

Jimmie Wade

Law Enforcement Working for Private Citizens in Tennessee



Awaly Diallo, Pennsylvania State University '20
Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Clinic
July 26, 2018

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION.....	3
II. LYNCHINGS.....	5
III. THE VICTIM, JIMMIE WADE.....	6
IV. THE INVESTIGATION.....	8
V. CONFLICTING NARRATIVES.....	9
VI. CONCLUSION.....	13

I. INTRODUCTION

Covington, a central city in the Tipton County, is located in the western part of Tennessee with a population of about 9,000.¹ This small city was flipped upside down on the night of Jimmie Wade's lynching. The death of Jimmie Wade has different narratives that often conflict at different avenues. In the summer of 1947, Jimmie Wade's family was beginning to build their own home when his life was sadly shortened.² On the evening of June 29, 1947, Jimmie Wade was sitting outside with his son, Jimmie Wade Jr., and others listening to the church service across the street from his home.³ A car pulled up in front of him with four men: City Marshal Jim T. Scott, Deputy Marshal Joe Oscar Hill, the grocery store owner of Strickland grocery on the corner of West Liberty and Haynie Street⁴, Mr. Strickland, and a fourth unknown man.⁵ Wade was then told to get in the car and never returned back to his family that night.⁶

It was later reported to the community and the NAACP Memphis chapter that Jimmie Wade had been shot four times and killed, according to the *Memphis Press Scimitar* newspaper.⁷ The newspaper reported that it was due to the allegations that Jimmie Wade pulled a knife on the City Marshal Scott and attempted to reach for the Marshal's gun when the City Marshal apprehended him for allegedly having relations

¹ United States Census Bureau. (2017). *Quick Facts, Covington City, Tennessee, Population Estimates* [Data file] Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/covingtoncitytennessee,tiptoncountytennessee/PST045217>

² Porteous, C. (1947, July 18). Father of Eight Shot by Marshal. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.

³ Telephone Interview with Mary Stewart (July 19 2018)

⁴ Telephone Interview with Covington Historian (July 17 2018)

⁵ Bodenner, Chris. (April 2016). Sometimes the South Really Is Something Out of a Flannery O'Connor Story. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/04/sometimes-the-south-really-is-something-out-of-a-flannery-oconnor-story/478656/>

⁶ Telephone Interview with Mary Stewart (July 19 2018)

⁷ NAACP Records Box II B117, Folder 18. Legal File. Police Brutality

with a white woman.⁸ There was a legal hearing before Judge R. H. Erwin, where he then “dismissed the case with a verdict of justifiable homicide.”⁹ All narratives in the media coverage and oral histories from families converge at this intersection of facts. The narratives differ on how Jimmie Wade was killed and the reason for his death. This conflict is pertinent in retrospect to the question of: is this a case of lynching?

The five primary narratives that undertake Wade’s death are two newspapers, *The Covington Leader* and the *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, the largest city next to Tipton County. *The Covington Leader*, a white newspaper reported a short synopsis of the incident while the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* provided a fuller account of the allegations and used character evidence to highlight the good reputation, Jimmie Wade had in Covington.¹⁰ The other three narratives come from the research done by a family member of the victim, a family member of the perpetrator, and the local historian of Covington. The granddaughter of Jimmie Wade, Mary Stewart recounted her family’s understanding in her research of how and why her grandfather, Jimmie Wade was murdered.¹¹ Laban Carrick Hill, the grandson of Deputy Marshal Hill, who allegedly involved in the murder of Jimmie Wade, narrates his knowledge of Jimmie Wade’s murder in an article in *The Atlantic*.¹² Hill recounted the gruesome details about how Jimmie Wade was murdered and further claimed that Jimmie Wade was not just shot, but also beaten.¹³ Hill suggested

⁸ *Bullet Ends Life of Fighting Negro*, *The Covington Leader*, 1947

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Porteous, C. (1947, July 18). Father of Eight Shot by Marshal. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.

