

How Five Died in Augusta

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New York Times

Augusta, Ga.

Three of the six Negroes killed by policemen here last week were unarmed bystanders who were not involved in rioting, according to several witnesses to the shootings.

Witnesses also say that two

others were killed in stores that were being looted after violence erupted in a Negro neighborhood Monday night. No witnesses to the sixth shooting were found by three New York Times reporters who questioned scores of Augusta citizens — Negroes and whites.

The witnesses who talked

about the shootings were Negroes. The only whites believed to have been on the scene when the six men were shot were policemen, and police officials have urged them not to make public statements until a police investigation has been completed.

In the four tense days since

rioting began in this half-black, half-white city of 70,000, the three Times reporters also made the following findings:

- Witnesses believed policemen did not fire in self-defense.

- No weapons were found

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on the bodies of the six men.

- Few members of the 130-man Augusta Police Department had received training in civil disorder or riot control techniques.

- A coroner's inquest has been stymied by the police department's reluctance to provide members of the force to testify as witnesses to the six deaths.

- None of the dead men was involved in social activism, and none had taken part in protest demonstrations that preceded the violence.

- The policemen's orders to begin shooting were issued by a white captain who was reported to be generally disliked and distrusted by members of the Negro community.

POLICE

The Augusta Police Department has refused comment on the shootings.

"We are investigating them ourselves, and when we are finished we will make our reports public," a spokesman said yesterday.

The FBI has also begun an inquiry into the deaths, and a team of criminal investigators from the civil rights division of the Justice Department is studying the violence to determine if federal law was violated.

Meanwhile, there are only a few here who feel certain about the riot's origins.

"Decades of racism," said Grady Abrams, one of four Negro members of the 16-man city council.

"A communist conspiracy," said Governor Lester G. Maddox who dispatched 1200 national guard troops to the city and later said the violence was the work of the Black Panthers.

The beginning was last Sunday, when there seemed little likelihood that anything extraordinary was about to happen.

It was a warm day. Although many of Carrie J. May's friends were relaxing and enjoying a leisurely afternoon, she was working in her husband's mortuary in the heart of the Negro neighborhood preparing the frail, 104-pound body of Charles Oatman, a 16-year-old accused murderer who was taken from a crowded cell at the county jail the evening before and pronounced dead on arrival at a local hospital.

"I saw right off somebody had really lit into the boy," she recalled nervously. "He had been beaten something awful, and there were cigarette burns on his hands and feet, and — and — and, well, there were burns on his buttocks, too."

Within hours, word of Mrs. Mays's grim observation, which was later verified by an autopsy report, had spread through the Negro community, gathering speed as it moved from corner to corner, becoming first a volatile rumor and then an unequivocal accusatory assertion that Charles Oatman had been murdered by policemen in his cell at the county jail.

DATH

"Before anybody could get to the truth of the Oatman boy's death, the thing had gotten out of hand," said Evan Bush, a young Negro who attempted to keep others off the streets Monday night and on the nights since.

On Sunday evening, about 200 Negroes gathered in a park and then marched to the jail after hearing that the dead youth had been tortured and beaten.

Sheriff E. F. Atkins told them that the boy had fallen from his cot and struck head, but his explanation did not satisfy Negro leaders, who arranged to meet with county officials and Mayor Millard A. Beckum Monday afternoon.

On Monday morning, Atkins announced that murder charges had been filed against two Negroes who had been in the cell with the dead youngster.

FLAGS

That afternoon, the leaders went to the city-county building, and a crowd of about 500 demonstrated peacefully outside. The leaders asked, as they had asked several times before, that juvenile prisoners like Charles Oatman, who was mentally retarded, not be confined in the county jail.

Meanwhile, one of the younger members of the

crowd outside captured the Georgia and United States flags from their staffs in front of the building.

The state flag was burned, but the United States flag was handed to Lieutenant Thomas Olds, a Negro policeman in civilian clothes.

Captain James G. Beck, who is disliked and distrusted by many Negroes, appeared before the crowd with 20 policemen holding riot guns chest high. Some of the youngsters derided the stern-faced but silent policemen.

Beck, who was later identified as the source of the order to begin shooting at the rioters, made no move to retrieve the burning flag, and the crowd of Negroes headed downtown.

When they reached the corner of Ninth Avenue and Gwinnet Avenue, some of them began throwing rocks and bottles and bricks at storefronts and passing cars. The men who had attended the meeting at City Hall hurried to the scene. The police were told that the Negro leaders could handle the situation

if there were no uniformed policemen around.

EVENTS

It was then after 6 o'clock, and what happened next is not precisely clear.

Tear gas was used, but one policeman said it "had absolutely no effect on the crowd." Another said policemen were outnumbered five or six to one.

Most of the Negroes left the scene, but a large group split into small bands and began a night of arson, vandalism and looting.

A Negro man who was in the original group said he was surprised that the police waited as long as they did to open fire. He said they did so only after the rioters began stopping automobiles and dragging white occupants from them.

