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*Justice, Southern Style: The Kidnap and Murder
of Mack Charles Parker*

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“Don’t let them take me. Don’t let them kill me.” These were the last words Mack Charles Parker uttered before he was kidnapped, literally dragged screaming, from the Pearl River County Jail in the early morning hours of April 25, 1959. Parker had been in jail awaiting trial, a trial that was scheduled to start just two days after his abduction. The charge was rape of a White woman and that was sufficient reason for a vigilante mob to break into the jail and deliver what will be defined later as Southern style justice to Parker. The result of Parker’s abduction showed that getting justice for the murder of an African-American in Mississippi was nearly impossible.

On February 23, 1959, Parker was arrested for the kidnap and rape of June Walters, a married and pregnant White woman. The circumstances of the alleged attack make it difficult to conclusively say whether Parker committed the crime for which he was arrested. Walters claimed that while she was waiting in her broken down car on the side of the road for her husband to return, Parker approached the vehicle and kidnapped her at gunpoint.¹ He then took her in the woods off the road where he committed the act. However when questioned about her attacker, Walters could only provide race, sex, and approximate age. Furthermore, the fingerprints at the crime scene did not match Parker’s and the tire track evidence was inconclusive. That is not to say Parker did not do it. According to the four

¹ Howard Smead, *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6.

friends he was with when he first noticed Walters' car on the side of road, he was quoted as saying "Why don't we stop and get some o' that white stuff."² He very well may have done the crime, but the evidence against him was weak and circumstantial at best. Following his lynching an article published in the *Chicago Defender* newspaper suggested that Walters may have used Parker as a scapegoat to conceal an affair. According to the article, "the lover reportedly came by, picked up the woman and her baby and drove to a secret tryst in the woods."³ It went on to say that "the rape story was cooked up to explain her absence."⁴ The information in the article was attributed to a "reluctant informant" who remained unnamed.⁵ The claim was never substantiated but it was not the first time a White woman falsely accused a Black man of a crime to cover her own misdeeds. From the Scottsboro Boys in 1931 to Susan Smith in 1994, there is an ugly history of White women falsely accusing Black men. Walters herself was never sure that it was Parker who attacked her. Nevertheless, even if Parker was guilty of sin, he was still entitled to a fair trial not an execution by vigilantes.

The events of that fateful night of April 24th can be divided into a discussion of what happened and how it happened. What happened was a group of between eight to ten White men, masked and gloved, gained entry into the jail. Upon entrance, one of the masked men leaned over to tell an awakened prisoner to "be quiet boy."⁶ That prisoner, whose name was redacted from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) released report on the case, identified that masked man, by his voice, as the jailer, Jewel Alford. He also identified three of the other conspirators as well. The men were directed to Parker's cell at which point they attacked him. According to another prisoner, Charles "C.J." Mondy, Parker attempted to defend himself, but four of the men used clubs two feet long and little bigger than a broom handle and began beating Parker. He continued to try and defend himself until he was struck by a garbage can.⁷ The men continued to viciously beat Parker, even once he was on the ground, until he could no longer fight back. At this point they dragged Parker, by his heels out of his cell and then out of the jail itself. As mentioned previously, Parker cried out for help several times and at one point told his attackers he would get up and walk but they would not let him. He was dragged, bleeding from the beating he had taken,

² Smead, 5.

³ "Claim Woman Cried Rape to Hide Secret Love Tryst," *The Chicago Defender*, May 16, 1959.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The Abduction of Mack Charles Parker*, Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI Vault Online, 1959, <http://vault.fbi.gov/Mack%20Charles%20Parker> (accessed March 28, 2014).

⁷ Ibid.

down a flight of stairs and out the door of the courthouse to a waiting vehicle described by the prisoner whose name was redacted, as a white 1958 Chevrolet four-door sedan.⁸ Parker was thrown into the vehicle that would become his hearse, and was never again seen alive.