¹¹ Telephone Interview with Mary Stewart (July 19 2018)

¹² Bodenner, Chris. (April 2016). Sometimes the South Really Is Something Out of a Flannery O’Connor Story. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/04/sometimes-the-south-really-is-something-out-of-a-flannery-oconnor-story/478656/>

¹³ *Ibid.*

the racial climate in Covington had, ultimately led up to that moment.¹⁴ The last source of information comes from the local historian, who has been collecting records of the city of Covington and recalled his understanding from interviews and discussions with both the black and white communities in Covington.¹⁵

This essay will examine the conflicting narratives and reports on the Jimmie Wade, the role of law enforcement in the system of institutional racism when they serve private citizens, and why this case, originally labeled as a case of police brutality, should be considered a lynching.

II. LYNCHING

Lynching has been an important aspect of truly understanding the fabric of the United States. This act of violence created a form of social control for many African Americans during the period of Reconstruction and the following years.¹⁶ Many families were fearful for their lives and for their jobs, therefore few spoke of the lynchings and were silenced for centuries.¹⁷ The waves of lynchings were heavily populated in the states of the confederacy; even Tennessee was ranked sixth in the nation for the number of lynchings.¹⁸ According to the Tennessee Historical Society, lynch mobs in Tennessee were responsible for the death of 177 African Americans between 1882-1930.¹⁹ Despite the fact that Tennessee was one of three states in 1897 to enact the anti-lynching law,

¹⁴ Bodenner, Chris. (April 2016). Sometimes the South Really Is Something Out of a Flannery O'Connor Story. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/04/sometimes-the-south-really-is-something-out-of-a-flannery-oconnor-story/478656/>

¹⁵ Telephone Interview with Covington Historian (July 17 2018)

¹⁶ Bennett, Kathy. (2017) Lynching. In *Tennessee Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/lynching/>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

which made this act of violence a felony crime, the lynchings persisted for many years following.²⁰ In fact, the last recorded lynching in Tennessee occurred in Haywood County in 1940.²¹ The victim was Elbert Williams after attempting to register to vote.²²

The NAACP created a lynching profile to magnify and describe what qualified as a lynching.²³ This profile expanded the definition of a lynching. It consisted of four elements:

1. Evidence that person was killed.
2. The victim met death illegally.
3. A group of three or more persons participated in the killing; and,
4. The group acted under the pretext of service to justice or tradition.²⁴

The NAACP's lynching profile provided an avenue for scholars and activists to label murders that were not necessarily spectacle events. In reflection of the murder of Jimmie Wade, it raises a question about whether the reason and how he was killed measure up to the components of the lynching profile.

III. THE VICTIM, JIMMIE WADE

Jimmie Wade was born in Covington, Tennessee to Hilary Wade and Lou Williams on December 25, 1909.²⁵ He married Lucille Wade and went on to have thirteen children, two of which were from a previous relationship and two that passed away shortly after their birth.²⁶ Wade completed his education up to sixth grade and then got a

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Death Certificate for Jimmie Wade, 29 July. 1947, File No. 16309, Tennessee Department of Public Health.

²⁶ Telephone Interview with Mary Stewart (July 19 2018)

job at the Millington naval base, which he commuted to daily.²⁷ Jimmie Wade and Lucille Wade lived on 111 Haynie Street, across the street from the church that they usually attended.²⁸ According to Jimmie Wade’s neighbors, Wade was “good, hardworking man” and that he never got into any trouble.²⁹ In 1947, Jimmie Wade was 38 years old and beginning to build a new home for his family before his death.³⁰

On the summer night of June 29, 1947, Jimmie Wade was sitting outside of the church service at the Covington Church of God in Christ with his son, Jimmie Wade Jr., listening to the sermon with other African American families.³¹ Allegedly, a black sedan pulled up in front of him and his son with four men in the car.³² The city marshal told him to get to in the car and drove off with Jimmie Wade; his family never saw him again.³³ The county undertaker, William Barlow of Barlow Funeral Homes was called to pick up a body in a field but was not told who the victim was. When he arrived at the scene, he found that it was the body of Jimmie Wade’s, who happened to be his friend and neighbor.³⁴ William Barlow called Lucille Wade, Jimmie’s wife to come view the body. He told Lucille Wade, as they would call her that her husband had been shot in the heart and that he did not suffer. The undertaker gave Mrs. Wade, the remnants of Mr. Wade’s wallet that had been in his chest pocket, known by the presence of residue from his wallet

²⁷ Porteous, C. (1947, July 18). Father of Eight Shot by Marshal. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.

