

The Case of Henry Thomas

Recounting the Murder Trial of Four Prominent White Farmers



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I. INTRODUCTION

On July 14, 1933 in Americus, Georgia, Henry “Pewee” Thomas was taken from the farm where he worked by four prominent white farmers – McKinley Jordan, Cliff Snider, Dave Mills, and Douglas Mills.¹ Thomas was later found shot dead with a bullet wound in his chest.² His death likely happened because of a fight the previous day between Thomas and Benton B. Mills, the brother of two of the white farmers responsible for Thomas’ death.³ Thomas was thirty-three years old, a beloved son and brother.⁴ In the days and months after his death, two local newspapers reported on the arrest, indictment, trial, and finally the acquittal of Henry Thomas’ assailants – documenting the rarity of the criminal justice system’s attempt to get justice for the death of an African American victim at the hands of four white prominent perpetrators.

By 1933, the Great Depression had devastated the entire country but African Americans in the rural South especially suffered.⁵ Declining incomes plagued all forms of black labor from landowners to sharecroppers.⁶ And throughout the early 1930s, any efforts from the federal government to rectify the damaging effects of the Great Depression were slow to reach black communities due to discrimination in implementation of government assistance programs by

¹ [Four White Men Held On Charge Of Shooting Young Negro To Death, Americus Times-Recorder, Jul. 15, 1933, at 1 \(Ga.\). The first newspaper to report the case referred to the four men as prominent white farmers and subsequent newspaper entries continued to refer the men as such.](#)

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ Death Certificate, Sumter County, Georgia, Jul. 31, 1933.

⁵ Joe W. Trotter, “Perspectives on Black Working-Class History and the Labor Movement Today,” adapted from *From a Raw Deal to a New Deal* in the Young Oxford History of African Americans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3.

⁶ *Id.*

local municipalities.⁷ As conditions for white workers worsened, tensions between whites and Blacks reached new highs.⁸

Henry Thomas was a black farm hand who had worked on Deputy Sheriff Walter Chappell's farm for five years.⁹ On July 13, 1933, he had been hired to take B. B. Mills on a trip and when they returned Thomas and B.B. Mills argued over how much Thomas was to be paid for his services. On July 14, Henry Thomas was dead – found by Deputy Sheriff Chappell and his son, Armstead Chappell, on the Mills' property in a car. Dave Mills and Cliff Snider were [also found at](#) the scene.¹⁰ By the next day, Dave Mills, Cliff Snider, McKinley Jordan, and Douglas Mills were arrested and taken to the county jail.¹¹ On November 27, 1933, a grand jury indicted all four men, in Thomas' murder and indicted B.B. Mills on separate charges as an accessory to the murder.¹² Just a little over three weeks later, after a three-day trial lasting from December 18 to the 20, the four men were acquitted and B. B. Mills' case was *nolle prossed*.¹³

II. KEY EVENTS IN THE THOMAS CASE

The story of what happened to Henry Thomas and his assailants' subsequent murder trial was mostly covered by two local newspapers: the *Americus Times-Recorder* and the *Tri-County News*. The *Thomasville Times-Enterprise* and the *Macon Telegraph* – newspapers from towns more than an hour away from Americus – also covered the highlights of the trial. Written accounts of what happened from the time of Thomas' death in July until the murder trial of the

⁷ *Id.* at 10.

⁸ *Id.* at 5.

⁹ *Four White Men Held ~~On~~ Charge ~~Of~~ Shooting Young Negro ~~To~~ Death*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Jul. 15, 1933, at 6 (Ga.).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 1.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *True Bill Is Found In Murder Case*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Nov. 29, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

¹³ *Four Sumter Men Are Acquitted On Charge Of Murdering Negro Man*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec. 20, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

four [prominent](#) white farmers in December are likely available only in these newspaper articles.¹⁴ Most of the news articles are straight-forward factual descriptions of the events. The newspaper accounts generally omitted the views of Thomas' family and friends and did not include community opinions about Thomas's death and the trial. As there appear to be no surviving ancestors of Thomas',¹⁵ the limited information provided in this paper concerning the reactions of Thomas' family and friends is all that is currently available for research and further analysis.

