



**FLAMES ARISING: OIL AND FIRE, THE LYNCHING OF JOHN HENDERSON  
AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF A TEXAS COMMUNITY**

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## Introduction

The crowd had increased to about two thousand; at 11 o'clock, about forty men made a rush from the jail across the street to the courthouse. In their midst an African American man named John Henderson stood handcuffed. Henderson had been accused of brutally murdering a local woman named Valley Younger. The men formed a circle, holding on to a chain, which surrounded Henderson, to prevent any attempt of the enraged citizens to get to him and tear him to pieces. They rushed to the pile of wood prepared for the fire and fastened the young man to the iron rail with wires and chains. Cans of oil were dashed over his clothes and dozens of lighted matches touched to the flammable material. At that time, the fire bell rang, and people rushed from the stores of the city into the streets toward the courthouse to witness the burning. Just before the pile began to burn, Conway Younger, husband of the murdered woman, jumped at Henderson and slashed him across the face with a knife. As, the flames encircled the young man and spread over his clothing, the crowd yelled and Younger again attempted to cut the accused murderer with his knife. At no time during the burning did Henderson give any indications of pain or suffering. He rolled his eyes as to get a glimpse of the sea of angry faces which surrounded him. His hands moved slightly. In about ten minutes the movements of his hands became feebler, and then he died. At no time had he cried out, other than to utter groans of agony. The northbound central train arrived at 12 o'clock, and was crowded with people from the southern part of Navarro County, who expressed disappointment in being too late to take part in the lynching.<sup>1</sup> This appalling event did not take place on the fringes of a backwards frontier society, but rather in the modern agricultural and petroleum center of Corsicana, Texas.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dallas Daily Times Herald*, March 13, 1901.

The Webster College Dictionary defines Lynch Law as the punishment of presumed crimes or offences, usually by death, without the due process of law. From the beginnings of Anglo-Texas history, lynching served as an accepted practice of extralegal punishment. Only in the states of Georgia and Mississippi did the number of lynchings exceed those that occurred in Texas.<sup>2</sup> During the Progressive Era, a marked surge in lynching occurred. What had been a practice given to all members of Texas society regardless of race, now became an institution reserved predominately for African Americans.

In 1901, in Navarro County Texas, ironically a county named after a Hispanic Texas revolutionary hero, racial violence reached a level not experienced before. As Corsicana grew into a substantial modern city, fueled by the wealth of petroleum, incidents of racial conflict continued to increase. While racial violence occurred in previous years within Navarro County, it had not reached the level recorded in 1901. The violence culminated in the lynching of John Henderson on March 12th 1901, but did not cease until some time later. Only when the discovery of oil in Beaumont, Texas took the spotlight away from Corsicana's oil fields did the violence begin to taper off. Although the racial lynching of John Henderson is not unique in Texas history, it does serve as a typical example of a "spectacle" racial lynching. With careful analysis of this specific horrific event, the historian can gain insight into the mindset of the lynching perpetrators and to the causes behind these horrendous events.

Throughout the last century, historians have attempted to explain the motivations behind these acts of racial barbarism. One of the first to do so was the African American

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<sup>2</sup> *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1919), 7.

novelist Walter White. He theorized, in his 1929 work *Rope and Faggot*, that lynching was primarily a method of controlling black labor.<sup>3</sup> While this work served as an important beginning to the study of lynching, it failed to fully explain the phenomenon. White's work most importantly informed the public of these lynching occurrences and helped instigate a movement to abolish the practice. Arthur Raper followed with his pioneering work, *The Tragedy of Lynching*. Raper argued that lynching occurred in backward isolated communities, such as those found in nineteenth century rural Georgia.<sup>4</sup> Only since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s have historians and other social scientists begun to reexamine this story of brutality in the history of race relations.<sup>5</sup>

Historians have offered several theories as to what could be behind the act of the southern lynching. Many scholars contend that American lynching somehow demonstrated the population's lack of belief in the due process of law.<sup>6</sup> Other investigators, such as Michael Pfeifer, suggested that common citizens believed that since they produced the laws they had the absolute right to form mobs and enforce the laws themselves.<sup>7</sup> One of the most popular explanations for the cause of lynching is that of the idea of a "frontier mentality." Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis suggested that a unique collective mentality and character emerged on the peripheries of the American frontier.<sup>8</sup> Although Turner did not specifically comment on the practice of lynching, adherents of his theory speculate that as the United States expanded across North America, the lack of official law enforcement enabled ordinary citizens to take the law

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<sup>3</sup> Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (New York: Beaufort Books, 1929)

<sup>4</sup> Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1933)

<sup>5</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 10.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Waldrep, *Lynching in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Waldrep, *Lynching in America*, 3-4.



into their own hands. Later, historians began to propose theories that lynching was being used as a tool by the elite classes to control their subordinates. The nineteenth century journalist Ida B. Wells believed that the origins of black lynchings could be directly linked to the emancipation of the slaves. Historians such as Grace Elizabeth Hale believe that the “spectacle lynching” was a product of the modernization and industrialization of American society.<sup>9</sup> Another prominent theory, cited by many southerners, is the fear of the “black rapist” or the idea of the defense of southern white womanhood.<sup>10</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage explains in his work *Lynching in the New South* that after emancipation the white culture of the South was threatened by the new community of free African Americans. He subscribes to the theory that the old Southern racial hierarchy and code of honor was being destroyed by the changing status of the African American. Brundage believes that under these circumstances the Anglo community responded with the practice of lynching to attempt to reinforce their racial hierarchy.

While the racial violence of Navarro County Texas did display almost all aspects of these theories, several stand out as being particularly relevant to the situation that developed. Brundage’s theories on the changing racial hierarchy in the South and the threatening of Southern honor seem to fit the Corsicana situation well. The theory put forth by Grace Elizabeth Hale also appears to fit the situation seen in Navarro County. The modernization and industrialization she describes in her work were all prevalent in Corsicana of 1901.

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<sup>9</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, “Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940” in *A History in Documents Lynching in America*, ed. Christopher Waldrep (New York, 2006), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Robyn Wiegman, “The Anatomy of a Lynching,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*/ 3 (January 1993): 456-462.

Only recently have historians begun to investigate occurrences of racial lynchings in the state of Texas. Three book-length works have looked specifically at Texas lynchings. One of these works is *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas 1836-1916*, by William D. Carrigan. This work attempts to explain how lynching became an accepted practice in Texas. Carrigan adheres to the ideas put forth by Fredrick Jackson Turner. He contends that the very nature of the colonization of Texas developed a system of people taking the law into their own hands and applying their own ideas of justice. While Carrigan's theories do hold some credence in the early settling of Texas, they do not fully apply to the situation seen in the modernizing city of Corsicana. One other recent publication to look specifically at Texas lynching is *The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington And the Rise of the NAACP*, by journalist Patricia Bernstein. This book investigates the torture lynching of seventeen-year-old Jesse Washington in Waco, Texas, and the reactions of elements of society who fought the institution of lynching. While Bernstein does an exceptional job of chronicling the lynching itself and the reactions against it, she does not fully analyze the causes of the phenomenon. The third and most recent work is titled *Lynching to Belong* by Cynthia Nevels. This fascinating work takes the stand that recent European immigrants in Brazos County chose to take part in the practice of lynching African Americans in order to "prove" their whiteness. She contends that by taking part in these atrocious activities they were able to assimilate into the older established Anglo society.<sup>11</sup> This does not appear to be the case in Navarro County as there was not a massive immigration of Czech, Polish, or German immigrants as in Brazos County.

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<sup>11</sup> Cynthia Nevels, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness Through Racial Violence* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007).

Missing from the three works is any mention of the lynching of John Henderson. It is intriguing that no historians have attempted to analyze the 1901 lynching of Henderson. His lynching was as public and violent as that of Jesse Washington, and nearly as many people took part in the violence. Both of these lynchings included photographic documentation, thousands of observers, and the torture and burning of the victim, yet the John Henderson incident, neglected by historians, has faded from the public's historical memory.

This thesis will examine the historical background of the city of Corsicana, Texas and its road to modernization. It will focus particularly on the discovery of petroleum and the advancement of the oil industry in and around Corsicana. It will also chronicle the events of racial strife, seen in Corsicana beginning in the late nineteenth century. In particular, this thesis will focus on the lynching of John Henderson. This work will attempt to explain how such a horrible and cruel act could take place in a town where racial violence on this level had not previously occurred. Blacks and whites had lived together in relative peace until the 1890s, but at this time a fundamental shift in society took place. With the founding of the petroleum industry and the increase in railway lines, new people began to migrate into the area. This thesis will explore how the very dynamics of Corsicana and the surrounding area changed. Due to these extreme changes in society two distinct groups developed, those people who had come from the rural traditional Southern way of life and those who belonged to the modern urban progressive era. Agricultural traditional workers who adhered to the ways of the old South and the Democratic Party saw their lifestyles slipping away and chose lynching as a way to preserve their threatened way of life. This thesis will also examine how all of these

changing forces united to cause a situation where a spectacle lynching could occur, and why this racial violence sprang fourth in the early 1890s but quickly disappeared after the events of March 1901.

