

THE PALIMPSEST

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A Race Riot on the Mississippi

It was early in the morning of the 29th of July, 1869, when the Northern Line steamer "Dubuque" swung slowly away from the wharf at Davenport and with many puffs and snorts from the remonstrating engine, began to push her way northward against the current. The shouting of orders, the creaking of the boat's machinery, and the bumping of the boxes and barrels of freight as they were moved about were in marked contrast to the quiet of the river slipping interminably on its way to the ocean, and the peaceful shores dotted here and there with farm houses.

In her cabins on the upper deck the vessel carried about one hundred passengers, and on the deck below where the freight was piled high were twice as many steerage or deck passengers, who shared with some horses, also bound northward, the discomforts of the open deck. These men, rough in dress and fluent in profanity, included many lumbermen who

had floated huge rafts of logs down the river and were now returning to the harvest fields and logging camps of the north. The steamer was commanded by Captain John B. Rhodes who had under him a crew consisting of a few white officers and about thirty deck hands, most of whom were colored.

A little after eight o'clock, just as the cabin passengers were finishing breakfast, the second clerk, Theodore Jones by name, went to the lower deck to collect fares and examine tickets. This was no easy task for the space was crowded; and the officer stationed a negro deck hand named Moses Davis at the stairway with orders to permit no one to ascend while the fares were being collected.

Apparently this was a mistake in judgment on the part of the clerk, for the raftsmen, accustomed to submit to harsh and even brutal treatment from their white bosses, had only contempt for a colored man. It was not long before an Irish lumberman known as "pock-marked" or "Mike" Lynch, who had been drinking and was in a quarrelsome mood, attempted to pass the guard—probably to secure more liquor at the bar above. An altercation followed which was interrupted temporarily by the mate, John F. Sweet. Lynch withdrew but gathered about him some twenty-five of his associates and began to threaten the negro. It was suggested that Lynch and Davis fight it out and a ring was formed, but the Irishman refused to fight a negro on these terms and instead led a rush at Davis.

This was the signal for pandemonium. Other raftsmen joined in the assault which was extended to all the colored employees on the boat. By this time the steamer had reached Hagy's Landing at Hampton, Illinois, and some of the rioters, running to the shore, armed themselves with pieces of coal, rocks, and billets of wood with which they bombarded the luckless colored men. Others, led by Lynch, began a search for the colored deck hands who made frantic efforts to find places of concealment. Some sixteen of them escaped to the shore followed by scattering revolver shots and missiles of various kinds. Others were not so fortunate. In the mêlée, Davis escaped from the mob and secreted himself under a lifeboat on the hurricane deck. Two other colored hands, beaten and cut by their assailants, hurried to the stern and in despair leaped into the river, where they sank immediately leaving the water colored with their blood.

A third victim, likewise cut and beaten until partly unconscious, was then seized by half a dozen men and thrown into the river where he, too, disappeared. A fellow sufferer, pursued by the blood crazed mob and frantic with fear jumped from the deck. For a while he struggled in the current but chunks of coal and sticks of wood fell thick and fast about him and he was soon engulfed by the stream, while the rioters shouted in exultation.

After these four murders, the mob made a hunt for more "niggers", searching the main deck, the

guards of the cabins, and the hurricane deck. At last Lynch spied Davis and with an oath pointed out his hiding place to the other rioters. The negro sprang up knife in hand, and ran toward the stairs slashing one of his pursuers as he went but not inflicting a fatal wound. He too was forced to jump into the river. Two men in a skiff started out to rescue him but before they could reach him he had been hit by one of the missiles which were being hurled at him and was drowned. Some days later his body was found in the river at Muscatine and given burial.

While this scene of bloodshed was being enacted on the lower deck, many of the cabin passengers watched the riot from the rail of the deck above, among them being a young woman named Jane Teagarden who many years later wrote a reminiscence of the experience. With her were some children and a number of other women. Fortunately for the colored men, however, many of the cabin passengers were still in their staterooms. One of the negroes, covered with blood from a cut in his throat, ran into the cabin occupied by Rev. and Mrs. D. C. McCoy, exclaiming "Save me, do save me, Missis!" He was kept there and his wounds bandaged while rioters rushed back and forth in the corridor outside hunting for more victims. One fugitive was hidden by a woman passenger in her stateroom and his pursuers were given to understand that he had jumped into the river. Several of the colored men were secreted by the officers in their cabins.

This was apparently all the officers of the "Dubuque" could do, for none of them, strange to say, were armed. In twenty minutes there was not a colored deck hand to be seen anywhere. In the midst of the riot, the vessel had left Hampton and was now continuing her course up the river, the rioters threatening to burn the boat if the captain made a stop for assistance. It appears, however, that no attempt was made to prevent the passengers from going ashore and these were requested by the officers of the boat to telegraph to Rock Island for aid. Some of the raftsmen even volunteered to act as deck hands and the steamer resumed a semblance of order, though the rioters kept a lookout for any of the colored men left on the vessel.

At Camanche, the ringleader, Lynch, and a man named Butler who had been slightly wounded by Davis in his unsuccessful dash went on shore and failed to return. They escaped just in time. A telegram had reached the Sheriff of Rock Island County and in a short time Deputy Sheriff Payne with a posse of about sixty men started to intercept the boat at Clinton reaching there between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, about fifteen minutes ahead of the "Dubuque". Here the steamer pulled into the shore and threw out a gang plank, for the arrival of the officers was unknown to the rioters. As the boat docked a number of the raftsmen started to follow Lynch's example and leave the vessel but they were met by the Deputy Sheriff backed by a

dozen armed men and compelled to return to the boat. The bluster and defiance of authority which had been growing weaker now disappeared entirely and it was without much difficulty that twenty of the men, pointed out by the boat's officers as implicated in the riot, were put in irons.