A. A Fight Occurred

All reports regarding Thomas' murder agree that it was the direct result of a fight between Thomas and B.B. Mills the previous day, July 13, 1933. No mention is made in any newspaper about the reason why Thomas was hired to drive Mills on a trip or their destination, but news reports state that Thomas and Mills had argued over the price of the trip.¹⁶ Thomas thought that he deserved seventy-five cents while Mills argued that the price should be fifty cents.¹⁷ What happened next was written entirely from Mills' point of view since Thomas was dead when the *Americus Times-Reporter* reported on the events.

B.B. Mills' alleged that he gave Thomas fifty cents and told him he would go get "the money changed and pay him the rest."¹⁸ Mills "then went to the house of a neighbor and came back with change. He walked down the road and the two met and argued."¹⁹ Mills then said "'Pewee' threatened him and he hit him over the head" until Mills was able to break loose and

14 [The docket for the trial does not contain a record of what occurred in the case. It only includes the charges, the verdict, the dates of the trial, and the names of the jury. *The State, vs. McKinley Jordan, Dave Mills, Cliff Snider and Douglas Mills & B. B. Mills, Dec. 20, 1933, at 1.*](#)

15 Noah Lapidus, "Family Member Search," e-mail message to Raven Smith, Jul. 5, 2017.

16 [See *Four White Men Held On Charge Of Shooting Young Negro To Death, Americus Times-Recorder, Jul. 15, 1933, at 1, 6 \(Ga.\)*.](#)

17 [Id. at 6.](#)

18 *Id.*

19 *Id.*

run away.²⁰ While Mills' version of events could be true, during the murder trial in December, Lou Bell Pope, a black farm hand who worked with Thomas, testified about the same fight and did not mention any version of events where Thomas had threatened Mills. Pope only stated that a fight had occurred.²¹ Nevertheless, some kind of conflict between Thomas and B.B. Mills did occur on July 13 and the next day, Henry Thomas would die because of it.

B. Four White Men Held On Charge Of Shooting Young Negro To Death

On July 14, the day after the fight between Thomas and Mills, Lou Bell Pope and Thomas Clark, two black farm hands,²² stopped Deputy Sheriff Chappell and told him that "four white men had gotten 'Peewee' out of the field where he was working and made him get in a car at the point of a gun."²³ The Deputy Sheriff told Pope and Clark that he would look for Thomas and that if he did not find where the men had taken him, they should tell Armstead Chappell²⁴ to look for Thomas that night.²⁵ The *Americus Times-Reporter* stated that Deputy Sheriff Chappell assumed that Thomas might have been taken by a county bailiff and that after searching for Thomas for a few hours, "thinking the matter was nothing very important," gave up his search and went back home.²⁶

Upon arriving home, Deputy Sheriff Chappell found his son, Armstead, still searching for Thomas. [Young](#) Chappell suggested that they go to B. B. Mills' house and see if they had seen the negro.²⁷ When the Chappells arrived at Mills' home, they saw the same car that Pope and Clark had reported as taking Thomas away from the farm earlier that day.²⁸ Cliff Snider exited

20 *Id.*

21 *State Rests In Trial Of Sumter Men*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec. 19, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

22 *Id.*

23 *Four White Men Held On Charge Of Shooting Young Negro To Death*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Jul. 15, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

24 Armstead Chappell was Deputy Sheriff Chappell's son and worked to run the farm for his father.

25 *Id.*

26 *Id.*

27 *Id.*

28 *Id.*

the car when he saw the Chappells approaching. Deputy Sheriff Chappell asked Snider “what he did with Peewee.”²⁹ Snider replied that he had left him down the road.³⁰ But as Armstead approached the car, he saw two men inside – Dave Mills and “Pewee, dead, with a bullet hole in his chest.”

When Deputy Sheriff Chappell went to arrest Snider, he found that Snider had fled.³¹ But he immediately arrested Dave Mills and secured warrants for the arrest of Snider and the other two men.³² He then went to McKinley Jordan’s house, awoke him, and arrested him.³³ By the next morning on July 15, 1933, Douglas Mills and Snider had surrendered to Deputy Sheriff Chappell.