## Chapter 1

### Corsicana's Past and Road to Modernization

In order to comprehend the lynching of John Henderson it is important to investigate the history of Corsicana leading up to the year 1901. Corsicana was founded in 1848 when it served as the county seat of the newly formed Navarro County. José Antonio Navarro, a hero of the Texas Revolution, after whom the county was named, was given the honor of naming the new town; he suggested Corsicana after the island of Corsica, the birthplace of his parents. David R. Miller, an early settler, donated one hundred acres for a town site. The new town began near a log tavern built in 1847. The first courthouse was built in 1849 and consisted of a two-room log structure. This structure served its purpose until 1853, when a new building was completed. The old courthouse then became the first school. Within a few years of the town's founding, a large number of mercantile establishments opened on and around the courthouse square. A new brick courthouse, the scene of the John Henderson lynching, was erected in 1858, and quickly became a symbol of the town's growing prosperity. By dedicating their limited resources to the building of a courthouse, the citizens of Corsicana demonstrated their early devotion to the due process of law.<sup>12</sup>

By 1850, Corsicana's population had already grown to near twelve hundred people of whom three hundred were African American slaves. Due to the influence of slaveholders in the town, Corsicana residents supported John Breckinridge over the

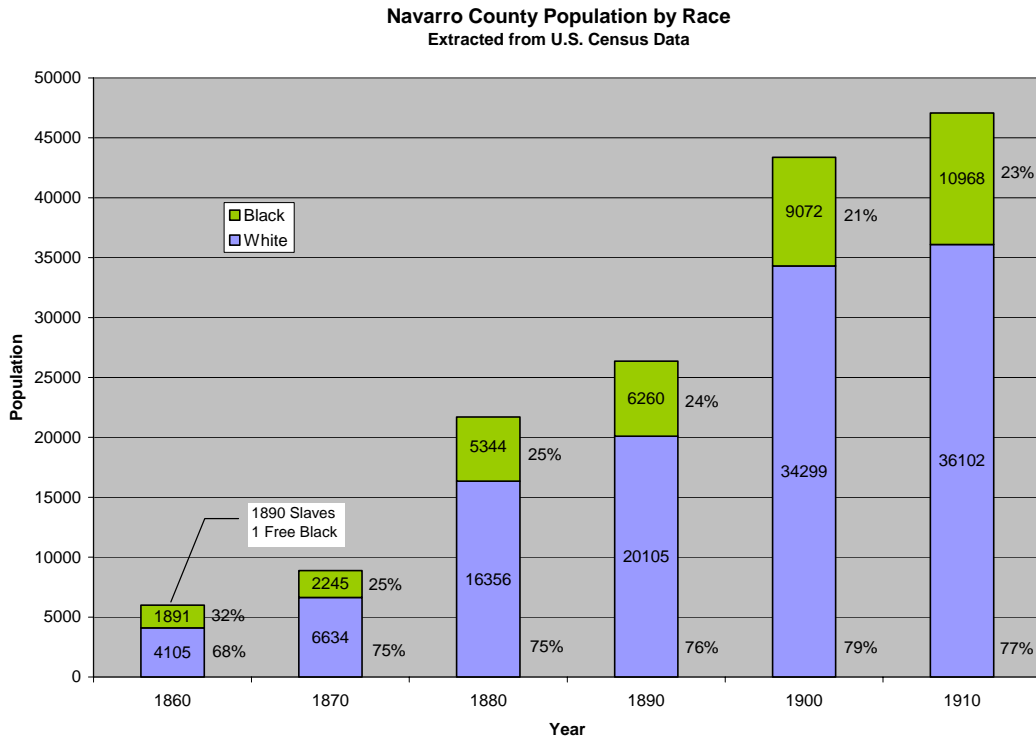
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<sup>12</sup> "Corsicana," Handbook of Texas Online, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/CC/hec5.html> (accessed 12 Jun 2008).

Fusionist slate of candidates in the presidential election of 1860. Figure 1 illustrates the population growth of Navarro County, broken down by race, from 1860 through 1910. In February 1861 when elections took place over the secession issue, the vote was almost unanimous with 213 in favor and three opposing. In April 1861, when the Civil War broke out, the townspeople of Corsicana held a mass demonstration on the courthouse square in favor of the Confederacy, and appeals sounded for volunteers to serve in the Confederate Army of Virginia. Later a company known as the Navarro Rifles formed and fought under the command of Captain Clinton M. Winkler. Before the war's end, four additional companies formed in Corsicana. After the war, Union soldiers occupied the town, but Corsicana saw very little of the strife that existed in many other Texas cities during Reconstruction. Captain R.A. Chaffee, commander of the Union troops, managed not to provoke the citizens of Corsicana, and the army was withdrawn in 1874.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



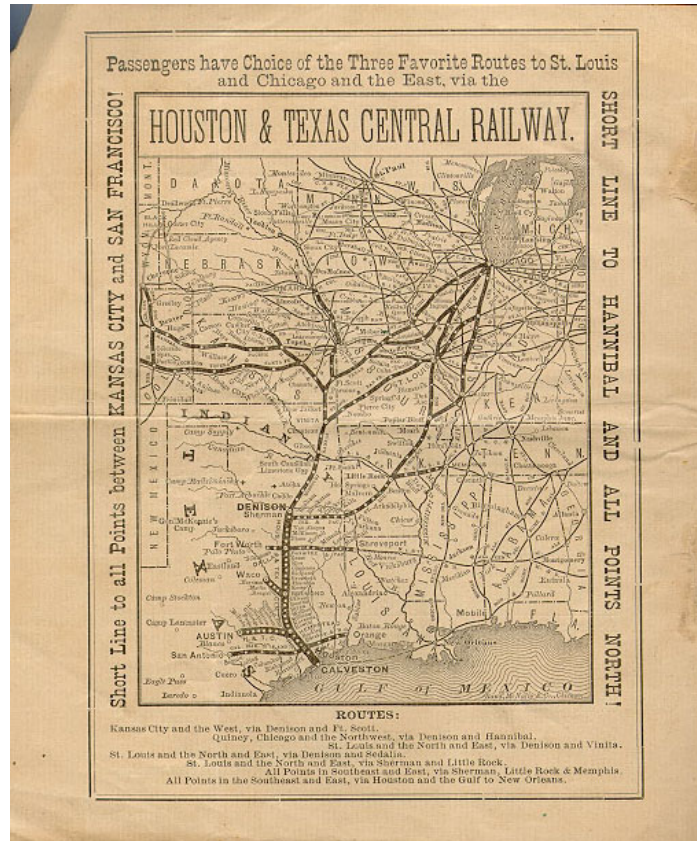
**Figure 2 Navarro County Population Analysis<sup>14</sup>**

The first principal event in the growth of Corsicana occurred in November 1871 when the Houston and Texas Central railroad was completed. With the coming of the railroad, Corsicana grew and prospered, bringing with it numerous settlers and new merchants. The completion of the construction of the Cotton Belt railroad in 1880 prompted even more development for Corsicana. Corsicana became the leading trading and shipping center for a large area of the Texas black lands.<sup>15</sup> The Blackland Prairie ecoregion spans approximately 6.1 million hectares from the Red River on the north to near San Antonio in south Texas. This area is part of a tall grass prairie continuum that stretches from Manitoba to the Texas Coast.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1860-1910 Census. Prepared by the Bureau of Census. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

<sup>15</sup> "Texas Blackland Prairies," World Wildlife Organization [http://www.worldwildlife.org/wildworld/profiles/terrestrial/na/na0814\\_full.html](http://www.worldwildlife.org/wildworld/profiles/terrestrial/na/na0814_full.html) (accessed June 15, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 2 Map of the Houston and Texas Central Railroad. This railroad linked Texas with major cities in both the East and West and connected all the cities of central Texas, including Corsicana. Houston and Texas Central Railway Schedule, November 7, 1879, Richard Niles Graham Collection, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.**

Before 1894, the city’s population increase can be attributed to agricultural advantages, but after this period, a new factor added to the growth of Corsicana. During the prolonged agricultural depression of the early 1890s Corsicana’s prominent businessmen attempted to lure industry that would diversify the area’s economic base. This would be difficult to accomplish without a new water supply for industrial purposes, so in the early 1890s, a water development corporation was formed to tap a nearby



artesian well.<sup>17</sup> On June 9, 1894, when the well was in the process of being drilled, at a depth of 1,027 feet, the drillers noticed the unmistakable signs of crude oil filling the well shaft and slowly rising to the surface.<sup>18</sup> The next two years were spent prospecting and collecting capital to invest in the new industry. A group of local businessmen organized by the Corsicana Oil Development Company began to lease town lots near the newfound well. The following year an arrangement was made between Pennsylvania oilmen James M. Guffey and John H. Galey and the Corsicana investors. The Pennsylvania oilmen agreed to drill five test wells and were to receive a one half interest in the leases owned by the Corsicana Development Company. The test wells were completed by 1896, and four of the five wells were productive. Each well produced a sustained flow of twenty to forty barrels of crude oil per day.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 3** This photograph depicts the original water well being dug in which petroleum was discovered. Navarro County Historical Society.

After the successful test wells were complete, a spirited oil boom exploded throughout the Corsicana area. Exclusively local businessmen financed almost all of these new ventures. The Texas Western Oil Company was primarily responsible for the

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<sup>17</sup> John O. King, "The Early Texas Oil Industry: Beginnings at Corsicana, 1894-1901," *The Journal of Southern History*/ 32, no. 4 (1966).

<sup>18</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, June 15, 1894.

