

Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America

By Cameron McWhirter

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Instead, an unprecedented wave of anti-black riots and lynchings swept the country for eight months. From April to November of 1919, the racial unrest rolled across the South into the North and the Midwest, even to the nation's capital. Millions of lives were disrupted, and hundreds of lives were lost. Blacks responded by fighting back with an intensity and determination never seen before.

Red Summer is the first narrative history written about this epic encounter. Focusing on the worst riots and lynchings—including those in Chicago, Washington, D.C., Charleston, Omaha and Knoxville—Cameron McWhirter chronicles the mayhem, while also exploring the first stirrings of a civil rights movement that would transform American society forty years later.

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Editorial Review

Review

"McWhirter makes clear in his carefully researched, briskly narrated account of this difficult period in our national history, African Americans were increasingly disinclined to take advice from even well-meaning whites. The NAACP, founded in 1909 by a primarily white group of Northern liberals, was transformed by the events of 1919 into America's premier civil rights organization, led by African Americans from the South."—Wendy Smith, *Los Angeles Times*

"That it is one of the most shameful periods in our history is beyond question. Yet McWhirter is right to insist that during this same time, forgotten though it may be, 'Black America awakened politically, socially, and artistically [as] never before.' The first stirrings of what became the Harlem Renaissance were felt, and seeds were planted that bore fruit in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. As McWhirter says, if you explore the whole story of those troubled months, you are left not thinking of America's bald and cruel failings, but of its astounding and elastic resilience. 'The Red Summer' is a story of destruction, but it is also a story of the beginning of a freedom movement."— Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post*

"A riveting account of the summer that transformed American race relations."—Vanessa Bush, *Booklist* (Starred Review)

"Masterly examination of the widespread outbreak of racially motivated mob violence in the summer of 1919. In his debut, *Wall Street Journal* staff reporter McWhirter describes in gripping detail a wave of incidents of mob violence that erupted across America in the summer following the end of World War I. . . . Throughout the book, the author writes with professional detachment, permitting his subjects' words and deeds to speak eloquently for themselves, amplified by liberal quotation from the vibrant black press of the period. An unsettling reminder of the cruelty and hatred that can lie beneath the surface of a nation formally committed to equal justice for all, but also a monument to the suffering and perseverance of a people at last determined to demand rights promised but too long denied."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"The author brings a journalist's diligent digging and skillful storytelling to this historical account; behind the names of towns, he takes the reader into the lives of victims who suffered, perpetrators who destroyed, enablers who dawdled, and politicians who profited, as well as those who fought back. . . . McWhirter's valuable study, in chronologically examining the outbreaks of violence, may well qualify as 'the first narrative history of America's deadliest episode of race riots and lynchings.'"—*PW*

"McWhirter's narrative style will engage general readers unfamiliar with events during America's early 20th-century civil rights struggle. Professional historians will appreciate the extensive, well-sourced newspaper and archival research."—Frederick J. Augustyn Jr., *Library Journal*

"McWhirter, a reporter who has worked around the globe and is now based at the Atlanta bureau of the Wall Street Journal, makes his case with deft prose and an exhaustive survey of the historical record… His reportorial skills make this an original and skillful contribution to the literature on the subject."—Jim Cullen, *History News Network*

"In *Red Summer*, Wall Street Journal reporter Cameron McWhirter skillfully reconstructs this bloody and

unsettling period, a pivotal stretch from April to October that produced ripple effects extending to our time. . . . There's a social consciousness to McWhirter's approach that is enormously appealing. It's as if he's walking through a neglected graveyard, etching names into gravestones that we have allowed to fade for fear of the stories that go with all those deaths. . . McWhirter's insistence on attaching names—to the dead and, when possible, to those responsible for the violence—provides the book with a cumulative power and a sense of historical accountability."—Ken Armstrong, *Seattle Times*

"Cameron McWhirter, not a historian but a journalist, has written [a fresh, compelling book about race relations]."—Steve Weinberg, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*

