justice Initiative. Retrieved December 29, 2019, from <https://eji.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/lynching-in-america-targeting-black-veterans-web.pdf>

After WWI, black veterans were more directly targeted by whites – especially by returning white soldiers – than were other factions of the black community. The author asserts that this phenomenon is due to a

struggle for jobs and housing as well as jealousies stemming from reintegration into society.

“Victims of the State: MAR to MAZ.” Retrieved March 7, 2020, from <http://vots.altervista.org/Name/M2.html>.

This source offered evidence of Mays’ innocence. This is the only location I found this particular evidence. The more accepted evidence involves a perpetrator nicknamed “Pants,” who was almost certainly the one who committed the Lindsey murder as well as other similar crimes in Knoxville.

Wheeler, W. (2017, October 8). “Knoxville Riot of 1919.” AASLH. Retrieved November 15, 2019, from <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=753>

This source gave information about the Knoxville Riot.

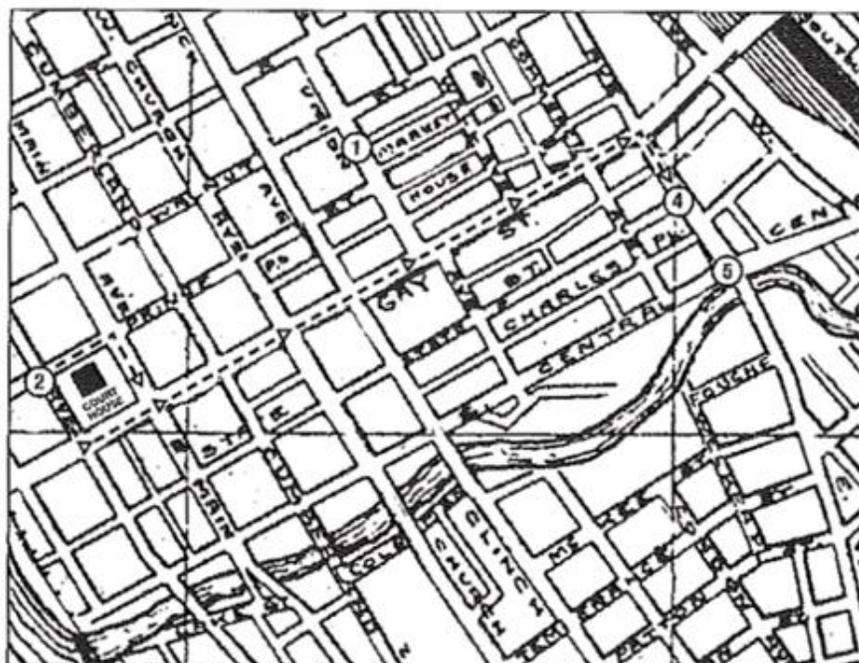
## Appendix



This is one of the most famous photographs of Maurice Mays. Mays was 5'8" and weighed 127 pounds at the time of Lindsey's murder. Eyewitnesses who saw the perpetrator escaping from Lindsey's house described him as a short, stout man (Paine, 2007). Photo taken from Lakin's 2000 article, "A Dark Night," from the McClung Historical Collection



Maurice Mays. He was described as a handsome man. Photo: Zinn Education Project



1. Market Square, initial gathering site of the rioters
2. Knox County jail
3. General path -----▷ of the rioters after leaving the jail
4. Machine gun positions
5. Central and Vine, scene of the most intense fighting

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Map of Knoxville in 1919, showing the route of the rioters and key points of the riot. Based on a map from the McClung Historical Collection.

This map depicts the route of the race-based riot during the weekend of August 30-31, 1919 in Knoxville. Many of the buildings marked are no longer present. Photo: Lakin's 2000 article, "A Dark Night," from the McClung Historical Collection



Knoxville Mayor John McMillan, alleged biological father of Maurice Mays. He relied heavily on Mays courting the black vote. Indeed, on the day of the murder, Mays had campaigned tirelessly for McMillan. Shortly after Mays' execution, McMillan committed suicide. Photo: Lakin's 2000 article, "A Dark Night," from the McClung Historical Collection



Bertie Lindsey. Bertie was a married woman who was soon to join her husband in Ohio but was spending the summer in Knoxville. Her cousin, Ora Smyth, was sharing her house on the fateful night of her murder. Photo: Lakin's 2000 article, "A Dark Night," from the McClung Historical Collection