<sup>19</sup> King, "The Early Texas Oil Industry," 506.

initial development of the Corsicana field. In September 1897, Guffey and Galey sold their interest in the Corsicana oil field to the Corsicana Oil Development Company.<sup>20</sup> Without the Pennsylvania investors' activity continued to increase. During 1896 and 1897 forty-three wells were completed. In 1897, the Corsicana oil field produced 65,975 barrels of oil, but this increased to 546,070 by 1898. In 1898 the field expanded from the town limits to include broad areas of the surrounding countryside. By 1901, the year of the John Henderson lynching, the Corsicana petroleum fields produced 1,350,000 barrels of oil. There were 594 producing oil wells and twenty-five natural gas wells in operation in 1901.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 4 A postcard depicting the early Corsicana oil field. Navarro County Historical Society**

The development of the Corsicana oil field was aided by the geological location of the city and new technological advancements in the field of drilling. Oil was easily found in the shallow sands at depths of 900 to 1,200 feet below the topsoil of Corsicana. A well could be drilled in less time and with less expense by using lighter drilling equipment. This was much less difficult than in other oil producing areas of the country.

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<sup>20</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, October 02, 1897.

<sup>21</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, May 03, 1901.

The introduction of the rotary drill also sped up the process of drilling in the Corsicana fields. A drilling speed of 1,000 feet in thirty-six hours had an average cost of \$550 to \$650 dollars in the Corsicana Field, where in the Pennsylvania field the cost ranged from \$1,790 to \$2,140.<sup>22</sup> Due to these lower costs Corsicana businessmen with small amounts of capital could easily invest in the oil field's development.

These inexperienced operators soon found themselves in a chaotic environment. The drilling area became crowded, and there were inadequate storage facilities for the freshly drilled crude. The oil producers also found that although they could produce the oil they did not have the marketing skills to sell it. The Corsicana operators attempted to raise local capital for an extensive field collecting system, storage area, and a refinery, but most of their funds had been expended during the exploration and production processes. They now were forced to seek help from an outside source.<sup>23</sup>

In the fall of 1897, Corsicana Mayor James E. Whiteselle invited Joseph Cullinan to inspect the Corsicana field. Joseph Stephen Cullinan, oilman, was born on December 31, 1860, near Sharon, Pennsylvania, the oldest son and second of eight children of John Francis and Mary Cullinan. At the age of fourteen he began working in the Pennsylvania oilfields and learned to perform virtually every task associated with oil production. In 1882 he joined Standard Oil, and he eventually held several managerial positions. He left Standard in 1895 to organize his own company, Petroleum Iron Works, an operation that manufactured steel storage tanks.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Matson and Hopkins, *Corsicana Oil and Gas Field: The Derrick's Hand Book of Petroleum: A Complete Chronological and Statistical Review of Petroleum Development from 1859 to 1899* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Geological Survey, 1917)

<sup>23</sup> King, "The Early Texas Oil Industry," 507.

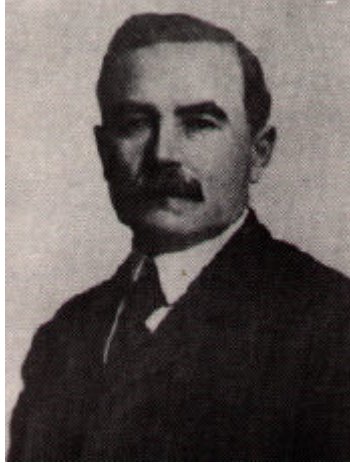
<sup>24</sup> "Joseph Cullinan," Handbook of Texas Online, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/CC/hec5.html>. (accessed June 15, 2008).

When oil was discovered in Corsicana, Texas local developers invited Cullinan to advise them on production and marketing techniques. In Corsicana he organized the J. S. Cullinan Company, which later became Magnolia Petroleum Company. Among the contributions that Cullinan made to the Corsicana oil industry were the introduction of oil as a fuel for locomotives, the use of natural gas for lighting and heating, and the utilization of oil to settle dust on the city's streets.<sup>25</sup> South of Corsicana, Cullinan constructed a refinery that began operation in 1899 and was the first such facility west of the Mississippi. In addition, in 1899 he was instrumental in persuading the Texas legislature to enact the state's first petroleum-conservation statute. Cullinan moved his operations to Beaumont shortly after the Spindletop discovery in 1901. There he founded the Texas Company (later Texaco) in 1902; he served as company president until he lost control of the stock in a proxy fight with eastern investors in 1913. When he moved his operations and the Texaco headquarters to Houston in 1905, Cullinan established that city as the focal point of the oil industry in the Southwest. He remained active in the industry after his resignation as president of Texaco. Eventually he founded ten companies involved in the exploration, production, refining, and marketing of Texas petroleum, and he was instrumental in developing oil deposits in the Sour Lake, Humble, and East Texas oilfields.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Before fuel oil was developed for use in locomotives, coal and wood were the primary sources of fuel. Fuel oil proved to be much more cost effective, less labor intensive and cleaner to burn.

<sup>26</sup> "Joseph Cullinan," Handbook of Texas Online.



**Figure 5 Portrait of Joseph Cullinan. Cullinan was responsible for the successful marketing and refining of Corsicana crude oil. Navarro County Historical Society.**

Aside from the oil industry, Corsicana displayed other aspects of a modern city not seen in other cities of its size at the time. In 1901 Corsicana was the largest inland cotton market in the world. The market produced 50,000 bales of cotton worth a total of over \$2,000,000. Corsicana also boasted the largest cotton gin in the world. The city contained two cottonseed oil mills, two compresses, and a \$150,000 cotton cloth mill. Corsicana demonstrated its modernity with its system of waterworks, electric power plant, ice factory, a paid fire department, a foundry and machine shop, three big laundries, a cigar factory, five school buildings containing nearly 2,000 students, a Catholic convent, free mail delivery, a modern courthouse and jail, two bottling companies, a sewer system, and paved streets.<sup>27</sup>

Four passenger trains left the Corsicana station every twenty minutes, and more people boarded and disembarked the Houston and Texas railway at Corsicana than at any other station on the route. The railroad passenger business of Corsicana was only

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<sup>27</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, May 03, 1901.

exceeded by three cities on the whole Southern Pacific railway, New Orleans, San Francisco and Los Angeles.<sup>28</sup>

Corsicana contained a State and Odd Fellows' Orphans home and a modern Y.M.C.A. In 1901 plans were being made to install electric streetcars on the streets of Corsicana. The city offered three national banks with over \$1,500,000 held in deposit. The city was home to several churches, including one \$12,000 Baptist Church; several more were under construction. By 1901, there were thirty-five incorporated companies with an aggregated capital of over \$3,000,000. Over three hundred new homes rose in 1900 costing over \$600,000. The assessed valuation of Navarro County in 1900 amounted to \$12,043,015, an increase of \$1,042,715 from the previous year. Only one other county in the state of Texas exceeded this.<sup>29</sup>

By 1901, the year of the lynching of John Henderson, Corsicana was not a typical rural Texas community. Oil wealth had helped to transform it from a small rural town into a thriving city. The jolting changes that accompanied this growth affected both the citizens of Corsicana and the rural farmers of the surrounding area. It was against this backdrop of rapid social and economic change that racial violence sprang forth from a once relatively peaceful community.

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<sup>28</sup> King, "The Early Texas Oil Industry," 507.

<sup>29</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, May 03, 1901.

## Chapter 2

### Navarro County Racial Violence: 1892-1901

Although the lynching of John Henderson was the height of barbaric racial violence in Navarro County, it was neither the first incident nor the last to mar the county. On March 3, 1892, racial violence almost boiled over in Corsicana. An African American woman, Mandy Washington, who was serving a long-term sentence on the nearby prison farm, died while under the supervision of Farm Superintendent John Faulk. The African American community demanded a postmortem examination on the body as the black population suspected that the superintendent had beaten Washington to death. When the postmortem did not agree with the African American community's beliefs, black citizens threatened to attack the work farm and free the prisoners. Superintendent Faulk stated that extra guards posted around the farm would shoot on sight anyone attempting to escape or attack the farm. The African American community backed down, and the volatile situation calmed.<sup>30</sup>

On April 10, 1895 Corsicana experienced another spasm of racial violence. According to local authorities a Mrs. Rosa Hughes, a prominent white citizen of Corsicana, was proceeding through the south side of Corsicana when she was seized by an African American man and criminally assaulted. City Marshall John Faulk, the same individual who previously served as work farm superintendent, eventually managed to capture the suspect, Nelson Calhoun, and took him to the home of Mrs. Hughes for identification. Neighbors soon learned of Calhoun's capture and proceeded to make their

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<sup>30</sup> *Rocky Mountain News*, March 4, 1892 (Denver, Col.).

way to the Hughes home. When the small mob arrived, Mrs. Hughes identified Nelson Calhoun as her attacker. This enraged the crowd to such an extent that they overpowered the marshal and captured the prisoner. According to local news sources, the mob planned to take Calhoun back to the scene of the alleged crime and deal with him summarily in a violent manner. In route to the scene, Calhoun managed to escape from his captors and fled across the countryside. He made his way through several wire fences and fields but could not escape his pursuers. When the enraged mob finally sighted Calhoun on the horizon, they opened fire with their rifles, firing over fifty shots. Twelve of the rounds struck Calhoun, killing him instantly. Soon other white citizens learned of the killing and arrived at the scene. The coroner, T.D. Hightower, arrived soon there after and ordered that the body be taken into downtown Corsicana. After he examined Calhoun's remains, he stated his verdict:

It is my judgment from the evidence that the dead body is that of Nelson Calhoun, a man of color, about 20 years old, and at the time of his death a resident of the city of Corsicana; that he came to his death from gunshot wounds from guns in the hands of parties unknown to me; I further find that in the evening of the 9<sup>th</sup> of April, 1895 a most respected white lady, Mrs. Hughes was assaulted and ravished by the deceased just outside the city limits of Corsicana in daytime: that last night deceased was arrested for the crime and that about 7 o'clock this morning deceased was carried by the officers into the presence of Mrs. Hughes and that she promptly and positively identified deceased as the party who made the assault upon her; that at once the deceased was taken from the officers by relatives and friends of the injured lady and carried just outside the city limits



about where his hellish crime was committed and there received the wounds that caused his death-a punishment certain, speedy and deserved. T.D. Hightower Recorder and Acting Coroner.<sup>31</sup>

In July of 1897, another situation almost erupted into a racial lynching that could have equaled the later John Henderson incident. An African American man named Phil Murphy faced accusations of assaulting a young woman named Miss Mamie Stewart. Supposedly, Murphy was the former resident of a house owned by Miss Stewart's mother. Reportedly, Murphy had arrived at his former residence and threatened the new tenants with violence for taking his home. During his interrogation, a large crowd began to gather in the courtroom and heard the testimony of Miss Stewart. The crowd who witnessed this testimony began circulating on the streets of Corsicana attempting to gather a lynch mob. The crowd grew quickly into a large group of men ready for violence. The horde planned to storm the jail, seize Murphy, and deal with him summarily. Some members of the mob even suggested that they post Murphy's bail in order to gain his release and then lynch him immediately thereafter. Eventually, calmer heads prevailed as Navarro County Judge Cobb ordered that a grand jury convene the next day. This appeased the potential lynch mob, and Murphy faced a trial by jury rather than death at the hands of a violent mob.<sup>32</sup>

Two years later on September 21, 1899, Corsicana officers of the law managed to prevent a determined lynch mob from gaining control of another prisoner. The Corsicana jail held an African American man named Tom Harris charged in the assault of a young white woman. Around the hour of midnight, seventy-five armed men surrounded the jail

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<sup>31</sup>*Dallas Morning News*, April 13, 1895.

<sup>32</sup>*Dallas Morning News*, July 19, 1897.

and demanded that the jailer release Harris into their custody. The jailer refused to give up his prisoner and the mob lowered its guns towards him. Jailer Boyd stood pat and stated he would kill the first man who put foot on the steps that led up to the secured door of the jail. The men began to parley, but word reached Sheriff Robert Allen, ex-Sheriff James Weaver, Deputy Sheriff Weaver, and Officer Stewart, who quickly hurried to the jail. Sheriff Allen pushed his way through the mob to the jail door. He turned to the mob and stated that they could have the prisoner over his dead body. He proceeded to denounce the mob as a gang of cowards and told them to return to their homes and behave themselves. The mob eventually took his advice and began to disperse.<sup>33</sup>

In the first years of the twentieth century racial violence reached its peak in Navarro County when on December 3, 1900, Mrs. Fosie French was found murdered in her Corsicana home. The suspect in the crime was an African American man named Anderson Norton. Supposedly, Norton pursued French into her home, and she attempted to grab a rifle to protect her self. A struggle ensued and the rifle discharged, lodging a bullet in the wall. The rifle then broke in half leaving the stock in the hands of the victim. Allegedly, Norton then took the rifle barrel and beat French to death. Norton, an employee of French, remained on the premises until the police arrived and arrested him. The population of Corsicana soon learned the details of Norton's alleged crime and began forming a lynch mob. If not for the quick actions of the local authorities, Anderson Norton would have met his demise at the hands of the mob. The Garitty Rifles, a local

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<sup>33</sup> *The Dallas Morning News*, September 22, 1899.

militia company, managed to take him into protective custody.<sup>34</sup> Eventually, Norton was convicted by a jury for murder, and was executed by hanging.<sup>35</sup>

The climax of Corsicana's racial violence began with the death of a white citizen, Mrs. Valley Younger. Valley Younger was the wife of farmer and house painter George Conway Younger.<sup>36</sup> Conway Younger, who was reported to be a son of one of the outlaw Younger Brothers, settled in Corsicana and married Valley Dale in 1897. It was rumored that Conway had spent some time in prison prior to marrying Valley Dale, but sources cannot confirm this. Conway and his family lived in a simple home on the edge of Corsicana on Eleventh Avenue. While Conway Younger was out of town on business, on March 7, 1901, Captain Dale, Valley Younger's father, found Valley murdered about fifty yards from her home, near the Houston and Texas Central railroad tracks in Corsicana.<sup>37</sup> Dale observed that his daughter had endured at least a dozen knife wounds over her body and had her jugular vein severed. The slash of the perpetrator's knife left her cheek laid open. On closer investigation, Captain Dale observed that Mrs. Younger had suffered a knife wound to her right hand, as if she had attempted to resist her attacker. Upon observing these atrocities, Captain Dale immediately rushed to Mrs. Younger's home where he knew her children should be present. Upon entering the home, Dale observed that blood saturated every room in the house and the furniture was strewn about the property. Dale then discovered his grandchildren locked inside the kitchen. He found his three-year-old granddaughter and one-year-old grandson paralyzed with fright

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<sup>34</sup> The Garrity Rifles were the forerunners of the modern Texas Army National Guard in Navarro County.

<sup>35</sup> *The Dallas Morning News*, December 7, 1900.

<sup>36</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1900 Census. Prepared by the Bureau of Census. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1900.

<sup>37</sup> Wm. A. McGlohen, interviewed by D. Wiley Whitten, 13 April 1990. Fort Worth, Tex., Transcript, Navarro County Historical Society, Corsicana, Tex. (A retelling of dark family secrets; William A. McGlohen was related to Conway Younger, and growing up he knew two other men present at the lynching.)

but otherwise unharmed. Finally, after several minutes the young girl succeeded in saying, “A negro hit mama.”<sup>38</sup>

It was not long before the white community sought to capture and seek vengeance on the suspect of the murder. One newspaper, *Corsicana Morning News*, reported a statement made by Justice H.G. Roberts on March 8, 1901. Roberts stated:

I have passed down the line of life for sixty years, accepting life as I have found it, passed through a war of courage and death, and trouble at my own fireside, death is unavoidable. But the scene I witnessed last night at the inquest of Mrs. Younger, who had been murdered by someone my vocabulary of language is not sufficient to describe. I am opposed to mob violence. People have a misunderstanding as to mob law. Where a person is taken and killed without a cause, is mob violence. What is law? Law is the people and the law is nothing but a creation of the people. Suppose I am one; I should assassinate one of my neighbors' wives or daughters; I should, if proved to be the right person, be hung at the first tree or telephone post. Would that be mob law? I say no. It would be enforcing the law in short order. The time has come that our people be protected. I find that men through the country are uneasy. When they leave home on business they think that perhaps when they return they will find their wives or daughters assassinated. Let every man, white or black, say by their actions and words that these things must stop, that the women and children shall be safe in this country. The law is alright, but at times hard to enforce. Our sheriff is doing

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<sup>38</sup> *Athens Weekly Review*, March 8, 1901.

all a man can do to bring the violators to justice. I will pay \$25 for the conviction of the man who murdered Mrs. Younger.<sup>39</sup>

Shortly after the discovery of the murdered body of Mrs. Younger, a sheriff's posse using bloodhounds began a chase. Eventually, after several days of a massive search, the suspect John Henderson was captured near Hillsboro, Texas on March 11, 1901. Jonas "John" Henderson was born in 1877 near Hearne, Texas. According to newspaper accounts, he was known as a tough individual who spent his early life working on a cotton plantation near Hearne. In July 1897, at the age of twenty, Henderson was convicted of a burglary charge in Marlin, Texas. Due to this crime, he received a sentence of two years at a state prison located near Rusk. In the Texas prison records it states that Henderson was not married, earned a living by performing day labor, and had received no formal education of any kind.<sup>40</sup> Henderson earned his release on May 24, 1899, and in September 1900 he ventured to Rice, Texas, in Navarro County, in search of work as a cotton picker. Nothing more was recorded about his whereabouts until he became a suspect in the Younger murder.<sup>41</sup>

Law enforcement authorities, fearing the rise of a lynch mob in Corsicana, made the decision to place the prisoner in the Belton jail, one hundred miles to the southwest in Bell County, overnight.<sup>42</sup> The Corsicana citizens became outraged that Henderson would not be brought to answer immediately for his alleged crime. A committee of prominent men met in the county courthouse to discuss the situation. Over two hundred men and boys were present, including many of the town's most esteemed leaders. Sheriff Wiley

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<sup>39</sup> "As He Passes Down the Line" *Corsicana Morning News*, March 08, 1901.

<sup>40</sup> Texas Convict Ledgers, Texas State Archives, Austin, TX.

<sup>41</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 14, 1901.

<sup>42</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 13, 1901.