"McWhirter weaves an understated, powerful narrative. . . In unflinching, just-the-facts style bolstered with copious footnotes, McWhirter describes how the entrenched white power structure—small-town police, elected officials, businessmen and even newspapers—were bent on preserving the social order in uncertain economic times. But African-Americans, some of whom had fought with valor in World War I, were chafing under Jim Crow rule and discrimination in the open marketplace."—Joseph Williams, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

"A must read! This visual chronicle is enhanced with pictures and the antidotes of heroes such as Thurgood Marshall, James Weldon Johnson, and W.E. B. Du Bois. I'd characterize this selection as a Black historian's dream work. I tread through the pages spellbound with feelings of sadness, pain, and hope. Students and educators will find this is a book to cite and refer to for many years to come."—Rosetta Codling, *Atlanta Examiner*

"There are plenty of eye-opening revelations in *Red Summer*. . . the first narrative history of that epochal year. McWhirter is a reporter for The Wall Street Journal, and much of the obviously extensive research he has done involves the way the newspapers covered the violence at the time. Not only does he give narratives of the causes and details of the riots in Chicago, Washington, Omaha and other cities, he gives a broader picture of the reasons 1919 should have been a particular year for racial violence, and the changes the violence wrought."—Rob Hardy, *The Columbus Dispatch*

"It has taken nearly a century for a narrative history of this tragic episode in American history to be written, and Wall Street Journal reporter Cameron McWhirter has done a superb job in *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America.* The book is well-researched, and McWhirter's journalistic skills serve him well in writing about such a sensitive subject. His prose is carefully constructed and clear, and he avoids the temptation to embellish."—Michael Taylor, *Richmond Times Dispatch*

"Cameron McWhirter, staff reporter for the Wall Street Journal and author of *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* has done a top-notch job of shining a light on a particularly horrific chapter in a long line of appalling treatment of African-Americans." –Peggy Carlson, *Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star*

"Weaving the great economic and political tides of the post-World War I era together with deeply personal stories, researched and written with an artist's eye for detail and a novelist's sense of pacing, Cameron McWhirter recounts an eight-month 'spasm of brutality' in which white mobs attached more than two dozen African-American communities."—*Hamilton College Magazine*

"The old boast is that everything is bigger and better in America. Cameron McWhirter's comprehensive history of the terrible Red Summer of 1919 reminds us that, because our failures at democracy are also very big, we have to be even better at understanding why."—David Levering Lewis, author of *King: A Biography* and *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*

About the Author

Cameron McWhirter is a staff reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*. He was awarded a Nieman Foundation Fellowship for Journalism at Harvard in 2007. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

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1.

Carswell Grove

[T]here has been nobody suffered in this matter like I have. I did not do nothing at all to cause that riot.

JOE RUFFIN

April 13, 1919, was perfect for a celebration. As Joe Ruffin set out to do his morning chores that Sunday, the sky was cloudless and blue. The temperature was in the high 70s—normal for spring in east Georgia.

The sixty-year-old man started the day at his barn, rushing to feed his pigs, cows, and horses so he would not be late. He had sent his children ahead to the Carswell Grove Baptist Church in one of the family's two cars, a Buick Six. Ruffin would follow later. The church festival was to mark its fifty-second anniversary. Preachers from several counties were coming to deliver sermons. The choir would give a special performance. More than three thousand people would be on hand for a gala cookout of roast pig and fried chicken. Though Ruffin was not a Carswell Grove member, he had been asked to speak as a prominent black Mason and treasurer of another black church.

Ruffin had lived his entire life amid fields of cotton and sugar cane east of Millen, the seat of Jenkins County. The land he tilled was once part of the plantation where his parents worked as slaves. Ruffin remained on good terms with the Daniel family, the former slave owners. Ruffin owned almost 113 acres.1 He ran five to seven plows a season—a substantial operation for anyone in that part of Georgia at the time and a major accomplishment for a black farmer. Unlike many blacks in the area, he could read and write, though census records did not report him having any formal education.2

Many of the years had been tough. Several times Ruffin had to mortgage tracts of land. He even took out loans on his mules and horses to cover debts.3

He had a large family. The 1910 census recorded three sons and four daughters living with him, plus another son and his family down the road. Ruffin was a widower.