The first law enforcement official to respond to the kidnapping was Sheriff W. Osborne Moody. According to the official statement he gave to the FBI, Sheriff Moody was alerted to a commotion at the jail via a telephone call from the courthouse-adjacent hospital by a nurse whose name he could not even recall.⁹ The nurse was identified in a newspaper article as Mrs. Forest Burge.¹⁰ For the man ultimately in charge of the jail, the prisoners, and their well-being, Moody was very nonchalant about the whole incident even before he knew who it involved. He admittedly dressed at a leisurely pace and “took his time driving to the jail from his home.”¹¹ Upon arriving at the hospital he approached a group of people gathered outside and asked what was going on, at which point a member of the group used a racial slur to describe Parker’s abduction. He drove around to the other side of the courthouse whereupon he noticed a few things amiss. The door was open, the lights were off, and there was blood on the steps. Upon entering his office, he noticed evidence of a break-in, something that was later proven to have been staged. Moody made a very telling statement about how relaxed, perhaps a little too relaxed in fact, of an operation he was running when it came to his jail. He admitted to the FBI that the keys to the jail were kept locked in a filing cabinet but that the keys to that were in an unlocked desk drawer. All of the blame for the less than professional manner in which the keys were maintained cannot be assigned to the sheriff however. According to Moody, he conferred with the aforementioned jailer, Jewel Alford about the keys upon Parker’s incarceration. They decided that for security purposes that Alford would retain the keys in his personal possession at all times for a few days, just after Parker was locked up.¹² Ironically, Alford felt that his life would be in danger if he did this. Moody then consulted his superior, Judge Sebe Dale who told him to go back to the regular routine and “in the event that someone did attempt to remove Parker from the jail no action should be taken which would endanger any law enforcement officer.”¹³ In effect, the judge gave *carte blanche* to let whatever might happen to Parker happen, suggesting that the corruption in this case started at the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Claude Sitton, “Mississippi Hunt for Negro Pushed,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 1959.

¹¹ *Abduction of Mack Charles Parker*, FBI Vault Online.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

top. To his credit, Moody did essentially the bare minimum and alerted the Mississippi Highway Safety Patrol to be on the lookout for Parker.

Because of Poplarville's location and the chance that Parker may have been taken across state lines, into Louisiana, the New Orleans bureau's special agent in charge, R.W. Bachmann, took charge of the case on April 25th. He was tasked with figuring out how what happened to Parker happened. Agents descended on the town and immediately began questioning first the people who arrived at the courthouse following Parker's abduction. That list included Sheriff Moody, Pete Carver, Bolivar Orr, and Jewel Alford. Neither Carver nor Orr provided much helpful information. Alford's statement on the other hand proved to be very interesting as it was the first glimpse at his inability to tell the truth. He said that the first he heard of Parker's abduction was a phone call from Sheriff Moody around 2:00 am. Based on the positive identification by the prisoner whose name had been redacted, it is clear that Alford was being less than honest with the FBI agent. Alford "distinctly remembered" that the janitor left before he did the night of Parker's abduction, making him the last one with the keys.¹⁴ He admitted to probably leaving the filing cabinet with keys open that night. At the very least that would be gross irresponsibility, if that were all he had done. The last thing he told the agent was that no one had contacted him with any information of any kind indicating that such an abduction was being planned.¹⁵ Based on information learned later, that was a direct lie. Alford's first statement to the FBI was given prior to the revealing interviews with the prisoners who named him as a conspirator in the crime. Alford was interviewed by the FBI again on May 14th. Confronted with the fact that he had been identified as conspirator in the abduction, Alford admitted to furnishing the mob with keys to the jail because he feared if he did not they would go after him or his family.¹⁶ Alford once again denied taking part in the actual abduction of Parker, however according Howard Smead's book *Blood Justice*, Alford quickly changed his mind once he was inside the courthouse.¹⁷

The search for Parker's body lasted for ten days following his abduction. Days into the case, there was speculation that his body had been tossed into the Pearl River. Because the waters were three feet above flood stage, officials feared it would be difficult to find his body if that was the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Smead, 49.