C. Sumter Men Given Bond

On July 18, three days after the four prominent white farmers were arrested, they remained in the county jail.³⁴ The *Americus Times-Reporter* reported that one of the defendants would demand a hearing that week, since before bond could be given out, a commitment hearing was required.³⁵ On July 25, the four men, Snider, Jordan, Doug Mills and Dave Mills were released on \$5,000 bond each.³⁶ Contrary to what the paper had reported a few days earlier, none of the men had asked for a commitment hearing.³⁷ Instead, after a three-way conference between Solicitor Hollis Fort, Defense Attorney Steve Pace, and Deputy Sheriff Chappell, the four men were released on a charge of manslaughter,³⁸ although the *Americus Times-Reporter* noted that

29 *Id.*

30 *Id.*

31 *Id.*

32 *Id.*

33 *Id.* at 6.

34 *Date Not Set For Hearing*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Jul. 18, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

35 *Id.*

36 *Sumter Men Given Bond*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Jul. 26, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

37 *Id.*

38 *Id.*

“no official record of the changes from murder to manslaughter could be found.”³⁹ Nonetheless, the grand jury indicted the four men for murder in November.⁴⁰

D. The Reaction of Thomas’ Family

No newspapers from the time ever discussed Thomas’ family or their reactions to the loss of their relative. However, on August 5, 1933, more than a week after the four men were released from jail on the charge of manslaughter, John Thomas, the brother of the deceased, wrote a letter to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (hereafter “NAACP”) in New York City. His letter provides some insight into how the Thomas family might have felt at the time. On John Thomas wrote: “Enclose [sic] clipping from our new [sic] paper condemning the murder of my bro [sic], Henry P. Thomas. Read and consider it please.”⁴¹

We can only theorize what John Thomas’ letter to the NAACP signified and how he felt about the release of the four men who allegedly killed his brother. However, it is significant that he wrote to the NAACP. He might have felt that not enough was being done in his brother’s case by the local authorities in Americus. Or he might have felt more comfortable trying to enlist the NAACP as a part of the case, or he may have believed that they would share more information about the case than what was being revealed to him at the time.

The NAACP sent a letter to the Atlanta Branch on August 11, 1933 which said:

The brother (John Thomas) would like some assistance, I judge. I do not know whether anything that can be done, but I would appreciate it if you would let me have the benefit of your advice. Perhaps the Atlanta Branch has some means of communicating with Americus to find out how the case stands at present.⁴²

39 *Id.*

40 *Id.*

41 John Thomas to NAACP, Aug. 5, 1933, in NAACP Records, Box I G44 Folder 5, Georgia Branch Files.

42 Assistant Secretary of NAACP to A. T. Walden, Aug. 11, 1933, in NAACP Records, Box I G44 Folder 5, Georgia Branch Files.

Absent any communication with the local NAACP branch, we can only hypothesize what the letter to the Atlanta Branch meant. However, it is significant that the national office of NAACP in New York wrote to the Atlanta Branch at all, since the NAACP at that time received hundreds of similar letters from African Americans all over the country asking for help in redressing the deaths of their loved ones.⁴³ No mention of further involvement in the Thomas case is noted in the Atlanta Branch files for 1933. Nor did any newspaper report NAACP involvement in the case.⁴⁴

III. THE LEGAL PROCEEDINGS

From the end of July to the end of November, no newspaper made any mention of the murder of Henry Thomas or the four prominent white farmers accused. But on November 27, the grand jury met for the presentment of evidence.⁴⁵ Judge William M. Harper's charge to the grand jury stated that they were committed "to the preservation of the peace of the community, the care of bringing to light for examination, trial and punishment, all violence, outrages, indecencies, and terror; everything that may occasion danger, disturbances, or dismay to the citizens."⁴⁶ This charge to the grand jury, published for the entire community, conveyed to the residents of

43 See New York City-Manhattan branch operations, January-March 1934 New York City-Manhattan branch operations, Part 12: Selected Branch Files, 1913-1939, Series B: The Northeast, Library of Congress, Copyright 2014, NAACP; June-July 1934, Papers of the NAACP, Part 12: Selected Branch Files, 1913-1939, Series B: The Northeast, Library of Congress, Copyright 2014, NAACP; New York City-Manhattan branch operations, August-December 1934, Part 12: Selected Branch Files, 1913-1939, Series B: The Northeast, Library of Congress, Copyright 2014, NAACP.

