

The Irwinton Story

July 1949

THE first lynching of 1949 is a classic example of the failure of law and order in a small community. From its beginning in a Negro cafe to its apparent end two weeks later when a grand jury failed to indict two suspects, the story is a sordid one. Many of the details, as they were printed in the newspapers, came from the sheriff of Wilkinson County, who played a large, though ignominious role in the affair. The remarks attributed to the sheriff and other local persons illustrate better than any amount of description the attitudes which make lynching possible.

According to the sheriff, on Sunday evening, May 29, he was summoned to a Negro night club near Irwinton, Georgia, to investigate a disturbance. Caleb Hill, Jr., a 28-year-old Negro chalk miner, was charged with having stabbed another Negro man. When he attempted to arrest Hill, the sheriff said, the man struggled with him, seized his gun, and fired at him. The sheriff was not hit, but in the confusion his gun was lost.

Finally, Hill was safely deposited in the Irwinton jail, which consists of several cells on the second floor of the sheriff's house. After locking up his prisoner, the sheriff set out to find his lost pistol. By his own admission, he left the keys to the jail on a table in the living room. (*Later the sheriff's wife said: That's nothing; he has been leaving them there for years.*) Moreover, he left the front door open. (*Said the sheriff: "If I lock it the lock sticks."*) He was gone two-and-one-half hours, and when he returned he "went straight to bed" without looking in on his prisoner.

The sheriff reported that he knew nothing further until the following morning at 7 A. M., when he was notified that the body of a Negro man had been found near Irwinton. (*Recounted the sheriff: "I thought, Could it be they had come and got my prisoner? I ran upstairs and, sure enough, Hill was gone."*) The dead man was, sure enough, Caleb Hill, Jr. He had been shot three times in the head and body and left face down by the side of a road. The sheriff several times made the statement that he had no idea when he left the jail that a lynching threatened—though, later, he was able to figure out a motive. (*"The trouble was a report had got around that the Negro had killed me. The men were pretty reiled up and when they didn't find me at home, they thought maybe I was dead."*)

Hill had not been alone in his cell when his lynchers came for him. A Negro man who had shared the cell testified at the inquest that two white men entered and said to Hill, "Come on, let's go." According to the witness, Hill said nothing, but went along without protest. The witness said he did not recognize the two

white men. (*Asked the coroner: "You probably couldn't identify the men if you saw them again, could you?" Replied the witness: "No, sir."*)

A coroner's jury ruled that Hill had come to his death by gunshot wounds, "being shot through the head by hands unknown." Newsmen asked the coroner if he was planning an autopsy to recover the bullets and he first answered no. ("*No need," he said, "since I don't have a gun to match the bullet with, or some suspects."*) Later he changed his mind and the bullets were recovered.

At this point, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation entered the case to assist the sheriff. After several days of investigation, the GBI agents arrested two white men of nearby McIntyre, Georgia, on suspicion of the killing. (One of the accused chanced to be a nephew of the sheriff.) The GBI spokesman declared that he was "sure" he had enough evidence to obtain indictments. A grand jury of twenty-three men, all white, was convened to hear the evidence. After six hours of testimony, the jury ruled that there was not enough evidence to bring anyone to trial, and the two suspects were dismissed.

There was an air of finality, not to say relief, about the grand jury's findings. The county solicitor, whose job it had been to present the evidence, promptly announced that the investigation had removed "any question of doubt" about the sheriff's blame in the affair. ("*Most Georgia sheriffs," he added, "would have shot the Negro instead of taking him to jail."*)

Unfortunately there was little evidence of any strong feeling among local white residents—except for resentment at the "fuss" that was being made over the killing of a Negro. Most of the comment centered around the alleged facts that Hill was a "bad" Negro and that he had been involved in illicit liquor dealings—both completely irrelevant as justification for lynching. In a "news" story, the *Wilkinson County News* said: "Citizens of this section are generally very critical of the manner in which the fatal shooting of Hill was handled by the newspapers. . . . They cited alleged half-truths, insinuations, and innuendos printed in the daily papers, reflecting unfavorably on the citizens of Wilkinson County."

As a matter of fact, one leading Georgia editor charged that irresponsible and inflammatory journalism in Wilkinson County itself had probably done much to create a climate for lynching. Certainly one editorial about the news handling of Hill's lynching, also from the *Wilkinson County News*, lent strength to the charge. The editorial concluded: "Maybe the editors and writers will eventually get the medals they so much seem to crave from the carpetbaggers, scalawags and blacks of New York. And maybe some of these Georgia editors will yet get the rancid tar and dusty feathers they so much deserve for being traitors to both white and black."

At the end of 1948, Georgia had an unbroken record of twenty-five unpunished lynchings of Negroes since 1930. If the editorial quoted above is representative of local attitudes, the Wilkinson County lynching will undoubtedly stand as number twenty-six.