²⁸ Death Certificate for Jimmie Wade, 29 July. 1947, File No. 16309, Tennessee Department of Public Health.

²⁹ Porteous, C. (1947, July 18). Father of Eight Shot by Marshal. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Bodenner, Chris. (April 2016). Sometimes the South Really Is Something Out of a Flannery O’Connor Story. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/04/sometimes-the-south-really-is-something-out-of-a-flannery-oconnor-story/478656/>

³² Ibid.

³³ Porteous, C. (1947, July 18). Father of Eight Shot by Marshal. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.

³⁴ Ibid.

in the gunshot wound.³⁵ Yet, Mr. Barlow withheld information about the state of Jimmie Wade's body as a way of showing compassion to the wife of his friend.³⁶ The undertaker chose not to tell Mrs. Wade that Jimmie Wade's body had been brutalized and that his head had been crushed.³⁷ The county coroner, Doc Ellison, conducted an autopsy and declared the death by four gunshots. The death certificate, it indicated the cause of death was from having been "shot" and was due to Wade having been "shot dead when I saw him".³⁸

III. THE INVESTIGATION

Following Wade's death, there was a hearing later on before Judge R. H. Erwin. The City Marshal, Jim T. Scott gave an account to the court on why the murder was in self-defense. He claimed that Jimmie Wade pulled a pocketknife on him "and suddenly attacked him and the husband, Mr. Strickland".³⁹

This was all due to the accusations against Jimmie Wade for supposedly writing letters to a white woman. The white woman was the wife of Mr. Strickland, storeowner of Strickland grocery store near the Wade's home. The Covington Sheriff Charlie Forbess said that there was an investigation on the murder and the city marshal claimed that he was in possession of several letters that contained poor English.⁴⁰ It was said that the letters indicated that Jimmie Wade wanted the white woman to meet him in a specific place. City marshal, Jim T. Scott claimed that he saw Jimmie Wade in the spot that was

³⁵ Telephone Interview with Mary Stewart (July 19 2018)

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Death Certificate for Jimmie Wade, 29 July. 1947, File No. 16309, Tennessee Department of Public Health.

³⁹ Porteous, C. (1947, July 18). Father of Eight Shot by Marshal. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.

⁴⁰ *Bullet Ends Life of Fighting Negro*, The Covington Leader, 1947

indicated in the letter and watched him for several hours before he apprehended Jimmie Wade. It was alleged that Jimmie Wade admitted to the penmanship of the letters.⁴¹ The city marshal said that he and the husband of the woman picked up Wade. They reported that they brought him to the home of the white woman and her husband on Murphy Lane in Burlison, a town in Tipton County.⁴² It was there that Jimmie Wade supposedly pulled out a knife on the city marshal and husband of the woman and then the city marshal said he shot Jimmie Wade four times.⁴³ Judge R. H. Erwin later dismissed the case with a verdict of justifiable homicide and no legal matter followed.⁴⁴

The sister of Jimmie Wade, Cloria Alston, reported to the NAACP Memphis chapter of the murder of her brother. She claimed that her brother was actually lynched and that none of the facts in the investigation was correct.⁴⁵ The NAACP Memphis chapter requested the national headquarters to send a private investigator and special counsel to Covington in order to investigate the murder of Jimmie Wade without bias.⁴⁶ The national headquarters was not able to send any assistance and said that it was a “routine police brutality action”.⁴⁷

IV. CONFLICTING NARRATIVES

The divergence of facts on Jimmie Wade’s murder lands on the junction of exactly how Jimmie Wade was murdered and the reason he was murdered that night. The

⁴¹ Porteous, C. (1947, July 18). Father of Eight Shot by Marshal. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Porteous, C. (1947, July 18). Father of Eight Shot by Marshal. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.