44 See Atlanta, Georgia branch operations, April-December 1933, Papers of the NAACP, Part 12: Selected Branch Files, 1913-1939, Series A: The South, Library of Congress, Copyright 2014, NAACP.

45 *True Bill Is Found In Murder Case*, Americus Times-Recorder, Nov. 29, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

46 *Judge W. M. Harper Delivers Charge To The Grand Jury*, Tri-County News, Nov. 29, 1933, at 6 (Ga.).

Americus and to the grand jury the importance of the upcoming indictment of the [prominent](#) white farmers.

A. True Bill Is Found In Murder Case

On Wednesday, November 29, 1933, the grand jury “returned a true bill against the five [prominent](#) Sumter County farmers.”⁴⁷ Douglas and Dave Mills, Cliff Snider, and McKinley Jordan were charged with murder of Henry Thomas.⁴⁸ B. B. Mills, brother of Douglas and Dave Mills, was charged in the same warrant with being an accessory before the murder for “ordering the alleged murder and planning it.”⁴⁹ Further, the court issued a bench warrant for the five men, ordering an immediate arrest pending trial.⁵⁰ The *Americus Times-Recorder* reported that the trial was to be scheduled in the next two weeks.⁵¹ The newspaper also made sure to recount what had happened to Thomas in July at the hands of the five white farmers.⁵²

Two days later, the front page of the *Americus Times-Recorder* read: “Three Charged With Murder Are Arrested.”⁵³ Cliff Snider and Dave Mills had been in the county jail since the bench warrant was issued.⁵⁴ B. B. Mills was also arrested on Wednesday but, due to ill health, was released on a \$5,000 bond.⁵⁵ Douglas Mills and McKinley Jordan were said to be out of the county when the arrest warrant was issued but it was reported that they would surrender before the trial began.⁵⁶ The newspaper devoted most of the column to the Thomas case and the five

47 *True Bill is Found in Murder Case*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Nov. 29, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

48 *Id.*

49 *Id.*

50 *Id.*

51 *Id.*

52 *Id.*

53 *Three Charged With Murder Are Arrested*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec. 1, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

54 *Id.*

55 *Murder Trial To Be Monday*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec. 12, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

56 *Three Charged With Murder Are Arrested*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec. 1, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

white defendants, even though there were several other criminal and civil cases announced at the time.⁵⁷

On Monday, December 12, the *Americus Times-Recorder* reported in a front page story that the Thomas murder trial was set for Monday, December 18, 1933. Four of the defendants were awaiting trial in the county jail.⁵⁸ B.B. Mills, who had also been indicted on a separate charge in the Thomas case, was in the community on bail. The newspaper announced the attorneys in the case: Hollis Fort and his son, Hollis Fort, Jr. were to prosecute the case on behalf of the State, and Attorneys J. A. Hixon and Steve Pace were to represent the defendants.⁵⁹

The murder trial of the four white Sumter County farmers lasted three days, from December 18 to December 20, 1933.⁶⁰ On Monday, the first day of the trial, the courtroom was “filled to overflowing with families, and the friends of the defendants, jurors and spectators as Judge W. M. Harper called the court to order.”⁶¹ Most of the first day was dedicated to jury selection for a petit jury from a pool of 178 prospective jurors.⁶² By noon only five jurors had been accepted by both sides,⁶³ as most jurors were rejected because of “over-age, sickness, or other reasons.”⁶⁴ By 3:30 p.m. the last juror was accepted and, after a short recess, the State began presenting its case to the jury.⁶⁵