Two sons—John Holiday, twenty-six, and Henry, thirteen—lived at home. Louis Ruffin, in his late twenties, farmed nearby.4 A fourth son, Joe Andrew Ruffin, twenty-four, served with the U.S. Army in France. He was due home in time for the fall harvest.

Whatever Ruffin's past struggles, 1919 was shaping up to be profitable. Cotton was fetching extraordinary prices, averaging more than 35 cents per pound, the highest ever.5 The Great War, which the United States entered in April 1917, was a boon for cotton. Textile mills needed tons of it for uniforms and other goods. The war's end the previous November had opened a broader market for cotton; mills across the world needed it for civilian clothes. Supply was limited as the ineluctable spread of the boll weevil reduced production in many parts of the South, including Georgia. Higher prices, fueled in part by cotton scarcity, helped farmers. The previous month, Congress boosted the price of cotton further by passing an amendment to the federal Cotton Futures Act, making it easier for speculators to make bids.6 As global demand for cotton increased, futures skyrocketed. This spike was a windfall for Ruffin and millions of other southern farmers from Virginia to Texas.

Jenkins County, Georgia, lay in the lower third of a swath of cotton farmland that extended from eastern Virginia into southern Alabama. From colonial days, the region had evolved into a network of plantations, cotton storehouses, and small towns grouped along a major road that later supported a railroad running south from Augusta to the Atlantic port of Savannah. Jenkins was rural and poor, like most counties in the region. Blacks accounted for almost two-thirds of its population.7 Many blacks in the county were illiterate, and election records indicate that only a handful were allowed to vote. All county government officials, from commissioners to police, were white.

Most blacks in Jenkins County were sharecroppers renting land from white landlords, but a growing number owned property, a phenomenon occurring all over the South. In the first decades of the twentieth century, despite the legal barriers imposed by Jim Crow, the number of acres owned by black farmers rose. In Georgia, black ownership jumped by 75 percent from 1899 to 1919.8 These landowners formed the "respectable" classes of black society in southern towns. They sat on church boards and led social groups. They generally had good relations with white business owners and politicians, serving as go-betweens when racial friction erupted. In the late morning of this particular April Sunday, Joe Ruffin was the embodiment of this new class, having spent a lifetime navigating the racial restrictions of southern life. Through luck and hard work, he had prospered and never gave "offense to any white man in the county."9

By the late afternoon of that April 13, however, almost every white man in Jenkins County wanted Joe Ruffin dead.

* * *

Around 11:30 a.m., Ruffin's youngest son, Henry, came back to the farm to get his father.10 Masons at the festival had asked for him.11 Ruffin changed into his best Sunday clothes, then got in his second car—a late-model, high-powered Ford touring car—and headed down the road. Henry stayed at the farm. The 15-mile drive from Ruffin's farm near Billies Branch to the church was cut with swampy creeks and hollows.12 The roads were unpaved. The car drove past acre upon acre of young cotton plants, very low to the ground with thin waxy leaves. Jenkins County is in the middle part of the state near the Savannah River Valley, where Georgia's Piedmont slopes gradually toward the coast. Georgia's famous red clay is sandier in this part of the state and a paler shade of orange. Ruffin could see cultivated land for miles, broken up by copses of loblolly pine and scrub oak as well as thickets of holly and cypress. Hawks and buzzards circled the sky.

Sometime after 2 p.m., Ruffin reached Big Buckhead Church Road, the final road leading to the festival. The dirt road had been around since the earliest settlers cut through the forest. As he crossed Buckhead Creek Bridge, Big Buckhead Church—one of the oldest inland white congregations in the South—was on his left. Across the road, mossy obelisk grave markers of Confederate veterans stood in a small cemetery.13 In the closing days of the Civil War, when Ruffin was a young boy, Union and Confederate cavalry battled here.14 The rebels lost; hundreds were killed.15

Carswell Grove was founded two and a half years after the battle in the midst of the social turmoil caused by the Confederacy's collapse. After the war, whites at Big Buckhead Church kicked out blacks, who for generations had sat in segregated pews. Porter W. Carswell, a white judge who owned nearby Bellevue Plantation, gave black congregants two acres of scrubland to erect their own place of worship just down the road. The congregants named their new church in his honor. By 1919, Carswell Grove Baptist Church boasted more than a thousand members, most of them sharecroppers. The yearly celebration of the church's founding was one of the largest African American gatherings in east Georgia.