⁴⁴

⁴⁵ NAACP Records Box II B117, Folder 18. Legal File. Police Brutality

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

compilation of facts materialized from five primary sources. The two newspaper outlets, *The Covington Leader* and the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* originally covered the story in 1947. These two written documents describe the circulating narrative from the law enforcement in Covington, following the investigation. Covington's local historian and the family research of the victim and the perpetrator supplement the remaining parts of the story.

The Covington Leader reported in a short story titled *Bullets End Life of Fighting Negro* that Jimmie Wade was writing letters to a white woman near Covington for a few months.⁴⁸ The newspaper named the City Marshal Jim T. Scott as the only law enforcement responsible for the death of Jimmie Wade.⁴⁹ The small story in the newspaper only acknowledges the allegations of the victim penning letters to a white woman and lacked much detail on the investigation.⁵⁰ The other newspaper, *Memphis Press-Scimitar* followed a separate track of unfolding what may have happened to Jimmie Wade⁵¹. This article provides a fuller account on the details surrounding the allegations and the aftermath.⁵² Nevertheless, the newspaper does not pursue other possible causes for the death and follows the investigation initiated by the Covington Sheriff Charlie Forbess.⁵³ It does provide a revealing detail that the Covington newspaper failed to provide. "Wade...was picked up in a car outside...Marshal Scott said he took Wade to a house on Murphy Lane, just outside of Covington, where the white woman

⁴⁸ *Bullet Ends Life of Fighting Negro*, *The Covington Leader*, 1947

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Porteous, C. (1947, July 18). Father of Eight Shot by Marshal. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

and her husband lived.”⁵⁴ The City Marshal did not bring Jimmie Wade back to the police station; instead he brought him to the home of the alleged.⁵⁵ The newspaper also gathered character evidence from several people around the Covington community on behalf on Jimmie Wade. All of the testimonies attested to Jimmie Wade’s good reputation around his community and church.⁵⁶ “Elder H.C. Foster, pastor of the church...said he had known Wade for 21 years and ‘he was a good hardworking Negro.’”⁵⁷ Another detail was provided that allowed for more understanding on the truth behind the murder.⁵⁸ The undertaker, William Barlow was interviewed and he explained that Jimmie Wade was indeed shot yet the victim’s head was caved in and that he did not believe it came from a bullet.⁵⁹

Over six decades later, a launch of research was done by a grandson of Joe Oscar Hill, the deputy marshal involved in the murder of Jimmie Wade.⁶⁰ He visited Covington and his family in late spring of 2008, to uncover the truth about his grandfather’s involvement in the lynching.⁶¹ *Sometimes the South Really Is Something Out of a Flannery O’Connor Story*; an article in *The Atlantic*, Laban Carrick Hill expressed his pain and shame of his family’s history in Covington.⁶² “In 1949, when my grandfather was a deputy marshal in Covington, he, the town marshal, a store owner, and another man seized an African American father, Jimmy Wade...they took him to the field behind

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Porteous, C. (1947, July 18). Father of Eight Shot by Marshal. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.

⁶⁰ Bodenner, Chris. (April 2016). Sometimes the South Really Is Something Out of a Flannery O’Connor Story. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/04/sometimes-the-south-really-is-something-out-of-a-flannery-oconnor-story/478656/>

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

the store owner's house, castrated him, shoved his privates into his mouth, dragged him behind the car by a rope. When that didn't kill him, they shot him 20 times.”⁶³ Mr. Hill spoke with the county coroner, Doc Ellison, who was still alive at that time and he verified that Jimmie Wade shot at least 20 times but did not reveal any more details. ⁶⁴ Mr. Hill addressed the reason for Jimmie Wade's death in his article and they followed similar accusations yet Mr. Hill said that Jimmie Wade was attempting to rape the wife of Mr. Strickland.⁶⁵ His research on the murder of Jimmie Wade produced elements to the story that had not been revealed in the newspaper.