B. The Prosecution’s Case

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Murder Trial To Be Monday*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec. 12, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Four Sumter County Men Are Acquitted On Charge Of Murdering Negro Man*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec. 20, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

⁶¹ *Trial of Four Sumter County Men Is Begun*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec. 18, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ *State Rests In Trial of Sumter Men*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec. 19, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

⁶⁴ *Trial of Four Sumter County Men Is Begun*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec. 18, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

⁶⁵ *State Rests In Trial of Sumter Men*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec. 19, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

The first witness called to the stand was Lou Bell Pope, the black farm hand who had stopped Deputy Sheriff Chappell on the day of the murder.⁶⁶ Pope testified that “the four defendants came to the field where Thomas was working on the afternoon of July 14 and forced him to get into their car at the point of a gun and a pistol. Dave Mills hit him over the head with a rifle.”⁶⁷ The testimony of the next witness, Thomas Clark, the other black farm hand who had stopped Deputy Sheriff Chappell, corroborated Pope’s story in almost every detail.⁶⁸ The *Americus Times-Recorder* made a point to note that “other colored witnesses testified in seeing four men and a negro in a car driving.”⁶⁹

The first white witness was M. C. Miller, a section hand who lived close to the place where Thomas was killed.⁷⁰ The *Americus Times-Reporter* labeled him the State’s star witness.⁷¹ Miller testified that on July 14, Douglas Mills had come to his house and asked if he could give him a ride home, but:

“ . . . before he could answer, he heard a man cry, and as he turned he hear a shot and then saw McKinley Jordan sitting in a car.”⁷² . . .

“McKinley was facing the rear of the car, a coach, with a pistol in his hand. Dave Mills was holding the deceased who was half standing in the rear seat of the car. As the gun fired Thomas slumped into the foot of the car.”⁷³

On cross examination by defense attorneys Pace and Hixon, Miller stated that, after he heard the gun shot, “Jordan then got out of the car and came to him and said he had to shoot Thomas

66 *Id.*

67 *Id.*

68 *Id.*

69 *Id.*

70 *Id.*

71 *Id.*

72 *Id.*

73 *Id.*

because he attacked him with a knife and showed him [Miller] a place on his shirt that was said to have been cut by Thomas before he was shot.”⁷⁴

Solicitor Hollis Fort, representing the State, immediately “claimed that he had been entrapped as part of Mr. Miller’s testimony...was withheld from him.”⁷⁵ The *Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, a newspaper that was almost two hours distant from Americus, reported on the heated exchange between Fort and his “star witness.”⁷⁶ The news report emphasized that Fort was angry at the witness for “failure to give him full facts in the case.”⁷⁷ The report in the *Americus Times-Recorder* stressed that Fort accused Miller of withholding these facts in the initial investigation, which occurred in July.⁷⁸ There was no mention in either paper of the reaction of the crowd in the court room, or the response of the Thomas family or the reaction of local residents in Americus.⁷⁹

Deputy Sheriff Chappell was the final witness of the day.⁸⁰ “He told of the case from the time it was reported to him that Thomas had been abducted until he allegedly found the lifeless body of Thomas in the rear seat of one of the defendant’s car.”⁸¹ He further testified that Dave Mills was in the car where he had found Thomas, and that Mills was “unconscious from drinking whiskey and that Snider was near the car but escaped when the body was discovered.”⁸² After Chappell finished his testimony, a recess was called until the next morning.

74 *Id.*

75 *Id.*

76 *State’s Witnesses Accused Of Holding Back Full Facts*, *Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, Dec. 19, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

77 *Id.*

78 *State Rests In Trial of Sumter Men*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec. 19, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

79 *See Id.*; *See State’s Witnesses Accused Of Holding Back Full Facts*, *Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, Dec.

80 *State Rests In Trial of Sumter Men*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, Dec. 19, 1933, at 6 (Ga.).