As Ruffin drove up the low ridge, he saw throngs of black men, women, and children milling about the grounds. They were talking and laughing—it was the cacophony of a large, joyous group. Ruffin parked his car and joined them. After a short time, Ruffin remembered that he had left the door to his house unlocked and decided to drive home. He got in his car, but the swelling crowds blocked the road. He drove as far as he could, almost to Big Buckhead Church, when he was forced to stop and wait for people to move along.

As he sat there, an older Ford drove up behind him and then pulled alongside. People scrambled off the road to get out of the car's way. It stopped abruptly and Ruffin looked over at its occupants: two white lawmen and a distraught black man in handcuffs. Ruffin knew the black man: Edmund Scott, his longtime friend.16 The driver was W. Clifford Brown, a Jenkins County police officer. In the back of the car with Scott sat Thomas Stephens, a Millen police night marshal. When he saw Ruffin, Scott frantically shouted to the white officers, "I can get him to stand my bond."17

Why the two white officers were at the black gathering is unclear. They had no warrant. Marshal Stephens was not even in his jurisdiction. In all likelihood, they were in search of illegal alcohol. Brown and Stephens were known for going after stills and liquor joints known in many parts of the South as "blind tigers."18 That spring, the National Prohibition Act was making its way through Congress. It would enforce the Eighteenth Amendment, which banned the sale of liquor nationwide. But in Georgia, the ongoing murky contest between police and those who made, sold, and drank liquor was an old game. In 1907, the Georgia legislature, bowing to pressure from Baptists, passed a law banning alcohol.19 The law was enacted partly in response to the Atlanta race riot of 1906, when white mobs attacked blacks for three days. Twenty-five blacks and one white were killed. White opponents of alcohol argued that heavy drinking in downtown saloons had been a catalyst for trouble, which they blamed primarily on blacks. The law, however, did little to suppress Georgia's thirst. By 1919, a thriving underground network of alcohol manufacturers and distributors operated across the state. The police, who were always white, played a running game of cat-and-mouse with still operators, many of whom were black. Sometimes police destroyed confiscated booze. Sometimes corrupt officers resold it. One newspaper reported that Brown, in only three months on the force, filed more than a hundred cases against gamblers and liquor manufacturers. The same report said Brown suspected Scott and the Ruffins of running a still.20

L. W. Beach, a white superintendent over black sharecroppers at a nearby plantation, told a different story. Beach was at the festival that day, driving impoverished blacks who did not own buggies or wagons to and from the church for one dollar a ride. He said Brown and Stephens were not investigating Scott or Ruffin. The white law officers claimed they arrested Scott, the festival's marshal of ceremonies, only after he brandished a weapon when they almost crashed into his car.21

Scott, who was driving a minister from another county to the fair, was infuriated by the officer's wild driving. Beach heard Scott say, "That is the way with some people, they haven't got a damn bit of manners." Brown and Stephens then arrested Scott, charging him with possession of an unregistered firearm. They were heading back to the Millen jail with Scott when they passed by Ruffin's car and Scott shouted for help. Officer Brown stopped his car and called for Ruffin. Ruffin got out of his car, walked over and stood on the running board of the police car.

"What is the trouble with Edmund?" Ruffin asked. Officer Brown said they had found a concealed pistol in Scott's car. Beach, positioned about thirty feet away, saw Ruffin take out a checkbook and offer to write a bond check for his friend. The officer told him he needed cash. Ruffin said he could not get that kind of money, $400, on a Sunday. Brown then said, "God damn it, I am going to carry him in."

A large crowd immediately gathered around the car, including two of Ruffin's sons, Louis and John Holiday. People who were there said Ruffin reached in and tried to pull Scott out. Brown became incensed and shouted, "God damn it, get back." He pulled out his pistol and struck Ruffin in the face. The gun went off, hitting Ruffin on the left side of his head, knocking him to the dirt. Ruffin said later he was unconscious for a few minutes. Others said he got up right away.