"There was this black man breaking into a car and a police car came up and the cop got out with a shotgun and yelled, 'halt,' but the man started to run and the cop cut down on him . . . he wasn't killed because the policeman shot at his legs," the man said.

One policeman said the riot might have been contained earlier if the police had not waited so long to open fire.

By dusk Monday, smoke belched from the run-down business area where many of Augusta's 35,000 Negroes spend much of their incomes, which average \$2600 a year per family.

By midnight, gunfire cracked and sirens wailed.

By dawn Tuesday, the six men were dead and National Guard troops were moving into the smoldering city.

Following are witnesses' accounts of what happened to the six dead men:

Charlie Mack Murphy

Charlie Mack Murphy had recently returned to Augusta, his home town, from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and had been temporarily hired by a local furniture company. He was separated from his wife but he planned to send for his family when his employment became permanent.

By the time the 39-year-old father of four left his \$60-a-week job Monday night, municipal bus service had stopped because of the violence. His mother, Mrs. Carl Mack Murphy, reasoned later that he must have begun to walk toward her house for supper.

A few blocks away from his mother's home, he was killed. The coroner's report said there were seven bullet wounds in his back, but no witnesses have been found to describe the circumstances of his death.

William Wright Jr.

William Wright Jr., an 18-year-old dropout from Lucy Laney High School, left his home in a housing project "about 7:30, I guess," said his father, a brickyard worker. "He said he was going over to see his girl friend and then they were going to the wrestling matches at Bell Auditorium."

The younger Wright, one of ten children, did not go to the auditorium that night, and it is not known if he visited his girl friend. His closest friend, John Collier, 17, said the two of them and two other teenagers got together and started "digging the action."

The four were going from one fire to the next, he said, watching the looters and laughing. At the corner of Twigg and Florence streets, they paused at a service station and giggled as dozens of Negroes filled their gasoline tanks from the abandoned pumps.

"I bent down to tie a shoelace and spotted three cars of cops through a hole in the fence," young Collier said. He shouted, "Run!" and ducked through the fence.

But young Wright, the oldest of his father's three sons, walked unhurriedly toward an exit in the fence near the station's office, his friend said. He said that the police cars screeched to the curb, that policemen stepped from the cars and took deliberate aim and that when the

youngster began to quicken his step as he neared the opening in the fence, he was shot in the back.

The coroner's report said there were eight wounds in his body; five in the back and three in his arm. Young Collier said he heard no warning or shouts from the police.

Sammy L. McCullough

Sammy L. McCullough, 20, and Russell Cunningham both worked at Talmadge Hospital in the housekeeping department.

As usual, they got together Monday night at the housing project where they lived, and, according to Cunningham, they drove his car around the corner from the project complex to find a parking space at about 11 o'clock.

Near 15th street, they saw a crowd of people watching a fire in one of the low industrial buildings that sprawl along the railroad.

They parked the car and walked toward the blaze, Cunningham said.

Within minutes, several police cars pulled up, and the crowd began scattering. The two young men were still some 50 feet from the group, and they began moving back toward their car, too.

Cunningham was in the lead when his friend began running. He said he turned to see McCullough fall to the ground about 30 feet from the car.

The coroner's report said there were two entrance wounds in McCullough's back. Doctors at Talmadge Hospital tried to save him, but he died in surgery.

James Stokes

James Stokes, 19, was a dropout from Lucy Laney High School. On Monday night he left the neat, Cape Cod-style house where he lived with his mother, his older sister and four brothers at about 11 o'clock and joined about 15 or 20 other young people, said Harold Lakes, a 17-year-old high school student. He said all of them were in a grocery store at the corner of Third and Walker Streets about midnight when a police car drove up, and a policeman pointed a shotgun or rifle out the window and shot Stokes.

The coroner's report stated there were nine wounds in the youth's back. Young Lakes said that only one shot was fired, an apparent discrepancy perhaps explained by the fact that the police were using shotgun shells with double-ought buckshot. In such a loading, nine pellets, each about the size of a .22-caliber slug, are discharged when the gun is fired.

John Bennett

John Bennett, 28., and his cousin, Larry Johnson, 199 were touring around the neighborhood in Bennett's car. They joined a party at a housing project, and when Bennett looked outside at about 1 o'clock for his car it was missing.

According to young Johnson's account, the two of them went to search for the car at about 4 o'clock Tuesday morning and found it at the corner of Tutt avenue and 15th street.

A grocery store on the corner, owned by a Chinese businessman, had been looted, and Bennett approached two policemen and told them the car nearby was his. Its trunk had been half-filled with groceries from the store, young Johnson said.

The policemen did not believe Bennett, he said, and began slapping him. One of the policemen involved was a Negro, and the other was a white man, A. J. Jackson, young Johnson said.

Other policemen arrived on the scene and placed Bennett on the front seat of his car. When he ran from the car into the vicinity of a housing project, they began shooting, young Johnson said.

"They didn't say 'stop' or 'halt' or nothing," he said. "They just opened fire. John was saying, 'that's my car, and that's my cousin. Ask him.'"

The coroner's report notes a single wound of entrance in the back and a second, superficial wound in the right arm.