81 *Id.*

82 *Id.*

The second day of the trial began on the morning of Tuesday, December 19.⁸³ The State continued presenting its evidence, calling to the stand two more witnesses.⁸⁴ Armstead Chappell, testified that he found the body of Thomas in the rear of the Mills' car.⁸⁵ The paper did not report the name of the next State witness or the substance of that witness's testimony.⁸⁶ At 10 a.m., the State rested.⁸⁷

C. The Case for the Defense

Before calling the first defense witness, Defense Attorney Hixon addressed the jury and stated that it was their contention that the homicide was committed in self-defense.⁸⁸ He stated that the case stemmed from "an attack on B. B. Mills, invalid brother of two of the defendants over a small sum of money and that he was severely beaten by the deceased."⁸⁹ Hixon further claimed that:

"B. B. Mills told the four defendants of the attack and on the day of the murder B. B. Mills made a trip with a colored friend of the deceased. As he did not return home on schedule they [the four defendants] feared Thomas was going to carry out a threat made on Mills' life the night before, during the attack. To prevent this the men went to the field where Thomas was working, made him get into the car and were bringing him to the county sheriff to have him arrested."⁹⁰

83 *Id.*

84 *Id.*

85 *Id.*

86 *Id.*

87 *Id.*

88 *Id.*

89 *Id.* Of the sixteen articles from four different newspapers over a six-month period, the only mention of B. B. Mills being invalid or that Thomas had severely beaten him was in this report of Hixon's statement to the jury.

90 *Id.*

Hixon then stated that Thomas “vigorously denied the charges and asked to be carried to B. B. Mills” in order to prove his innocence, and added that, when the four defendants went in search of Mills, “Thomas attacked Jordan with a knife and he fired in self-defense.”⁹¹

Finally, Hixon concluded that because the four men “did not wish to bring the body to Americus and cause a scene, ... they attempted to get in touch with Sheriff McArthur and have him send for the body.”⁹² But since they failed to get into contact with the Sheriff, they went “to the home of Mills’ father to ask advice and it was there that the negroes body was found in the car.”⁹³ The *Americus Times-Reporter* did not mention how the crowd responded to Hixon’s statement to the jury, and concluded the article by stating that defense witnesses were expected to take up the rest of the day, and the case was likely to go to the jury the following day.⁹⁴

Despite the newspaper’s prediction that defense witnesses would take up most of the second day, the Defense rested on Tuesday at 2 p.m., much sooner than expected.⁹⁵ After examination of the witnesses was completed, all four defendants made statements to the jury.⁹⁶ Defense attorney Steve Pace then addressed the jury. His statement was followed by Solicitor Hollis Fort, Hollis Fort Jr., and finally J. A. Hixon, the other attorney for the Defense, delivered the conclusion.⁹⁷ The jury began deliberating the evidence at 5:50 p.m. until they were dismissed by Judge Harper at 10:55 p.m. on December 19.⁹⁸

D. The Verdict

91 *Id.*

92 *Id.*

93 *Id.*

94 *Id.*

95 *Id.*

96 *Id.*

97 *Id.*

98 *Four Acquitted On Charge of Killing Negro*, *Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, Dec. 20, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

After over six hours of deliberation, the jury announced that they had a verdict on Wednesday December 20, at 9:45 a.m.⁹⁹ “A comparatively small crowd, consisting mostly of relatives of the defendants, heard the verdict.”¹⁰⁰ The four prominent white farmers were acquitted.¹⁰¹

That verdict left the case against B. B. Mills, the brother of two of the men who killed Thomas, still pending on the docket for subsequent trial. However, because the case against B.B. Mills was based on his alleged role in planning and ordering the death of Thomas, it was basically an ancillary criminal charge, which was dependent on the murder case brought against the other four defendants. Therefore, B.B. Mills’ case was *nolle prossed* when the jury acquitted the four other defendants in the murder case.¹⁰² The only official record of the trial that exists in Americus is a file that lists the jury members and their verdict.¹⁰³ The final news report of the trial and the murder of Henry Thomas was an article in the *Tri-County News*, which focused on the acquittal of the four white farmers.¹⁰⁴

IV. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WHITE ASSISTANCE

One of the big -- likely unanswerable -- questions in Henry Thomas’ case is why did a rural Georgia town put these five prominent white farmers, McKinley Jordan, Cliff Snider, Dave, Douglas and B. B. Mills, on trial for the murder of Thomas, a black farm hand. Jim Crow still