case.¹⁸ Such speculations became a reality when Parker's decomposing corpse was discovered floating in the Pearl River on the Mississippi side near Bogalusa, Louisiana, just twenty miles from Poplarville.¹⁹ The body had been in the river for so long, the water had bleached it and identification had to be made through fingerprints. Parker's corpse was clad only in underwear and a t-shirt, and in addition to the beating he had suffered at the jail, he had been shot twice.²⁰ Maybe the only the saving grace was that the coroner determined he was dead before he hit the water.²¹

The FBI stepped up their investigation at this point. Although the FBI did not make it public knowledge, they had several suspects already as the prisoner had identified Alford as a conspirator, and had identified J.P. Walker, the Rev. Floren Lee, and another man whose name was redacted from the report, as conspirators as well. The car used to transport Parker following his abduction was traced to Christopher Columbus Reyer. When he was interviewed by agents, Reyer detailed going to a meeting outside Poplarville around nine-thirty the night of the abduction to discuss what to do with Parker.²² In his statement he identified Lee as also being at this meeting and told the agents he had been essentially forced to allow the mob to use his car for their plan. The FBI also interviewed Lee, who despite having been identified at both the planning meeting and in the act itself, denied having participated and flatly refused to provide details of his whereabouts that night. Walker also denied participating when he was interviewed even though Reyer identified him as being under the steering wheel of Reyer's car when he drove by the courthouse shortly before the abduction took place.²³ All of these interviews conducted by the FBI proved to be nothing more than inconvenience to the citizens of the town. According to an article published in the *Chicago Defender*, several people claimed to have been harassed and one man even claimed to have suffered a cerebral hemorrhage as result of the interrogation. His doctor later dispelled the claim.²⁴ These people were not interested in finding and prosecuting the perpetrators of the crime and that was a foreshadowing of what was to come.

One month after the kidnapping, the FBI officially wrapped up its investigation having "clearly established" that no federal law had been

¹⁸ Cliff Sessions, "Hints of Break in Lynch Case," *The Daily Defender*, April 29, 1959.

¹⁹ "Find Body of Mack Parker in Pearl River," *The Daily Defender*, May 5, 1959.

²⁰ Smead, 109.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Abduction of Mack Charles Parker*, FBI Vault Online.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ UPI, "FBI Mob Probe Irks Citizens," *The Daily Defender*, May 21, 1959.

violated.²⁵ The lack of a violation of federal law meant that the FBI no longer had jurisdiction and as result, they withdrew from Poplarville and the investigation officially on June 4th. They turned over three hundred and fifty plus pages of documents to Mississippi governor J.P. Coleman who promised a full scale investigation and prosecution of the guilty parties.²⁶ It took five months before the case was brought before the grand jury. In a cruel irony, the judge who presided over the grand jury was Judge Sebe Dale, the very man who had turned a blind eye to potential for violence that ended up befalling Parker. The grand jury convened on November 2nd. At 2:00 p.m. on November 3rd, the business was concluded.²⁷ Indictments were returned in the case of several other complaints, but not one single indictment was returned against anyone accused in the lynching case. It was revealed later that the county attorneys had not called any witnesses, or presented the FBI's report, or for that matter, even argued the case. There was immediate satisfaction from the citizens of Poplarville and immediate outrage from the Black community. The strongest outrage, however, was expressed by officials within the Justice Department. Those officials immediately re-inserted the Justice Department back into the case. Attorney General William P. Rogers called it "as flagrant and calculated a miscarriage of justice as I've ever seen."²⁸ He cited violations of Parker's civil rights as legal justification for the Justice Department's renewed involvement in the case, much to the chagrin of the citizens of Poplarville and Vernon Broome, the prosecutor who had failed to do his own job. The federal grand jury convened at Biloxi on January 4, 1960. Unlike the previous grand jury, there was one Black man on this jury. The Justice Department even sent two attorneys from the civil rights division to assist the U.S. attorney in presenting the case. According to one newspaper article, a score of persons, including seven of the suspects, had been subpoenaed to appear before the grand jury.²⁹ Among those who testified were June Walters, and Jewel Alford. Alford attempted to deceive the jurors about his role in the abduction before finally admitting to only providing the keys. As previously established in this paper, that statement was not the truth but he steadfastly maintained he had nothing to do with the actual kidnapping. One thing that marked the Mack Charles Parker case was collusion with corrupt members of the law enforcement and legal communities, not just the usual dismissal,

