

Blues Alley
Special Rabbit Hole Edition
"Body & Soul - Part 2"
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Nashville TN

RECAP

Previously on this Rabbit Hole Edition of Blues Alley...

On the afternoon of May 22nd, 1917, five years before the birth of the Grand Ole Opry, two hundred miles east, in Nashville, W.C. Handy approached a crowd of black men on Beale, only to find them gathered around a severed head.

A few weeks earlier - on the morning of April 30, a fifteen year old girl named Antoinette Rappel, left for school and never came home again.

Her decapitated body was found by her uncle Will Wilfong, in the brush near the long bridge crossing the Wolf River on Macon Road.

In search of the doer, Shelby County Sheriff, Mike Tate, rounded up the usual suspects.

All of them black.

First he accused Dan Armstrong of the killing. But Armstrong, had an alibi.

With the city getting restless for a result, Tate's focus landed on El Person, a black wood cutter, who lived in the area of the murder.

Unfortunately, the Sheriff, had no evidence.

Then all of a sudden, authorities announced a midnight confession, one some speculated had been beaten out of El Person. It certainly didn't sound like the words of an itinerate woodcutter.

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News of this confession, got the city's blood up, and a vigilante mob surrounded the jail demanding Person be handed over to them. Fortunately - Sheriff Tate had foreseen the potential, and moved Person to the Nashville jail - just ahead of the posse.

A few day's later, the mob confronted Tate, as he stepped off a train in Arlington Tennessee, just west of Memphis.

Denying that he had Person in his custody, Tate hopped into a waiting car and sped away, the posse in hot pursuit.

And that's when the Sheriff up and vanished.

Find out what happened next, on this rabbit hole edition of Blues Alley.

Body and Soul, Part II

On Thursday the 17th of May, the press reported that Sheriff Tate and his deputies were last seen Wednesday near Rossville, TN, but by weeks end - no one had heard from the Sheriff in days.

Word was spreading that Sheriff Tate had been taken by the mob, and was being forced to sign an order releasing Person into their custody.

Two of the deputies who had been with Tate returned, but remained mute about the whereabouts of their boss.

By the time the evening paper came out, the missing Sheriff was the biggest mystery in Memphis.

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With Tate AWOL, the mob had sent men to the Nashville jail, where they learned that Person had been moved to Springfield, TN about thirty miles north. So they went there... only to discover that Person had already been moved back to Nashville, where the jail was now guarded by state troops.

Law enforcement remained - just barely - a step ahead of the lynch mob.

By Friday morning May 18th, Tate was still missing, and the deputies who'd been with him during the car chase remained silent.

The entire city feared the worst.

Then at 11:30 AM Sheriff Tate walked into the Memphis courthouse, and revealed the mystery.

He had been in Mississippi, hunting for a convict named John Revinsky, who had escaped the Shelby County jail.

Tate's clandestine machinations, had only made the mob's fury grow more feverish.

Rumors began to appear in the press of a "strange, tall, square shouldered" klan leader, who had hundreds of "personally selected," men eager to follow his command.

According to sources of the Memphis Press Scimitar, the mysterious man was "known to have established a system of communication by which the farthest outpost can be reached in a few minutes time.

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As this 200 mile wide attempt to checkmate authorities unfolded across half the state, Memphis judges appealed to Tennessee Governor Thomas Rye - for additional men to protect their prisoner.

The plea went unanswered.

While there was little hope of a fair and impartial trial for a black man accused of the rape and murder of a white girl in Jim Crow Memphis, judges were just trying to ensure that Person would get a trial at all - for appearance sake if nothing else!

After a few days respite, the Memphis mob came back to life, when word spread that Person would have to return to town for his court date. They once again began stopping every car and train entering the county from the north and east.

As the new term of criminal court opened, authorities decided to quell the blood lust, and have the arraignment and trial on the same day - instead of the normal three day wait for the defense to prepare it's case.

