



The Murder of Isadore Banks

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Isadore Banks, 59 years old and a prominent landowner, disappeared on June 4, 1954.¹ Banks' wife, Alice, last saw him as he left the house with the intention of paying his farmhands.² On or about June 5, 1954, Banks' truck was discovered in a wooded property just outside of Marion, Arkansas, by Carl Croom, a neighboring landowner.³ Banks' loaded shotgun and coat were still inside.⁴ Authorities found Banks' body, tied to a tree, mutilated, and burned beyond recognition.⁵ Banks had been drenched with fuel and burned from the knees up.⁶ A can of gasoline was found close to the body.⁷ The coroner, T.H. McGough, found no sign of robbery or struggle at the scene,⁸ indicating that the killing may have occurred elsewhere and the 300 pound body of Banks was likely carried by several people to the site.⁹ The coroner also reported that either a knife or firearm discharge left a hole in Banks' right side.¹⁰ Banks' murder came on the heels of a wave of lynchings in Vrendenburg and Birmingham, Alabama; Cleveland, Ohio; and Charleston, South Carolina.¹¹

Isadore Banks was born on July 15, 1895, a period of Arkansas history when violence against African-Americans was once again on the rise.¹² By 1900, African-Americans throughout Arkansas had been cut out of the political process.¹³ African-Americans were living in constant fear with lynching quickly becoming the "primary form of control of blacks."¹⁴ As historians explain, "[n]ot only did lynching reduce the desire of blacks to participate as equals in society, it served, as well, to indoctrinate whites. 'With each unpunished killing, with every unprosecuted outrage, whites learned that, as citizens, blacks could be treated with complete contempt.'"¹⁵ Jim Crow laws were in full effect during the early 1900s and "Arkansas whites had constructed a superstructure of racial dominance so strong that from the inside it all but seemed unchallengeable."¹⁶

In April 1917, the United States entered World War I. A year later, at age 22, Banks joined the Army and fought in World War I.¹⁷ After returning to Arkansas, Banks began work at a utility company laying lines and support poles, bringing electricity to the town of Marion, as well as surrounding communities.¹⁸

Unfortunately, little changed in Arkansas after WWI. In the summer of 1919, numerous "race riots broke out . . . as black troops came home to encounter the same racism that was now coupled with inflation and unemployment."¹⁹ Many African-American veterans were killed throughout Arkansas because they "were coming back from overseas and getting completely out

of hand.”²⁰ Realizing they were no closer to being treated as equals, African-Americans throughout Arkansas and all over the Delta region began to organize.²¹ After an altercation near the town of Elaine ended in the death of a white man, “a mob estimated to be between six hundred and a thousand whites armed with shotguns and rifles poured in to the Elaine area the next day” from surrounding Delta towns.²² They began to slaughter black men, women and children.²³ Troops sent by the governor to quell the massacre are thought to have aided in the slaughter.²⁴ The Elaine Race Massacre demonstrated that the tradition of white supremacy that had been in place since the time of slavery continued in full force. The return of the Ku Klux Klan to Arkansas,²⁵ in the 1920s, and then the Great Depression brought even more misery to the Delta region.²⁶

Despite these obstacles, Banks had become a prominent and respected leader, a Mason, and one of the wealthiest African-American landowners in this region of Arkansas, known for its racially violent past. Banks is reported to have owned over 1000 acres of land, which he farmed or leased to tenants,²⁷ and a number of businesses. Banks helped other black farmers with loans to buy seeds and farm equipment and supported the local black school with supplies.

A number of theories have emerged to explain the motive behind the murder. The first suggests that Banks had refused to sell his land to a number of white men who were angered by his repeated refusals and resorted to violence.²⁸ The second theory offers that Banks was renting land from a white woman and white farmers wanted that land and killed him to gain access to that land. A third theory echoes an often-cited premise behind brutal lynchings; Banks may have been romantically involved with a white woman and that relationship could not be tolerated and so he was killed.²⁹ Finally, it has been suggested that Banks had been involved in an altercation with a number of white men who propositioned his daughter and the murder occurred in response.