B. Robinson stated that the object of the meeting was to feel the public's pulse as to the protection of the prisoner if he were brought back to Corsicana. After several resolutions and parleying, the citizens' committee issued the following statement:

Your committee reports that it is the sense of the committee that the persons present at the meeting and all persons who signed the petition requesting the return of the prisoner, as well as all the law abiding citizens of Navarro County hold themselves in readiness to respond to the summons of the Sheriff in carrying out the pledges made in said petition and in the resolution passed by this body. Your committee further recommends that all saloons in the city be closed from 12 o'clock tonight until at least 12 o'clock tomorrow and that the Mayor of the city be requested to issue a proclamation requiring the closing off all saloons in the city during such time as may be specified in said proclamation." Signed, R.B. Molloy, W.N. Kenner, W.L. Bullock, J.W. Mitten and A.W. Hartman<sup>43</sup>

The leaders of this committee appear to be prominent citizens of Corsicana, some with ties to the Democratic Party and the Confederacy. One, William N. Kenner, was born in Fauquier County, Virginia, and as when a boy moved with his parents to St. Charles County, Missouri. In 1861 he relocated to Navarro County, Texas, and soon afterwards, impatient to serve the Confederacy, went to Ellis County, where he joined the Ellis County Grays. This company was later known as Co E of the 12th Texas Cavalry, which was one of the regiments in Parson's Brigade. Although almost a stranger at the organization, his strong personality made such an impression on his comrades that they elected him first lieutenant of the company. One of his old comrades testified that "he

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<sup>43</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 11, 1901.

commanded the respect, love, and esteem of every man in his company." On a certain occasion when some prisoners were captured, such was his magnanimous bearing that one of them, an officer, pulled off his silver spurs and presented them to him. Not long before the surrender Lieutenant Kenner was promoted to the position of captain. After the war Captain Kenner returned to his Navarro County home and busied himself in recuperating from the losses occasioned by the war and in helping to rebuild the South. In 1868, he married Miss Lou Riggs of Corsicana. He also served as the chairman of the Democratic Party of Navarro County.<sup>44</sup> Another community leader who served on the committee was J.W. Mitten. Mitten owned and operated Corsicana's wagon yard, livery, and stable located at 419 N. Beaton St. Mitten became famous in Navarro County for his love of horse racing after he purchased a horse named Charlie M.<sup>45</sup> A.W. Hartman, also a member of the committee, served as the editor and publisher of the *Corsican Daily Sun*. Robert Molloy, a committee member, held a prominent position as a local attorney. Committee member William L. Bullock earned a living as a clothing merchant in Corsicana.<sup>46</sup> All of the five men who signed the committee's resolution were members of the Democratic Party.<sup>47</sup> The sheriff, Wiley B. Robinson, was a man who served at a difficult time. He had scarcely been sworn into office when he was faced with the Henderson situation.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> "W.M. Kenner," Navarro County Historical Society Website, <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~txnavarr/index.htm>. (accessed June 12, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1900 Census. Prepared by the Bureau of Census. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1900.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> "Wiley Robinson," Navarro County Historical Society Website, <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~txnavarr/index.htm>. (accessed June 12, 2008).

This committee, composed of the prominent citizens of Corsicana, appears on the surface to be an attempt to enforce law and order in the community, or to demonstrate the town's adherence to the due process of law. In reality, judging from the subsequent actions of many of the committee members, the committee's actions appear to have been a ruse to return Henderson to the city to face vigilante justice, or to reassert the authority of the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party had just recently gained a majority of votes in the county after several years of control by the Populist Party.

Believing that the committee's resolution would return John Henderson to Corsicana by daybreak, the people of Navarro County and many from other surrounding counties began to arrive in downtown Corsicana. The rumor that Henderson was returning to Corsicana spread like wildfire. When the train thought to be carrying Henderson arrived in town in the morning hours, over six thousand spectators were on hand. The depot grounds as well as the tops of every boxcar were crowded with onlookers, but the prisoner was not on the train. Many in the crowd believed that somehow he had been secretly taken to the jail by other means, and the crowd quickly rushed the six blocks to the courthouse, in which the jail was located. Justice H.G. Roberts appeared on the courthouse steps and announced to the mob that the prisoner would not arrive due to missing a train connection. This enraged the crowd, and shouts for the sheriff rang out. Several minutes later, Sheriff Robinson made an appearance before the crowd, but only repeated the story given previously by Justice Roberts. This further infuriated the mob, and it made a mad dash toward the jailhouse to search for Henderson. A committee of three men searched the jailhouse, but turned up nothing. After the group left the jail and announced to the crowd that Henderson was not present,



the mob was still not satisfied. The crowd resolved to return to the sheriff and force him to reveal the whereabouts of Henderson. One member of the mob exclaimed, “If we can’t get the nigger let’s hang the sheriff, unless he will tell us where his prisoner is!”<sup>49</sup> The crowd again rushed toward the courthouse and upon arrival, the members of the mob made several speeches. Eventually the crowd began to disperse, but again a rumor developed that Henderson was in the jail. The mob once more forced its way to the jailhouse but again there was no Henderson.

John Shook, a druggist from Corsicana, then addressed the crowd and pleaded with it to exercise restraint.<sup>50</sup> He then addressed the victim’s husband Conway Younger and asked him if he would be willing to wait until the grand jury had heard the evidence before attempting violence against Henderson. Younger agreed to the proposal, and Shook asked the members of the crowd to remove their hats if they agreed. The entire crowd removed its hats.<sup>51</sup> It is unclear if Shook was an active participant in the mob or an innocent bystander, but Shook’s statement provides important insight into the dynamics of the unfolding drama. Though his motives are not entirely clear, he apparently knew better than to try to persuade the crowd to abandon all thoughts of lynching the prisoner and await the outcome of a trial. Instead he only pleaded with the crowd to wait for the grand jury to hear the evidence against Henderson before “attempting violence.” Clearly Shook knew that a lynching was inevitable if the grand jury issued an indictment, and he may have believed that violence was unavoidable even

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<sup>49</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 11, 1901.

<sup>50</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1900 Census. Prepared by the Bureau of Census. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1900.

<sup>51</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 12, 1901.

in the event that no indictment was made. So whatever his motives, Shook appears simply to have been stalling for time.

After receiving notice about the situation from an unknown source, Texas Governor Joseph Sayers forbade the return of John Henderson to Corsicana.<sup>52</sup> He insisted that Henderson travel on a northbound train to Fort Worth accompanied by Deputy Sheriff Hammond, Constable Grantham of Navarro County, and Sheriff Sparks of Bell County. The train made it to the Itasca station, which is located forty-two miles south of Fort Worth, with no incidents, but soon after arriving at the station three men boarded the train. They proceeded to enter the car and to approach the law enforcement officers from behind. As the officers realized what was happening, a scuffle began and the three men pushed the law officers and John Henderson from the train. When Henderson and the officers landed, they found themselves surrounded by a party of men holding revolvers. These men hurried to some horses, and the entire party left for Corsicana. The posse announced that they intended to take Henderson to Corsicana where it would make quick work of him. Members of the posse even exclaimed that they planned to have a sunrise picnic after which they would burn the prisoner. Word of Henderson's abduction apparently preceded the posse's arrival, and many of the citizens of Corsicana lined the railways and roads leading from Waco, as not to miss Henderson when he passed by. According to Sheriff Satterfield of Hillsboro, the well-planned capture of Henderson, performed by unmasked men, preceded in a very deliberate manner.<sup>53</sup> The vigilantes had even gone to the extreme of causing a distraction to divert the attention of law enforcement and allow their easy capture of Henderson. A runner

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> *Waco Times Herald*, March 13, 1901.

entered the railroad station in the town of Angus, located in Navarro County near Corsicana, and shouted that a black man had raped a white woman holding a baby. Several officers left to investigate, finding that the entire incident was a ruse to keep the officers from interfering with the return of Henderson.<sup>54</sup>

In a correspondence between the mayor of Itasca G.C. Weaver, and Governor Sayers, Weaver stated:

Referring to the matter of taking the negro off train, here last night, beg to say that it occurred about as follows: Two officers were on the north bound M.K. & T. train in charge of the negro. Several parties arrived in Hillsboro from Corsicana & boarded the train on which the negro was being conveyed, just before arriving in Itasca they disarmed the officers & took charge of the negro & took him off the train & went to the livery stable where they ordered rigs for the trip to Corsicana. After they arrived at the stable the two officers went to the stable and then the mob ordered them to get in a vehicle & accompany them.

There were seven of the mob according to my best information. They carried two of three drivers from Itasca. I was at the house asleep and knew nothing of the occurrence till this morning at the time I telephoned you. Had I known it I should have done my best to have stopped the proceedings and I am sure I could have done so. The people here however, I am sorry to say seem to be largely in sympathy with the mob and it is difficult for me to get all the data as every one knows I am very much against mob violence.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> C.C. Weaver to Governor Joseph Sayers, March 13, 1901, Governor Joseph Sayers's Papers, Texas State Archives, Austin, TX.

Once again word quickly reached the white population of Corsicana that Henderson was in the custody of the vigilantes and would soon be in town. Messengers traveled the far reaches of Navarro County bringing the word of Henderson's return. The entire county was soon in a state of feverish excitement at the news that John Henderson would definitely be in Corsicana at dawn on March 13, 1901<sup>56</sup> When Henderson arrived at the Corsicana jail he was placed in the custody of Sheriff Robinson. Justice H.G. Roberts soon advised him that any statement he made would be used against him. According to Justice Roberts, Henderson immediately wished to confess to the murder of Mrs. Younger.<sup>57</sup> John Henderson then allegedly gave a confession:

I John Henderson a negro about 22 years, went to the house of a white lady unknown to me, who lived about three miles north of Corsicana, on the Houston and Texas central, west of a station house, about one fourth of a mile, on the afternoon of March 6, 1901 and killed her. There was no one present when I committed the crime except the lady two children and myself. I killed the lady in the house, and when I left, she was lying in the door. I used a new knife with two small blades and one large blade. The knife had an iron handle. I want to be hung. I hereby give my body to C.M. Hornbeck and Dr. Hedge. I did not attempt such violence upon Mrs. Younger as would deprive her of her virtue.