The schedule set, Sheriff Mike Tate issued an order to have Person returned from Nashville. A pair of Deputies, Wilroy and Thomas, were charged with delivering the accused safely to the magistrate.

Knowing the mob had locked down all the roads approaching Memphis from the north and east, Deputies left Nashville at 4:00 am Monday morning May 21st, taking Person by train to Birmingham, Alabama - transferring there to the Frisco mail, hoping to fool the mob by approaching Memphis from the south.

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But the plan leaked - the klan leader clearly had soldiers among the police.

About 2:30 in the afternoon the mob swarmed the depot in Holly Springs, Mississippi, capturing several Frisco passenger trains, but El Person was no where to be found.

Not wanting anything to happen in his hometown of Holly Springs, Mississippi, Marshall County Sheriff Dancey - passed the buck - steering the mob to a neighboring town.

When deputies aboard the mail train with Person arrived in Potts Camp, Mississippi they found a waiting telegram warning them that the posse was headed their direction, and suggesting they take Person off the train and secure him in the in Potts Camp jail.

Back in Memphis trial procedures had begun. Every public defender appointed to represent Person tried to riggle out of the job, one claiming to have personally found and presented evidence in the case, creating a conflict of interest.

In Potts Camp, moving the prisoner to the local jail proved to be a mistake.

The overpowering mob needed little time to seize El Person from Deputies, and the local Marshal.

According to the account in the Press Scimitar - Deputies barely got Person to the waiting car, before the mob got him.

At about eight PM a parade of fifteen or so - fast automobiles headed northwest to Memphis - with Person in their custody.

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News of the capture flashed across telephone and telegraph lines to all the surrounding counties.

The morning paper claimed that the mob had known the details of every movement by police since they left Nashville at four AM.

By 9PM - the car carrying El Person still headed towards Memphis a crowd gathered near the murder scene along Macon Road. The Press Scimitar reported that thousands were gathered by three PM on Monday - several hours before Person was captured.

Cars were backed up for a mile along either side of the long bridge.

Then about 11:15 Monday night, word came that Person wouldn't be arriving until the next morning. A sudden thunderstorm, had made the largely dirt roads in Mississippi impassable.

While the mob was waylaid by the storm, an interrogation was under way, to determine if El Person had accomplices. It was starting to look like one lynching wouldn't be enough to satisfy this bunch.

In one of the most macabre events to ever occur in Memphis - or anyplace else for that matter - the front page of Tuesday morning's Commercial Appeal, carried multiple headlines reading...

"Mob Captures Slayer of Rappel Girl

El Persons to be lynched near scene of murder.

May resort to burning - and

Armed Force is growing."

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Beneath their own banner headline, the evening Press Scimitar printed a list called "Lynch Bulletins", describing trucks of soft drinks doing "land office business."

There were vendors selling sandwiches and chewing gum.

Police and traffic officers maintained "order," so as to demonstrate that Judge Lynch, could carry out the well organized execution, at the hand of what they had begun referring to as the "invisible government in charge of this case."

By 8 Am the crowd was estimated at between five and seven thousand.

Pockets of disturbance broke out and several shots were fired. The secret leader ordered his lieutenants to confiscate any weapons, and "a considerable number of shotguns and revolvers were gathered in."

The invisible government clearly didn't want anyone to murder El Person before they could complete their sadistic show.

Men with axes cleared away the underbrush so more spectators could view the scene.

And then the car bearing El Person arrived.

Sitting in a separate car, with a full view of what was about to happen, Antoinette Rappel's mother, Minnie Woods, passed sentence for the government of the unseen hand.

Woods thanked the crowd for working on her behalf, asking them to "make him suffer ten times as much as he made my little girl suffer."

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A man the press called the "master of ceremonies," shouted out what he claimed was El Person's dying declaration... relaying to the crowd...

"He says he knows he's about to die and what he's about to confess is true. He says Dan Armstrong planned the murder and struck the first blow. He admits that he cut off the little girl's head, and says the Dummy is implicated."