One person who was there said Louis, Joe's oldest son, rushed the car, wrested the gun from Brown and shot the police officer in the head, neck, and body, killing him. Two others said that the father, Joe Ruffin, killed Brown, pulling out his own pistol and firing into the police car. Others said Officer Stephens, a short, heavyset man, stepped out of the car, hunkered down with his pistol drawn. Another round of gunfire erupted. Scott, caught in the middle and handcuffed, was shot to death as he struggled to get out of the way. Stephens was wounded and slumped to the ground.

"It was just like a package of poppers [firecrackers]," said Ed Tancemore, a white man who saw the shooting, adding that it took no longer than a finger snap. In an instant, Brown and Scott were dead, slumped in the blood-smeared Ford. Stephens lay on the ground, bleeding but conscious. Black men in the crowd attacked him. Some said Ruffin's two sons led the assault. Tancemore watched as Stephens was beaten: "Every time he would get up, they would knock him back until they got him down the side of the car, and one of them placed his foot in his breast and the other handed him an oak limb, and right there they stopped him."

Police later found a blood-soaked oak branch beside Stephens's mutilated body. A newspaper account described Stephens as "a shapeless mass."22 He took as long as two hours to die.

Ruffin said that after he was shot, he "fell to the ground and did not know anything at all until my boy J. Holiday and Willie Williams picked me up off the ground, and went walking with me off to my car." Ruffin said his friend Williams tried to hand him the checkbook that he dropped when he was shot. Williams also offered him a gun.

"No, keep them," Ruffin said. "I have got no use for them now at all. I better go to the doctor because I believe I am going to die."23

Someone, perhaps one of his sons, perhaps Williams, started Ruffin's Ford. Ruffin sat in the passenger seat, his head gushing with blood, his ears ringing from the gunshots. Smoke stung his nostrils as he looked upon the contorted corpses of a friend he had known his whole life and a white law officer. The other officer, Stephens, writhed on the ground, mortally wounded. Surveying the scene, Ruffin knew immediately he would be lynched when the white mob came for him. And there was no doubt it would come—if he lived that long. Word of the incident spread farmhouse by farmhouse across the county. The word traveled along two distinct vectors: black and white. Blacks hid in their homes while hundreds of white men grabbed their guns and headed toward Carswell Grove.

As Ruffin was rushed from the scene, he asked to be taken to the home of the only person who could help him—Jim Perkins, the most powerful white man in Jenkins County, whose farm was three miles from the shooting. Perkins, the chairman of the board of commissioners, had known Ruffin his whole life. Perkins was waiting at a nearby train depot when a black man told him a wounded Joe Ruffin had arrived at his farm. Perkins rushed home.

Ruffin recalled telling Perkins, "I was only trying to offer him [Brown] a bond for Edmund, and he got mad and shot me down for nothing."

Perkins remembered Ruffin telling him, "Mr. Brown shot me and it made me so mad I jumped up and emptied my pistol at him."

Perkins was baffled that Ruffin was in trouble. "I consider he came to me because he didn't know where to go or what to do," he said later.24

Perkins got the county jail physician, J. R. Littleton, to bandage Ruffin's head, and then drove to meet the county sheriff, M. G. Johnson, at the scene of the shooting. The two men saw the dead Brown and Scott and the dying Stephens. When the gathering white farmers learned Ruffin was alive and at Perkins's house, they became incensed. Perkins and Sheriff Johnson rushed back to protect him.

Ruffin sat bandaged on a cot in a cook's shed when Perkins and Johnson burst in. "Joe, come on, a mob is coming after you," they yelled. They had Ruffin lie in the back of Perkins's Cadillac, then drove north as fast as they could. Cars filled with angry white men pursued them all the way to Waynesboro, the seat of the next county. Perkins and Johnson then decided to drive on to the nearest big city, Augusta, about 45 miles away. They arrived about 6:30 p.m. and put Ruffin in the jail there. Ruffin recalled his jailer told him he had "better be proud Mr. Johnson and Mr. Perkins brought me for safekeeping and I told him I was."25

As Ruffin lay in his cell, mobs took vengeance in Jenkins County. In the first of many acts of violence that night, white men with guns charged the church at Carswell Grove, firing as they came. Congregants jumped through windows and took off into the woods. Mothers tossed children through the windows, and then scrambled behind them.26The mob torched the building.27 Smoke and flames could be seen for miles as dusk descended.