John Henderson<sup>58</sup>

It is unclear from the reports given in the local newspapers as to whether John Henderson confessed willingly or was coerced in some manner. Judging from the biased and racist accounts reported in the papers of that era it is highly probable that Henderson

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 14, 1901.

faced intense pressure to confess to the crime. Henderson, facing certain death, most likely confessed in order to hopefully secure a death by hanging. This is evident in Henderson's statement that he wished to be hung. Death by hanging would have been seen as an excellent alternative to death by an enraged mob. As no trial ever took place, we are unable to confirm Henderson's guilt or innocence. Even if a trial had taken place the outcome most likely would not have changed, due to the climate of the county. This is evident by the previous accounts of mob violence in Navarro County.

The reference to the "virtue" of Mrs. Younger is consistent with the ideals of the protection of "white womanhood" prevalent in the South and often used by lynch mobs to justify their actions. However, according to Henderson's confession, he "did not attempt such violence upon Mrs. Younger as would deprive her of her virtue." Interestingly, the absence of an overt charge of rape is unusual in situations where lynchings took place. Under the southern honor code a simple murder, no matter how grisly, could be tried in a traditional court of law, but a rape charge was more likely to result in a lynching. If Henderson's confession was indeed coerced it is interesting that a rape charge was not added to his statement. It is possible that the officials that took the statement did not want to appear to be overtly responsible for a lynching, so they decided to let the statement stand. If a lynching took place in a community it often tarnished the reputations of local law enforcement and judiciary. Confessing to a murder could result in a lynching, but in most cases it was less likely to do so than a confession of rape and murder.

Justice Roberts drew up an affidavit in which stated that Henderson had made the above confession and Henderson made his mark to it. This was done as Henderson could

neither read nor write.<sup>59</sup> This very fact questions the validity of Henderson's confession. The confession does not appear to be that of an uneducated lower class African American. It appears as the entire confession may have created by Justice Roberts due to the grammar and structure of the confession itself. A letter from Henderson to his father was also written. It stated

I am in Jail on charge of murder of Mrs. Conway Younger, a white lady, I am guilty of the charge. I can't tell why I did this. I am to die for the crime. I have sent for the preacher to pray for me, I never killed a woman before, but you know I killed Mr. Ward in Marlin and served five years for this. Tell my brother Charlie to be a better boy then I have been I went astray but say to him that I will die for this awful crime. Good Bye father.

John Henderson<sup>60</sup>

After the above statements took place, a committee of twenty-five citizens entered the jail. The committee reviewed the confession and swore to it as being correct<sup>61</sup> According to the official prison records of the state of Texas, John Henderson had been convicted of burglary and not of murder and had served two years rather than five. This is yet more evidence that the above confession may have been contrived.

As the committee was investigating the confession, word arrived that the governor was sending troops to Corsicana. In fact, Governor Sayers had ordered Thomas Scurry, the Adjutant General of Texas, to handle the situation. Scurry contacted Colonel G.W. Hardy, of the local militia, via telegraph, and ordered him to assemble local military units as soon as possible. Hardy was given the authority to direct the railroads to furnish

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<sup>59</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 14, 1901.

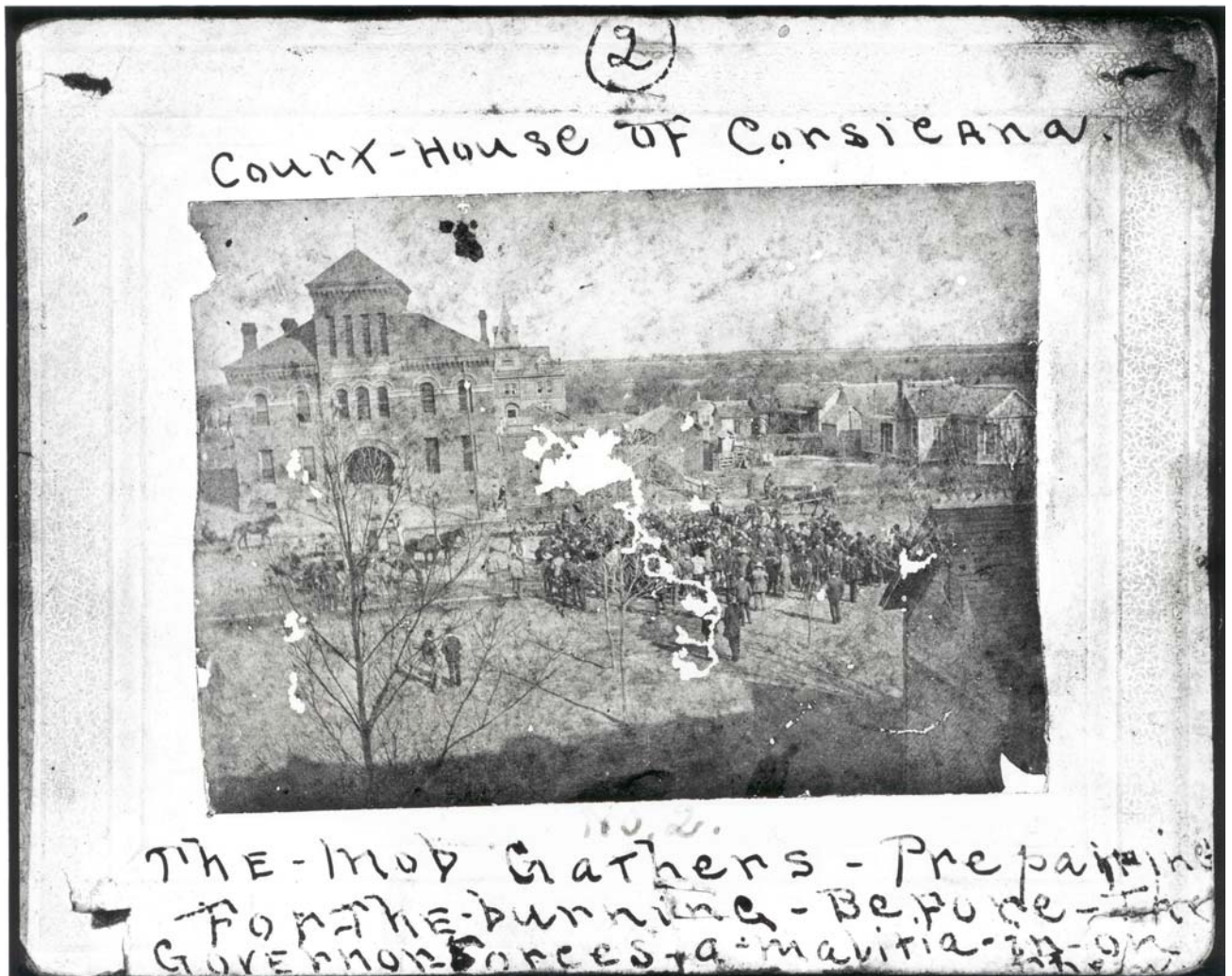
<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

special trains to procure the necessary troops, and to report conditions and his action at once directly to Austin. Colonel Hardy responded to Scurry that he had followed his orders and had ordered the companies to assemble, but that with only five hundred men he would only provoke bloodshed. He requested that Scurry release the Dallas, Waco and Mexia companies to assist in the situation.

Throughout the south it was not unusual for extensive photographic records to be taken to chronicle lynchings. Often these photographs were reproduced and sold to the masses as souvenirs, or they were made into postcards to be sent off to friends and family. It is unclear if these particular photographs were used as postcards, but it is known that they were taken by W.A. Radford, owner of Fine Merchant Tailoring in Corsicana. The photographs were part of a private collection until the Dallas Public Library purchased them in 2006.

Figure 6 depicts the mob gathering directly in front of the Navarro County Courthouse. According to the hand written caption the mob was preparing the scene of the lynching in great haste, in order to accomplish its goals before the state militia could arrive and restore order. In the photograph one can observe that the picture appears to have been taken on the rooftop of one of the businesses or homes located on the courthouse square. This birdseye view gives the viewer a good idea of the layout of the city center of 1901 Corsicana. Several horse drawn wagons or buggies can be seen arriving for the event. At the time of this photograph the mob does not appear to have reached its capacity, nor has the stake been erected for the anticipated burning.



**Figure 6 "The Mob Gathers Preparing for the Burning before the Governor can Alert the Militia"**  
"From the collections of the Texas/Dallas History and Achieves Division, Dallas Public Library."<sup>62</sup>

The citizens of Corsicana began to prepare the area for the planned burning. Men began hoisting a thirty-foot railroad steel rail. This rail stood with the help of three guide wires, two of which were fasted to trees and the third to the iron fence that surrounded the courtyard. Next, the crowd placed heavy iron door castings around the rail to hold it in place. Oil soaked timbers were placed around the pole and readied for the match.





**Figure 7 "Crowd increasing and preparing stake" "From the collections of the Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library"**

In figure 7 we can observe the crowd steadily increasing. It appears at this point the crowd consisted of mainly men and boys as no women can be observed. This photograph appears to have been captured at ground level but at a vantage point directly to the left of figure 6. In this figure the railroad rail is clearly visible in the center of the photograph. One can also observe the small pile of timbers that would be used to fuel the fire located in the bottom left of the photograph. It appears that the individuals depicted in this figure are attempting to gain an excellent vantage point before the lynching begins.