Laban Carrick Hill was not the only family member committed to finding the truth of the murder of Jimmie Wade.⁶⁶ Mary Stewart, the granddaughter of Jimmie Wade had been working for years on her family research. She compiled many narratives to understand the life and unfortunate death of her grandfather. Her grandmother, Lucille Wade, was only made aware that her husband, Jimmie Wade, was shot in the heart and that he did not suffer.⁶⁷ This was the story that she went on to tell her children and what was carried across the generations. Yet, Mary Stewart began to dig up stories that alluded to details about Jimmie Wade being beat and lynched in addition to the shooting.⁶⁸ These brutal accounts of how her grandfather, Jimmie Wade was killed began to ring true when she spoke with other family members and began to reflect on the social-political context of the South during that time period.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Telephone Interview with Mary Stewart (July 19 2018)

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

She became aware of the leading accusations of writing letters to a white woman in town against her grandfather. Yet her uncles and only two sons of Jimmie Wade, Jimmie Wade Jr., and Leاون Wade, spoke of a contrasting narrative of why Jimmie Wade was actually killed.⁶⁹ She first spoke with Jimmie Wade Jr., and said “He knew about the newspaper accounts and everything but when I asked him if he knew of anything that happened or was he really trying to get with a white woman and he said that’s not the truth. He said he was killed over some meat...he was killed over some bad meat. He said Mr. Strickland was trying to sell daddy some pork chops and they were almost spoiled...he was arguing with the man that he could not buy spoiled meat for his family.”⁷⁰ Mary Stewart stated that she had also spoken with her uncle Leاون Wade, briefly before his passing of cancer.⁷¹ He did not know that she had spoken to his brother about this different account and he gave the same narrative, “it was almost word for word”.⁷² She believed that this was the correct narrative to her grandfather’s death and that it correlated with the details of being beat and lynched.⁷³ Her conclusion came from a deep analysis of lynching across the United States and the justifications for them.⁷⁴

The local historian in Covington also reflected on his knowledge about the murder of Jimmie Wade, saying that Jimmie Wade was in fact lynched and found in a field in Covington.⁷⁵ “He was dragged down the street, which was gravel at the time, down Haynie Street and he was hung on a farm over there...and today that is still farmland.”⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Telephone Interview with Covington Historian (July 17 2018)

He said that Jimmie Wade was eventually cut down and he found out how Jimmie Wade's body was found from the county coroner, Doc Ellison.⁷⁷ "The county coroner told me that he was barely recognizable at the time." the local historian recounted.⁷⁸ The historian indicated based off of his recollection, that the cause for the lynching was following claims of Jimmie Wade writing letters to the wife of Mr. Strickland.⁷⁹ He did not understand why there was such little media coverage and on the lynching since Covington was not a racially tense city.⁸⁰ The community of Covington does not speak of the lynching and many do not remember the night.

V. CONCLUSION

The story of Jimmie Wade engenders two common themes that are not mutually exclusive. The question of whether this murder was in fact a lynching and an analysis on the role of law enforcement in this case. The narratives given in the newspapers and family history tell an account of omitting facts in favor of the audience and to sustain the power imbalance in the community.⁸¹ The newspapers failed to relay the additional grim facts about Jimmie Wade being beat and lynched before he was shot, as a means of covering the tracks for law enforcement.⁸² The body of details favors the narrative of lynchings in the United States.⁸³ The accusations of having relations with a white woman or an argument that transpired in the grocery store have historically been used for

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

justifications for the death of African Americans.⁸⁴ The role of law enforcement in upholding white supremacy took on a new shape. The role is to protect all citizens of the communities that they serve, yet, in this instance the city and deputy marshal disregarded the safety and life of an African American to serve a private citizen. It muddles the line of who are the police in the communities. The true story of how and why Jimmie Wade was murdered is not known, but there is an understanding on the implications that culminated his death.

⁸⁴ Ibid.