White men went to Ruffin's farm and grabbed his youngest son, Henry. No account mentions the whereabouts of Ruffin's daughters. They apparently fled. Somewhere near the church, the mob also grabbed another Ruffin, John Holiday. Louis Ruffin escaped. The mob took Ruffin's car and drove the two boys back to the roaring fire at the remains of the Carswell Grove church. The mob burned Ruffin's car, one of the clearest symbols of the black man's relative wealth. White men then hung a wagon "trace" chain around one son's neck and a rope around the other's. They threw both of Ruffin's sons into the flames. It is not clear whether they were dead when they were tossed into the fire. At some point, the bodies were shot. When the corpses were examined the next day, it was impossible to tell which son suffered the chain and which got the rope.

The mob next moved south to Millen. Three black Masonic lodges were torched. At least two more cars owned by blacks were destroyed. One black man was shot and wounded; mob members told a reporter that the man was at fault for acting suspiciously by running away when they approached. There were reports of other blacks murdered in remote sections of the county.

The crescendo of the mob's work in Millen was the abduction and lynching of Ruffin's friend Willie Williams, who had helped him get up after being shot. Sheriff's deputies took him into custody, presumably for his own safety. First they put him in the county jail near the courthouse. When they learned a mob was searching for Williams, they hid him in a nearby stable. But a mob easily found Williams. They dragged him three miles outside of town to a remote swamp hollow. They tortured him, and then shot him to death. Word came from the mob that before he died, Williams confessed to a plot to kill Brown because of his anti-liquor activities, though he would not tell the mob where Louis Ruffin, allegedly wounded, was hiding.28 Blacks lured the white law officers into a trap, the story went. Another black man who was arrested, Jim Davis, also "confessed" to the plot and his life was spared. The story made its way, without any evidence or attribution,

into news accounts of the lynchings, offering white readers moral justification for what happened. Whites cast the killings as all lynchings were presented, as *lex talionis*—the law of retribution.

The morning of April 14, the *Augusta Chronicle* ran a front-page, banner headline in capital letters: "RACE RIOT AT MILLEN; NEGRO IN JAIL HERE." The *Macon Telegraph* reported the day after the lynchings that hundreds of whites came to Carswell Grove and "found the church a charred ruin. The bodies of the two Ruffins—what was left of them—were still lying on the ground."29 White reporters filed stories from the telegraph office at the Millen Depot, spreading the news across the country. The*Telegraph* reported Millen's blacks circulating a petition asking whites not to burn down any more of their churches. Black Masons in Jenkins wrote to the *Atlanta Independent*, the main black newspaper in the state, to solicit donations to rebuild their destroyed lodges. The letter never mentioned the lynchings but only pleaded for money "to help us in our trouble as none of us know just where and when our troubles are coming."30

The published accounts were full of inaccuracies, ranging from minor misspellings to confusion over whether the mob had lynched Louis Ruffin. No newspaper—white or black—ever definitively reported how many people were killed; the number ranged from four to seven. In many of the stories, hearsay blended with fact, and prejudice assumed the guise of accepted wisdom. White mob members were not quoted or named. Blacks were not interviewed. White newspapers discounted the riot as a regrettable aberration as soon as it was over.

"All is quiet again," assured Jenkins County journalist John Gordon Ellison in the April 16 *Atlanta Constitution*. "The innocent will have nothing to fear."

Black newspapers, in the midst of a golden age of growth across the country, ran the Jenkins County story and put their own agenda onto the bare facts. At the time, the*Chicago Defender* was the nation's largest black newspaper, with a circulation of more than 100,000. Much of that circulation penetrated the Deep South, where most of America's more than 10 million blacks lived.31

The *Defender*'s defense of black rights, sharp criticism of Jim Crow, and ardent call for southern blacks to migrate to northern cities aroused deep hatred from southern whites. Southern legislators moved to ban its distribution. Black readers loved it. On April 19, the *Defender* picked up the Jenkins County story with the headline: "White Officer Is Killed for Breaking Up Church." The *Defender* story laid blame on the white police officers for trying to break up a revival meeting and turned the piece into a pro-migration story.