Several young men have climbed into a near by tree for a better view. One individual near the pile of timbers appears to be standing on top of a metal tub or pot to gain a view over the crowd.

Members of the mob forced John Henderson from the courthouse, as seen in Figure 8, in front of a crowd now estimated at over twenty-five hundred. The number had fallen from nearly 6,000 spectators the day before, when Henderson was expected but did not make his appearance. This photograph depicts members of the lynch mob forcing Henderson from the Navarro County Courthouse. An interview was conducted in April of 1990 of a descendent of a lynching witness; it stated that Rufe Highnote, who reportedly had killed thirteen men in prior gun fights, took the keys from Sheriff Wiley Robinson. As he headed toward the cells Highnote is said to have looked back over his shoulder and cautioned Robinson not to move. He stated “Wiley, I hope you’re still here when I get back.”<sup>63</sup> It appears as though a rope held by the individual in the front of the group is leading Henderson. The vantage point of this picture gives the illusion that the events about to be carried out are in some way legal. The courthouse gives the impression that the lynching of John Henderson is to be within the law. One can also observe that the majority of the mob is not depicted in this figure. It can be assumed that these men are the leaders or instigators of the lynching. This can also be confirmed due to the fact that the faces of the men have been scratched out to protect their identity.

The crowd attempted to chain Henderson to the rail, but so many in the crowd attempted to assist in the task that it took several minutes to accomplish the goal. A man then mounted the courtyard fence and read aloud the confession and letter dictated by

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<sup>63</sup> Wm. A. McGlohen, interviewed by D. Wiley Whitten, 13 April 1990. Fort Worth, Tex., Transcript, Navarro County Historical Society, Corsicana, Tex.

Henderson. When he reached the last words of Henderson's letter, "goodbye father," he added, "goodbye John." In figure 9 we can observe a close-up, detailed photograph near the center of the mob in front of the tree depicted in figure 7. It appears that a speech is taking place before the lynching was carried out. It is unclear if these are the same individuals seen forcing Henderson from the courthouse in figure 8, but the man seen standing above the crowd in a speaking position appears to be dressed the same as one of the men seen in figure 8.



Figure 8 "Henderson is Taken from the Courthouse to the Stake" "From the collections of the Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library."



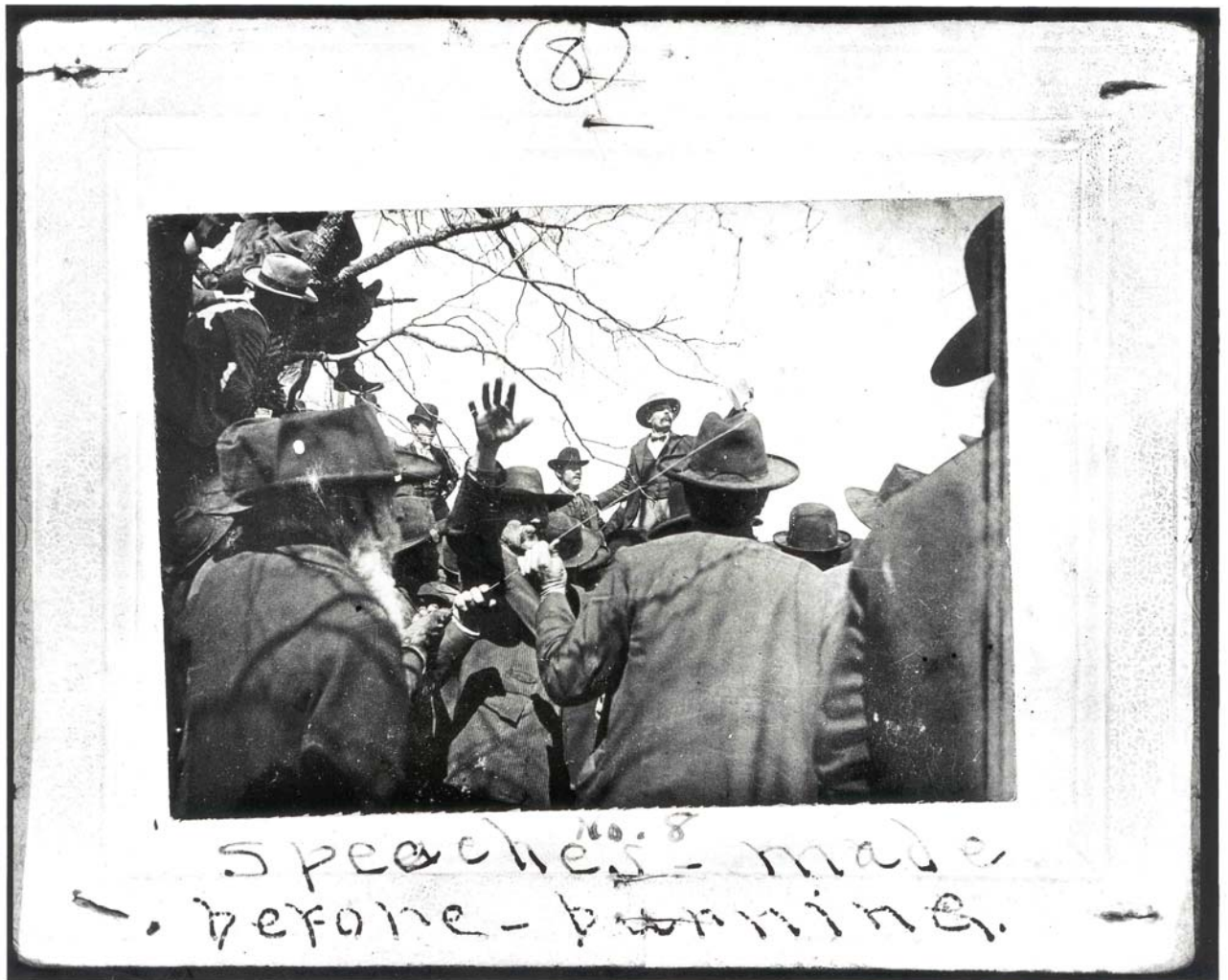
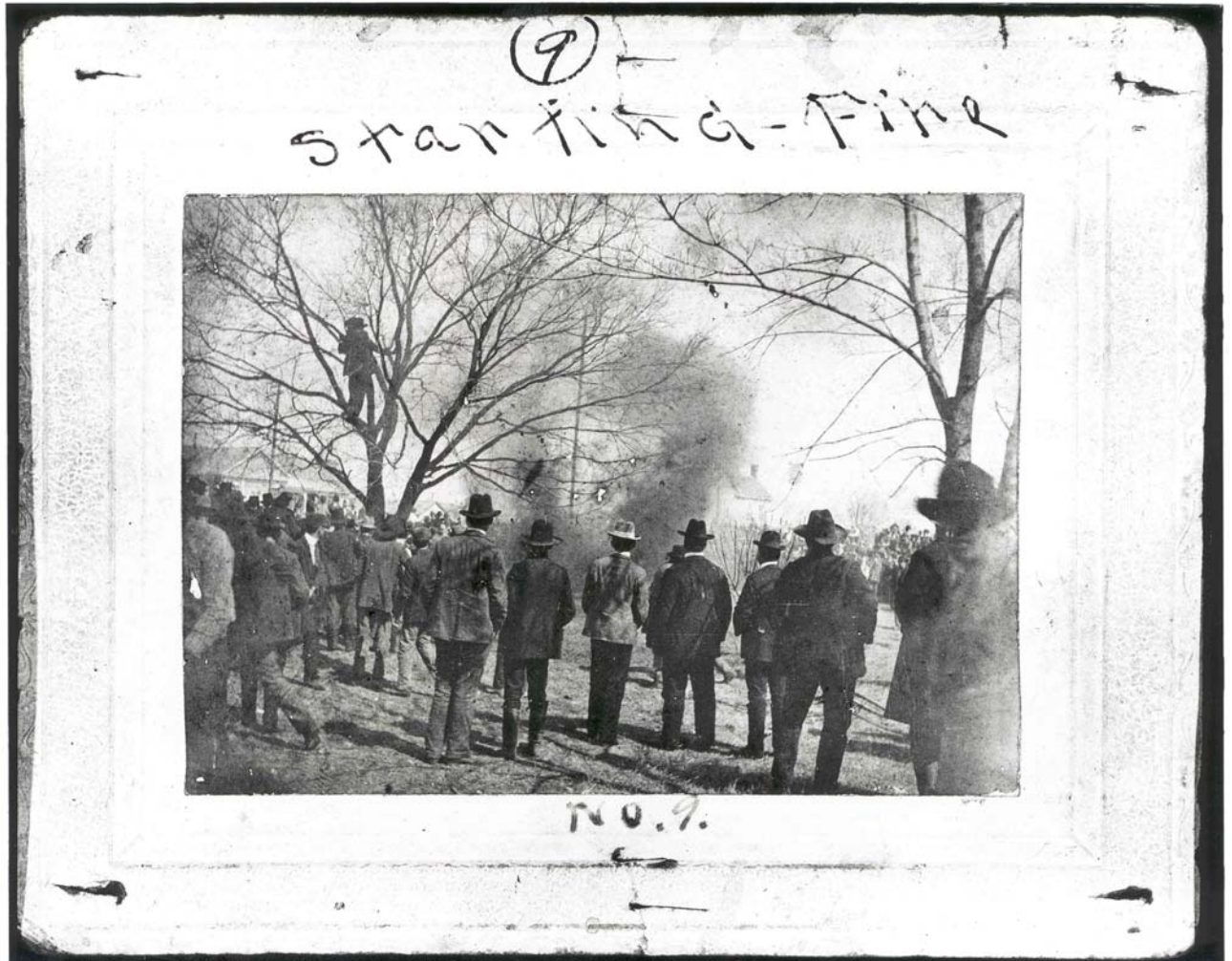


Figure 9 "Speeches Made Before Lynching" "From the collections of the Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library."