He then asked Minnie Woods what she wanted done with the other men Person had supposedly just identified. She replied, "If they're guilty, let them suffer death too!"

A chant began to grow throughout the crowd, calling for the lynching of Armstrong and Ford.

A large man called "Brother Royal," said to be a minister stepped up and momentarily quietened the cheers, calling - "It's been suggested that a prayer be offered, but I am opposed to that, for he didn't give the little lady any chance for prayer."

The crowd's mantra rose again. This time to a fevered pitch.

And with that, the sentence was carried out.

El Person was tied to a log, a hundred yards from where Antoinette Rappel's body had been found, and burned alive.

A front page headline the next morning read - "Thousands Cheered When Negro Burned," and called it "an execution without parallel in the history of the south. The approximate hour and place of the lynching were advertised widely," adding that the forces of law and order dared not interfere.

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It was just after noon on Tuesday, May 22nd.

El Person was dead.

But, the vigilante mob had only completed act one - their gruesome intentions weren't over yet.

Citing the last minute confession of Person, a hundred or so members of the posse set out to capture Dan Armstrong and Dewitt Ford.

By the Press Scimitar's afternoon deadline, Ford had been taken by the vigilantes.

A two inch headline decried "Mob holds "Dummy," Seeks Armstrong, Crowds awaiting further lynchings"

Memphis had gone insane.

The mob had decided not to immediately lynch Ford - choosing to wait until they had Armstrong in custody too.

According to press accounts, a gun was shot from Dewitt Ford's hands as he (was) taken, bound in chains and kept in a garage near National Cemetery.

Within hours, they had Dan Armstrong - captured from the home of a relative, disproving rumors that he had defied the mob at his cabin.

It's unclear what happened next, or why, but by Wednesday morning May 23rd, leaders of the "invisible government of the unseen hand," had miraculously determined that Dewitt Ford and Dan Armstrong were innocent.

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They told reporters:

"Committees of prominent citizens of the Macon Road community, made a thorough investigation of the charges against the men, and found by what they consider absolute proof, that neither was considered in any way with the girls murder."

A public appeal from the Attorney General - insisting to all "Law abiding citizens that he could prove Armstrong was innocent," may have been a factor.

The "trial" of Armstrong and Ford, by the invisible government - also revealed, that during the overnight interrogation on the road from Mississippi, a member of the mob had held a shotgun in Person's face threatening to shoot him if he didn't tell the truth - and at that time - Person insisted he had acted alone.

If that's true though, someone was lying as he supposedly "confessed" moments before his death.

That evidence in hand though - was enough. It broke the spell and the vigilante government brought the curtain down on their sadistic theatrical production.

By dark both Armstrong and Ford had been released.

Armstrong immediately vanished.

Dewitt Ford went to Memphis and sought by using his sign language to be taken into protective custody.

Memphis police refused.

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The next day reports began to circulate that members of the crowd had, shortly after the fire, stampeded the scene to gather souvenirs from Person's body.

A local barber, Tony Schiro, was arrested for having part of El Person on exhibit in his shop.

Within an hour, of the lynching Person's head was tossed into a crowd of black men on Beale Street.

A photo of the severed head was made into post cards and circulated around the Memphis tenderloin and ultimately around the nation, as a threat - reminding the black community to stay in their proper place.

As news of the lynching spread throughout the nation it was decried as one of the greatest travesties of justice in American history.

James Weldon Johnson President of the NAACP visited the spot where Persons had been lynched.

After his visit to Memphis, Johnson wrote, "I tried to balance the sufferings of the miserable victim against the moral degradation of Memphis, and the truth flashed over me that in large measure the race question involves the saving of black America's body and white America's soul."

In the end, the events surrounding the murders of Antoinette Rappel and El Person raise more question than they answered.

That Antoinette Rappel's death was a travesty against humanity - there's no question.