²⁵ UPI, "FBI To Quit Parker Case," *The Daily Defender*, May 24, 1959.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Smead, 175.

²⁸ Susan Wagner, "Why U.S. Back in Parker Case," *The Daily Defender*, November 18, 1959.

²⁹ UPI, "US Jury Hears Parker Case," *The Daily Defender*, January 4, 1960.

and the federal grand jury proceedings were not immune to such corruption. Judge Dale, who had already had less than helpful hand in this case in various ways, traveled to Biloxi and had a highly unethical private meeting with the presiding judge, Sidney Mize, in which he convinced Mize to narrow the scope by which the federal kidnapping statutes could be applied.³⁰ Such action all but ensured that no kidnapping charges would be brought against the men. Days later, Mize made another controversial ruling that all the men had to be indicted or none of them. That all but ended any small chance the government had of successfully obtain indictments. On the thirteenth, the grand jury abruptly cancelled further testimony in the case and prepared to vote on whether to bring charges against the accused.³¹

Despite the fact that the jury deliberated for at least three days, they predictably returned no indictments against anyone involved in kidnapping and murdering Parker. The outcome of the grand jury proceedings showed that the justice system in the Mississippi was one where a man could be accused of raping a woman, who admitted more than once, including before the grand jury, that she was not positive that he was her assailant, and before he could have his day in court be beaten and kidnapped from a jail, murdered, and dumped in a river without anyone ever paying for their crimes. Perhaps Gulfport, Mississippi attorney Stanford Morse put it best when he said simply that “Southern Justice had triumphed.”³² Before the last grand jury convened, Poplarville mayor Pat Hyde made a telling but sadly truthful statement when he said that “you couldn’t convict the guilty parties if you had sound film of the lynching.”³³ It echoed the sentiments of a Poplarville businessman who was quoted in an editorial published in the *Chicago Defender* in May 1959 asking why the FBI was wasting their time investigating because no jury would ever convict the mob.³⁴ The Black community was outraged but not shocked at the result of federal grand jury and it was determined not to let Parker die in vain. In June 1959, before the first grand jury failed to act, the Parker case was used in a push for a federal anti-lynching bill. The senate GOP policy committee put heat on, then Senate Democrat Leader, Lyndon Johnson for an early vote on a pending civil rights bill.³⁵ These efforts were quickly crushed, however, by the potent Southern Democratic voting bloc. Mack Charles Parker’s name was not added to an

³⁰ Smead, 195.

³¹ UPI, “Miss. Grand Jury Abruptly Halts Probe of Lynching,” *The Daily Defender*, January 14, 1960.

³² Cliff Sessions, “US Jury Fails to Indict Lynchers,” January 24, 1960.

³³ Smead, 197.

³⁴ “The Mack Parker Tragedy”, *The Daily Defender*, May 4, 1959.

³⁵ Harry Wilson Sharpe, “Parker Case Pushes Bid for Rights,” June 1, 1959.

anti-lynching bill, but sadly to the list of Black Mississippians who received no justice for the crimes done against them. Potentially a victim twice, Parker or at least his family, learned the lesson that at that time, Southern justice was not just. An editorial in the *Chicago Defender* two months after the federal grand jury had failed to indict, summed up what the Parker case meant for the country when the reporter said that the Parker case should never be forgotten and was a grim reminder that democracy was not yet safe in America.³⁶

³⁶ "Remember Parker's Lynching," *The Daily Defender*, March 16, 1960.