99 *Id.*

100 *Id.*

101 *Id.*

102 *Id.*

103 The State, vs. McKinley Jordan, Dave Mills, Cliff Snider and Douglas Mills & B. B. Mills, Dec. 20, 1933, at 1.

104 *Sumter Men Are Acquitted From Murder Charge*, *Tri-County News*, Dec. 22, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

reigned in the South.¹⁰⁵ Segregation permeated every facet of life.¹⁰⁶ The Great Depression had only heightened the tension between Blacks and whites,¹⁰⁷ with the number of lynchings in the United States rising to twenty-eight occurrences in 1933.¹⁰⁸ And yet, five prominent white farmers in Americus were put on trial for the murder of a black farm hand.

One possible explanation for the efforts to obtain justice in the Thomas murder case was the influence of Deputy Sheriff Walter Chappell. Henry Thomas had worked on Chappell's farm for five years.¹⁰⁹ Armstead Chappell, was in charge of the farm but it belonged to his father, Walter Chappell.¹¹⁰ Lou Bell Pope and Thomas Clark, the two black farm hands, had stopped Deputy Sheriff Chappell while he was driving down the highway and told him what had happened to Thomas.¹¹¹ They likely took this action because they felt comfortable enough to do so, and they felt that he could do something about it. Both Chappell and his son searched for Thomas for hours until eventually they found him shot dead in a car on the Mills' property. Deputy Sheriff Chappell did not hesitate to arrest Dave Mills on the spot.¹¹² Furthermore, he drove to McKinley Jordan's home, awoke him from sleep, and arrested him.¹¹³ Without Deputy

105 Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945, *Library of Congress*, <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/depwwii/race/>.

106 *Id.*

107 Joe W. Trotter, "Perspectives on Black Working-Class History and the Labor Movement Today," adapted from *From a Raw Deal to a New Deal* in the Young Oxford History of African Americans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

108 Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945, *Library of Congress*, <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/depwwii/race/>.

109 *Four White Men Held On Charge Of Shooting Young Negro To Death*, Americus Times-Recorder, Jul. 15, 1933, at 6 (Ga.).

110 *Id.* at 1.

111 *Id.*

112 *Id.*

113 *Id.* at 6.

Sheriff Chappell's persistence Thomas' body might have never been found, nor would any of the men been arrested in the following days.

Moreover, Prosecutor Hollis Fort, the prosecutor, chose to present evidence to a grand jury that eventually indicted the five men for murder. Again, Deputy Sheriff Chappell's likely close relationship to the prosecutor could have influenced Fort's actions. During trial, the two black farm hands, Pope and Clark, spoke in front of an all-white jury and the five defendants responsible for the death of their friend, testifying that the men had taken Thomas by gunpoint from the farm.¹¹⁴ It's likely that they likely felt brave and safe enough to do so because of the approving presence of their employer, Deputy Sheriff Chappell, who also testified against the defendants later that same day.

After the State's star witness, M. C. Miller, was accused of withholding facts,¹¹⁵ Deputy Sheriff Chappell and his son's testimony were most likely the only testimonies to carry weight with the jury. The jury deliberated for over six hours.¹¹⁶ After they were presented a detailed self-defense argument by the Defense attorneys, they probably would have reached their verdict much more quickly if Deputy Sheriff Chappell's influence and testimony against the four men he had arrested had not also affected them. In the end, [even though the all-white jury acquitted](#) the five prominent white farmers, the significance of Deputy Sheriff Chappell's involvement in every step of the investigation and subsequent murder trial cannot be understated.

114 *State Rests In Trial of Sumter Men*, Americus Times-Recorder, Dec. 19, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

115 *State's Witnesses Accused Of Holding Back Full Facts*, Thomasville Times-Enterprise, Dec. 19, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).

116 *Four Acquitted ~~On~~ Charge of Killing Negro*, Thomasville Times-Enterprise, Dec. 20, 1933, at 1 (Ga.).