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Yet no one ever got the chance to speak on her behalf - because there was no trial.

A century later, we only know her in relation to the lynching.

The voice of Antoinette Rappel is lost to history, except for a physical description in the press, that she wanted to join the Red Cross, and died an horrific death.

We know little more about El Person. If he was guilty, the actions of the mob still aren't excused. Vigilante justice doesn't support law enforcement, it in fact, disrespects the rule of law.

But, what if Detectives Brunner and Hoyle were right and the killer was a white man who knew the young woman? Could Rappel's family have gone to church, or lived next door to the real killer, possibly for decades?

What if El Person's dying declaration was the literal truth? Then Dan Armstrong and Dewitt Ford got away with murder.

And what about that last moment statement? It directly contradicted Person's confession to detectives, the press, and at gunpoint - that he'd acted alone?

And then there's the posse - hundreds of men clearly guilty of Murder, Accessory to Murder, Conspiracy to commit murder, and Kidnapping - plus the thousands of additional men, women and children implicated, by their very presence.

The state ordered a grand jury convened on May 26th.

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Jurors were instructed that according to Tennessee law "every person present, aiding and abetting or willing to aid and abet the commission of a crime... are guilty as principals." It was then incumbent on the grand jury to indict them!

No one was ever charged!

No justice was ever carried out, on any front.

But what does all this have to do with Blues music, and W.C. Handy, much less the Grand Ole Opry?

Handy talks about it in "Father of the Blues." He tells the story of a head being thrown into a crowd on Beale Street. The date matches up with the El Person lynching. And though Handy refers to the man as Tom Smith, he was almost certainly talking about El Person.

There's no other account of such an event in Memphis, for a decade either side of the Person lynching.

A search of local newspaper records from the late 19th and early 20th centuries shows hundreds of mentions of the name Tom Smith - decades apart - mostly black men accused of various crimes - often lynched for "outrages" against women... That Southern code for rape.

Was Handy simply using the colloquial term for black men who'd been lynched?

Even if there had been a another severed head in Memphis that year, it was the racism of Jim Crow that influenced Handy's decision to leave town.

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Over the years his band had been kidnapped several times, and forced to play for all kinds of atrocities. One man insisted they play "The Last Shot Got Him," as he attempted to murder a rival.

Witnessing a severed head in the street, was just one more moment in a long string, that made Handy realize if he - a wealthy and well known black man - didn't feel safe in his own home town no one could.

Combine that with the rebellion of his musicians, and Handy's decision to pull up stakes and head for New York was easy.

But what about the Grand Ole Opry... what's all this have to do with country music?

Now, this is a point of personal privileged.

I've lived half of my life in Memphis - the other half in Nashville.

And, I've always wondered... what would've happened if Handy had stayed in Memphis, built his empire there?

The Artist Services Bureau, bred an enormous industry in Nashville, one that Memphis has been trying to attract for a century.

Could Memphis have become another version Music City USA, with the accompanying studios and record companies? Or would the city's original sin of racism have blocked the path anyway?

All the pieces were there - in place - in Memphis.

George Hay - who created the Opry - had established WMC radio in Memphis three years before WSM went on the air in Nashville.

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Hay had set a precedent -
integrating radio in Memphis with
that performance of Bessie Smith in
1923.

Handy had established his booking
agency, with the exact same value
that the Artist Services Bureau
offered to Opry stars, and Handy
had a twenty year head start!

But Memphis musicians didn't buy in
they way their Nashville
counterparts did.

What if Handy's players had stayed
on board?

Could Memphis have been the music
city it's always dreamed of
becoming?

The questions of course are all
rhetorical, because Handy did go to
New York.

For that original sin, Memphis
would spend the next forty years
wandering in the proverbial desert,
but they would change the face of
music again in 1954 with a young
kid named Elvis Presley.

Ironically rock and roll would
burst onto the scene, in the same
year that Boss Crump would make his
final exit from this world.

Memphis music had come full circle.

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