"It appears to have been another case of too much of the ‚ÄòSouthern Idea' of interfering with our people, this part of the country representing the usual type of Georgia civilization," the article read.

Some suggested whites were threatened by the economic success that black men like Ruffin embodied. William Pickens, famed dean of the black Morgan State University in Baltimore, wrote about the clash on the front page of the *Washington Bee*, a newspaper serving what was then the nation's largest black urban population. Pickens wrote that Ruffin, "one of the wealthiest Negroes in Jenkins County," had been shot and his sons lynched in part because whites were jealous of his wealth.32

"This disposition of the South to govern the Negro without his consent or participation, to really ‚Äòkeep the Negro down,' will make trouble to the end of it," he added.33

The *Savannah Tribune*, a black weekly, declared the violence was a reaction to the rising economic status of southern black farmers. The root cause, it argued, was "a deep-seated envy and animosity toward a few thrifty and industrious Negroes there who committed no worse wrong than to appropriate to themselves the right and privilege to own pleasure automobiles to enjoy and break the monotony of their Sundays."34

The editorial stated: "The tension and stress of racial hate and envy is so unnecessary and so unwarranted that it cannot obtain for many years more. Negro progress will continue: the attitude and opposition of the lawless, shiftless lynching elements must yield."

But the white mobs did not yield. They roamed Jenkins County for days. They grabbed a black man from neighboring Burke County, believing he was Louis Ruffin. Only when the terrified man was brought back to Millen and properly identified did they turn him loose. The mob made threats to get Joe Ruffin from jail in Augusta. When his jailers heard a mob was headed their way, they sent Ruffin to a jail in Aiken, South Carolina. Even out of state, Ruffin had no idea whether a white mob might show up some night to lynch him. Sending mobs far distances to kill people was not without precedent in Georgia. Georgia led the nation in lynchings in 1918 and had the most lynchings of any state since anyone had cared to keep records.35 In a notorious case in 1915, a mob traveled over several counties to kidnap Leo Frank, a Jewish businessman, and lynch him for the alleged rape and murder of a young white girl, Mary Phagan. Hugh Dorsey, the prosecutor handling the Frank case, had been mortified by the lynching, which made national news and outraged Jews across the country. Dorsey became governor after Frank's death in part due to a promise to crack down on lynching.

In early 1919, Dorsey drafted legislation to authorize the state to seize control of sheriffs's departments and levy fines against county officials who did not suppress lynching. A day after the Carswell Grove lynchings, a reporter found Dorsey at a hotel in Macon and asked him about the violence.

"I have put in a call for the sheriff," he said. "And if the county authorities wish any state aid, the National Guard organizations at Savannah can be quickly rushed to the scene of the trouble."36

No such request was ever made; Jenkins County would handle the "trouble" itself. The county prosecutor charged Joe Ruffin with the murders of officers Brown and Scott and ordered that he be returned for trial. If Ruffin made it to trial without being lynched, his conviction was certain and his hanging would follow. No white person was ever arrested or charged with any crime relating to the riots and lynchings of April 13 or the destruction of the church and other buildings. Perkins, the county commission chairman who had rushed Ruffin to safety, ruled that no inquest regarding the white attackers was necessary.

At some point, someone—perhaps a jailer who read newspaper accounts of the lynching—told Ruffin that two of his sons were dead.

"This is an awful thing. It is awful!" Ruffin moaned later. "I am sorry for Mr. Brown. I am also sorry for Mr. Stephens; I am sorry for their families, but there has been nobody suffered in this matter like I have. I did not do nothing at all to cause that riot."37

The Jenkins County riot was not an isolated tragedy. In coming months, similar horrors would afflict cities and towns across America. The violence that April Sunday was only the beginning of what would become known as the Red Summer of 1919, when riots and lynchings spread throughout the country, causing havoc and harming thousands—yet also awakening millions of blacks to fight for rights guaranteed them, but so long denied.

Excerpted from Red Summer by Cameron McWhirter
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