Little to no investigation was carried out by local law enforcement. The Grant Co-op Gin, run by a group of prominent African-Americans of Crittenden County including Banks, offered a reward of \$1000 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the perpetrators. No one came forward with any information, no arrests were made and no one was prosecuted in connection with this brutal murder.³⁰ L.C. Bates, a prominent civil rights advocate in Arkansas, and the local branch of the NAACP reached out to help in the investigation, but to no avail.³¹ Julian Fogleman, the city attorney for Marion in 1954, was asked in August 2010 about the

murder and its aftermath but could not recall whether a coroner's inquiry was even performed.³² Fogleman noted that no one ever came forward with any information and that was likely why no investigation was carried out.³³

The murder of Isadore Banks dealt a severe blow to the African-American community of Crittenden County. The case remains on the list of Civil Rights Era Cold Cases which are under review by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.³⁴ Nearly five decades after his death, Banks was given military honors in recognition of his service in WWI. His family continues to search for answers as to who perpetrated this brutal crime and why.

¹ *Chain Arkansas Farmer to Tree, Set Him Afire*, THE CHICAGO DEFENDER (National edition) (1921-1967), June 26, 1954, at 5 [hereinafter Chicago Defender]; *Chained to Tree, Burned to Death*, PITTSBURGH COURIER, June 19, 1954, at 1 [hereinafter Pittsburgh Courier] (Banks "had been missing from his home since June 5.").

² Chicago Defender.

³ *Negros Death is Believed Murder*, CRITTENDEN COUNTY TIMES, June 12, 1954, at 1 [hereinafter June 12 Crittenden County Times]; see also *On Murder of Marion Negro*, Unidentified newspaper from around the time of murder in 2007 FBI report [hereinafter FBI Article].

June 12 Crittenden County Times; FBI Article.

⁵ *Burned, Tied Body of a Negro is Found in Marion Vicinity*, ARKANSAS GAZETTE, June 9, 1954, at 1B [hereinafter Arkansas Gazette]; *Man's Body Chained to Tree, Burned*, ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT, June 9, 1954, at 11 [hereinafter Arkansas Democrat]; *Charred Body is Still a Mystery*, ARKANSAS STATE PRESS, June 18, 1954, at 1 [hereinafter Arkansas State Press]; *On Murder of Marion Negro*, Unidentified newspaper from around the time of murder in 2007 FBI report [hereinafter FBI Article].

⁶ Chicago Defender; Arkansas Gazette.

⁷ Arkansas State Press.

⁸ June 12 Crittenden County Times, Pittsburgh Courier, at 4; Chicago Defender, at 1.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ FBI Article.

¹¹ Pittsburgh Courier, at 4.

¹² GRIF STOCKLEY, *RULED BY RACE: BLACK/WHITE RELATIONS IN ARKANSAS FROM SLAVERY TO THE PRESENT* 130 (The University of Arkansas Press 2009).

¹³ *Id.* at 129.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.* at 130.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 143.

¹⁷ Wayne Drash, "50 years after he was chained and set afire, WWI hero is honored," CNN.com, April 12, 2010. Available at <http://www.cnn.com/2010/CRIME/04/06/isadore.banks.cold.case/index.html?iref=Articlesearch> target= (last accessed November 30, 2010). [Hereinafter CNN Article].

¹⁸ MARGARET ELIZABETH WOOLFOLK, *A HISTORY OF MARION* 48 (Margaret E. Woolfolk 1983); see also, CNN Article.

¹⁹ STOCKLEY, at 149.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.* at 160-161.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.* at 166-169.

²⁵ While this “new” Klan was “not nearly as violent as the old Klan, which terrorized blacks after the Civil War, it had more influence.” *Id.* at 189.

²⁶ African-Americans were disproportionately affected by loss of funding towards education and the increase in the practice of peonage that took place during this time period. *Id.* at 221.

²⁷ Chicago Defender.

²⁸ CNN Article; see also, Chicago Defender.

²⁹ Chicago Defender, at 1; see also CNN Article.

³⁰ *Offer Reward for Banks’ Murder*, CRITTENDEN COUNTY TIMES, June 19, 1954.

³¹ FBI Article; Arkansas State Press.

³² Interview with Julian Fogleman, Attorney at Law, in West Memphis, Ark. (Aug. 26, 2010).

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³⁴ For general information on the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Civil Rights Cold Case Initiative, see http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2010/march/coldcase_030210/civil-rights-era-murders-joint-initiative-yields-resultsthe (last accessed November 23, 2010). See also, Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division homepage <http://www.justice.gov/crt/> (last accessed November 23, 2010).