Captain Rhodes decided to land the prisoners at Rock Island, and the "Dubuque", upon which there was now the hush of tragedy and the order imposed by armed representatives of the government, was turned southward late in the afternoon, stopping only to pick up some of the deck hands who had fled from the boat at the beginning of the attack.

As the steamer drew up to the landing at Rock Island crowds of curious people were kept back by ropes which had been stretched about a part of the levee. The colored deck hands who had escaped the fury of the mob were formed in two lines inside this space while the posse stood guard with drawn revolvers. Then the chief rioters in irons were marched off the boat and the remaining deck passengers were ordered to pass between the rows of negroes to be identified. Over forty white men were taken to jail to await a preliminary hearing and the crowd dispersed. The colored witnesses were given lodgings in the Court House. Mr. Jones, the clerk whose order had precipitated the riot, and Mr. Sweet, the mate, remained to give evidence and at half-past nine that night the boat again started northward.

The following Friday morning the preliminary

hearing was begun at Rock Island before Police Justice E. C. Cropper. The prisoners were brought in manacled in pairs and guarded by the Deputy Sheriff and fifteen assistants. The survivors of the colored crew, twenty-four in number, were seated inside the bar, fronting the prisoners. A local newspaper gives the following description of the scene:

“The negroes were then called up, one by one, and asked to take a careful survey of the prisoners. They followed instructions to the letter. The objects of their searching gaze were about as uneasy a set of mortals as ever occupied the prisoner’s box in Rock Island. As the negro would point to a rioter and spot him, the fellow’s breath would be impeded by a thickness in his throat, and his face gave signs of oppressive fear.”

As a result of this hearing ten men were held for trial and the rest were freed. Among those held was Timothy or “Ted” Butler also known as William Jones, who had left the “Dubuque” in company with Lynch. Butler had been captured by the Sheriff of Clinton County and turned over to the authorities at Rock Island. The prisoners were indicted for the murder of one of the negro deck hands known as William Armstead or William Armstrong, but their trial was postponed from time to time and the witnesses allowed to leave on their own recognizance.

This gave rise to the suspicion that the authorities did not intend to prosecute the white men for the murder of negroes. “The long and short of the bus-

iness is that the case is virtually approaching an inglorious fizzle", was the comment of the *Rock Island Argus* in October, 1869. "A pile of money has been expended by the county and private individuals, and the whole affair has 'ended like a shepherd's tale'. Justice has been cheated of its prey. . . . It is to be hoped that Lynch will not be caught, and another \$500 saddled on the county."

To this the *Davenport Democrat* replied: "Such surely cannot be the case. When a reckless crowd of rioters will murder negroes, drive them into the river, cut and shoot them down for no other offense than color, whether drunk or sober, they should be made to suffer the full penalty of the law. . . . These men are the terror of river travel, and now let them learn well the lesson of obedience to law, and of respecting the rights of others."

The fact that the crime was caused by race prejudice aggravated by drinking gave the tragedy some political significance in the opinion of a Muscatine editor who published the following comment:

WHISKY and PREJUDICE—These were the incentives to the late terrible affair on the steamer *Dubuque*, whereby five human lives were sacrificed and the persons and property of hundreds of men, women and children placed in imminent peril by an infuriated mob. . . . For the first of these incentives, whisky, the steamboat company is responsible, at least to the extent to which it permits intoxicating beverages to be dealt out from the bars of its steamers to reckless and irresponsible men. . . .

For the second incentive, prejudice, the leaders of the Democratic party are mainly responsible. They have persistently taught their followers to hate the negro and look upon him as one having "no rights which a white man is bound to respect."

After some delay, however, arrangements were made for the trial of the rioters; but the defendants, evidently fearing the sentiment in the community familiar with the story of their crime, asked for a change of venue. This was granted and the case was transferred to the Circuit Court of Henry County, Illinois. Here nine of the men were put on trial at the June term of court in 1870. As a result of this trial two of the defendants were acquitted and seven were found guilty of manslaughter, receiving sentences of from one to three years in the penitentiary. The case against Timothy Butler for some reason was postponed and finally dropped.

In the meantime Michael Lynch, the chief instigator of the crime, remained at liberty for some months. At the request of the Northern Line Packet Company a reward of \$500 was offered for his arrest but he had apparently disappeared completely. He was finally apprehended in a lumber camp at Clarendon, Arkansas, where he secured work in a saw mill. Reports as to the agency of his capture differ. One story is that he was indentified by a former associate, who, knowing that Lynch was aware that he had another wife still living, feared that the Irish lumberman would make known this fact and desired

to get Lynch out of the way. Another account is that Lynch was identified by a travelling agent who had been on the "Dubuque" during the riot.

The identity of the person who received the \$500 reward is not, however, an essential point in the story. Lynch was arrested and two officers went to Clarendon and returned bringing with them the former rioter. The trip was made by boat, the steamer "Minneapolis" bringing the trio from St. Louis to Rock Island. At various stopping places curious and sometimes hostile crowds tried to get a glimpse of the pock-marked face of the prisoner, but Lynch was kept in a stateroom in irons and the would-be spectators were disappointed.

Lynch was put on trial for the crime of murder in the Circuit Court of Rock Island County in September, 1870, and after a trial lasting six days was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to ten years in the State Penitentiary at Joliet.

And while these men served out their sentences, the steamer "Dubuque" plied up and down the Mississippi. The riot, unusual only because of the number of the victims, was almost forgotten, except when in the evenings the colored deck hands perhaps related to newcomers among them the story of the five men of their race who lost their lives that July morning, or the white officers pointed out to favored passengers the places on the boat from which the hunted negroes jumped into the river which on that occasion served as the executioner for the mob.

RUTH A. GALLAHER