Before the match touched the lumber, Henderson pulled his cap down over his eyes as if to shield him from the horror. The match met the kindling and the flames leaped high into the sky enveloping Henderson.



**Figure 10 "The Fire is Ignited by the Mob" "From the collections of the Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library."**

In figure 10 we can observe the very beginnings of the fire. This photograph appears to be taken from the opposite viewpoint than the previous figures. The rail can easily be observed in the center of the photograph amongst the smoke, but interestingly the photograph is taken in a manner where Henderson cannot be observed. It does appear in the bottom right hand side of the figure on the opposite side of the fire, that women may now be present.

It was not long before Henderson succumbed to the inferno. The crowd applauded and shouted approvals as the victim met his demise. Women had certainly arrived on the scene by now, because the press reported that a large number of women, who lived near Mrs. Younger's neighborhood, showed their approval by walking to the pyre and tossing in fuel.<sup>64</sup> Many women attempted to hit Henderson in the head with the wood they threw into the fire.<sup>65</sup>



Figure 11 "Flames Arising" "From the collections of the Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library."

<sup>64</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 14, 1901.

<sup>65</sup> *Dallas Daily Times Herald*, March 14, 1901.



In figure 11 the conflagration appears to be at its height. Once again we can see the tree with several individuals observing from within. Many in the crowd now appear to be shielding themselves from either the horrific sight or from the heat of the fire. In the bottom right hand side of the figure we can observe several individuals who have turned their backs to the fire. The intense black smoke, most likely produced by the coal oil used to start the fire, conceals the victim.

In figure 12 the photograph depicts the fire as it has died down to mostly coals. In this figure we can observe the charred remains of Henderson. The crowd appears to have moved further away from the fire. All those individuals in the front of the crowd have turned their backs to the pyre either due to the heat or due to the terrible sight and smell.

Figure 13 depicts the end of the horrendous event. One can observe the rail protruding from the center of the smoldering remains of the fire with Henderson's remains affixed to it. The crowd appears to still be looking away except for those few individuals in the treetops.

Shortly after the conclusion of the burning, Colonel Hardy sent another telegraph to Scurry, which stated:

Your message ordering me to assemble certain companies &c received at 10:35 A.M. today. I proceeded at once to notify officers of local Cos. to assemble and report to me at 11 o'clock come to telegraph and sent former message then mounted first horse and went in run to courthouse only to see the lifeless charred form of the mob's victim chained to a post amidst the hottest fire. I immediately returned and countermanded my orders. The mob numbers between three and

five thousand, orderly and quiet, no further danger. The negro Jno. Henderson confessed fully.<sup>66</sup>

When the terrible crime was complete the crowd began to disperse, but the fiendish relic hunters began their search for souvenirs. These relic hunters were ghoulish in their search for mementoes, taking pieces of Henderson's bones, fragments of charred flesh, and pieces of the chain that secured Henderson to the rail.<sup>67</sup> A local minister of Corsicana even went as far as to procure a part of Henderson's liver for his collection.<sup>68</sup> One Mexican man who attempted to take a bite out the remains of Henderson's heart carried out one of the most horrendous acts of the day. The remaining crowd quickly hurried this individual away.<sup>69</sup> Once again, the intense racism and scapegoating taking place in Corsicana was apparent. Although the Caucasians of the community were responsible for the atrocity of the lynching and the souvenir collecting, the newspaper still chose to single out the actions of one Hispanic participant.

After the area was clear of scavengers and vigilantes, the acting county coroner examined the body of Henderson. As it happened, the coroner was the same H.G. Roberts who also served as the justice of the peace. Although it was not uncommon during this period for these two posts to be held by the same individual, it was an uncommon occurrence for the Justice of the Peace to be involved in an overt illegal action such as this lynching. As a Justice of the Peace Roberts would have sworn to

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<sup>66</sup> G.W. Hardy to General Thomas Scurry, telegram, March 13, 1901, Governor Joseph Sayers's papers, Texas State Archives

<sup>67</sup> An actual strand of rope, used to secure Henderson to the Railroad Rail, may be seen at the Dallas City Library, Texas History Division.

<sup>69</sup> *Dallas Daily Times Herald*, March 14, 1901.



uphold the law, and his verdict is a direct affront to the law and his duties. H.G. Roberts stated in his coroner's verdict:

I find that the deceased came to his death at the hands of the incensed and outraged citizens and the best people in the United States, the citizens of Navarro and adjoining counties. The evidence as well as the confession of guilt by the deceased show that his punishment was fully merited and commendable.

Two hours after the fire had taken place; the frenzy that had filled Corsicana for a week entirely disappeared. People continued to speak about the incident, but things quickly returned to normal. Within twenty-four hours people returned to their churches, and the city opera house was full of spectators. One would never have guessed that such a terrible incident occurred the very day before.<sup>70</sup>

Another Justice of the Peace for Navarro County Precinct No. 1, Harrison Ward Burton, forwarded a letter to Governor Sayers on March 15, 1901. This letter included several newspaper clippings explaining the serious actions of Justice Roberts, including the statement made by Roberts to the *Corsicana Morning News*. Burton explained to the Governor that Roberts had influenced the people of Corsicana into lawlessness. He wrote to the governor that Sheriff Robinson and County Attorney O.C. Kierven did all that was in their power to protect Henderson from the hands of the mob. Burton stated that both Sheriff Robinson and County Attorney Kirven were being subjected to all manners of abuse for their efforts to protect the prisoner, while Justice Roberts received letters of support from members of the lynch mob for his "verdict." According to Burton, Roberts was chiefly responsible for the act of violence that took place against Henderson. He

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<sup>70</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 14, 1901.

stated to Governor Sayers “I could have held the inquest but refused to do so upon the request of one of the onlookers. I am not prompted to write this by any others, only a desire to place blame where it belongs.”<sup>71</sup>

Sheriff Robinson apparently did attempt to uphold the law throughout the Henderson ordeal. This is suggested by a letter sent to Texas Governor Sayers by Navarro County District Attorney O.C. Kirven who stated:

Now as to the officers, I wish to state, first, that I have never known an officer who acted with more firmness, zeal and courage throughout, than Sheriff Robinson, the fact is he has been and is being consumed and cursed more by a majority of the people, than any officer I ever knew, and simply because of his devotion to duty as he understood it, he has stood at his post, from first to last, and looked to the law and observed your instructions to the letter in the face of protestations of his friends and his boardsmen and the demands of an excited and enraged public. I know that he had not the remotest idea that the negro would be captured at Itasca, when this was being done he with the Deputy and myself were on the H. & T. C. R.R. going south to Wortham to see about a negro in the caboose there which suited the description of the supposed murderer. I went on to Mexia at 12 o'clock last night (on my return home Fairfield) leaving them at Wortham this morning they returned here at six o'clock and found John Henderson in charge of a great number of determined people who in a few hours burnt the negro (after a confession) in the court house yard. All of this was wholly unexpected by officers and could not have been prevented by less than a

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<sup>71</sup> H.W. Burton to Governor Joseph Sayers, March 13, 1901, Governor Joseph Sayers's Papers, Texas State Archives, Austin, TX.

thousand soldiers, after the prisoner confessed. No blame can be attached to any officer, in the least Sheriff Robinson had agreed and intended to take witness today to whenever the prisoner was, for the purpose of identification and really did not know exactly where the prisoner was, and it was a surprise to all that he was captured & brought here this morning and but or his free & full confession, I have no doubt but it at his preliminary trial would have been had here without mob violence, as the main part of the mob from the country dispersed yesterday evening & went to their houses, not knowing or believing that the prisoner moved. Of course all this is to be much regretted, but vigilance and proficiency of the best officers could not prevent it, for nearly all of the best citizens of the county seem to approve and most of them seem to participate in taking the law into their own hands.<sup>72</sup>

Under the anti-lynching statute passed several years before the crime, the governor had the ability to arrest those who had participated in the lynching. Governor Sayers had the ability to call upon the state militia, the Texas Rangers, and any other law enforcement personnel if he wished to enforce the anti-lynching statute. The people of Navarro County watched the governor for any sign of action but none took place. A statement made to the *Dallas Daily Times Herald* the day after the lynching, by an unknown Corsicana resident, gives us an idea of the mentality of the times:

Despite the anti-lynching statute, despite long dissertations against mob rule, despite the tireless actions of the civil authorities, despite the watchfulness of the states executive office, the unwritten law, one of the

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<sup>72</sup> O.C. Kirven to Governor Joseph Sayers, March 13, 1901, Governor Joseph Sayers's Papers, Texas State Archives, Austin, TX.

priceless heritages of the Anglo-Saxon race and which commands that none shall lay forceful hands on the body of a women, has been swiftly and awfully enforced. Led and spurred on by as good men and as prominent as there are in this community, 2500 citizens yesterday ended the life of the murderer John Henderson.<sup>73</sup>

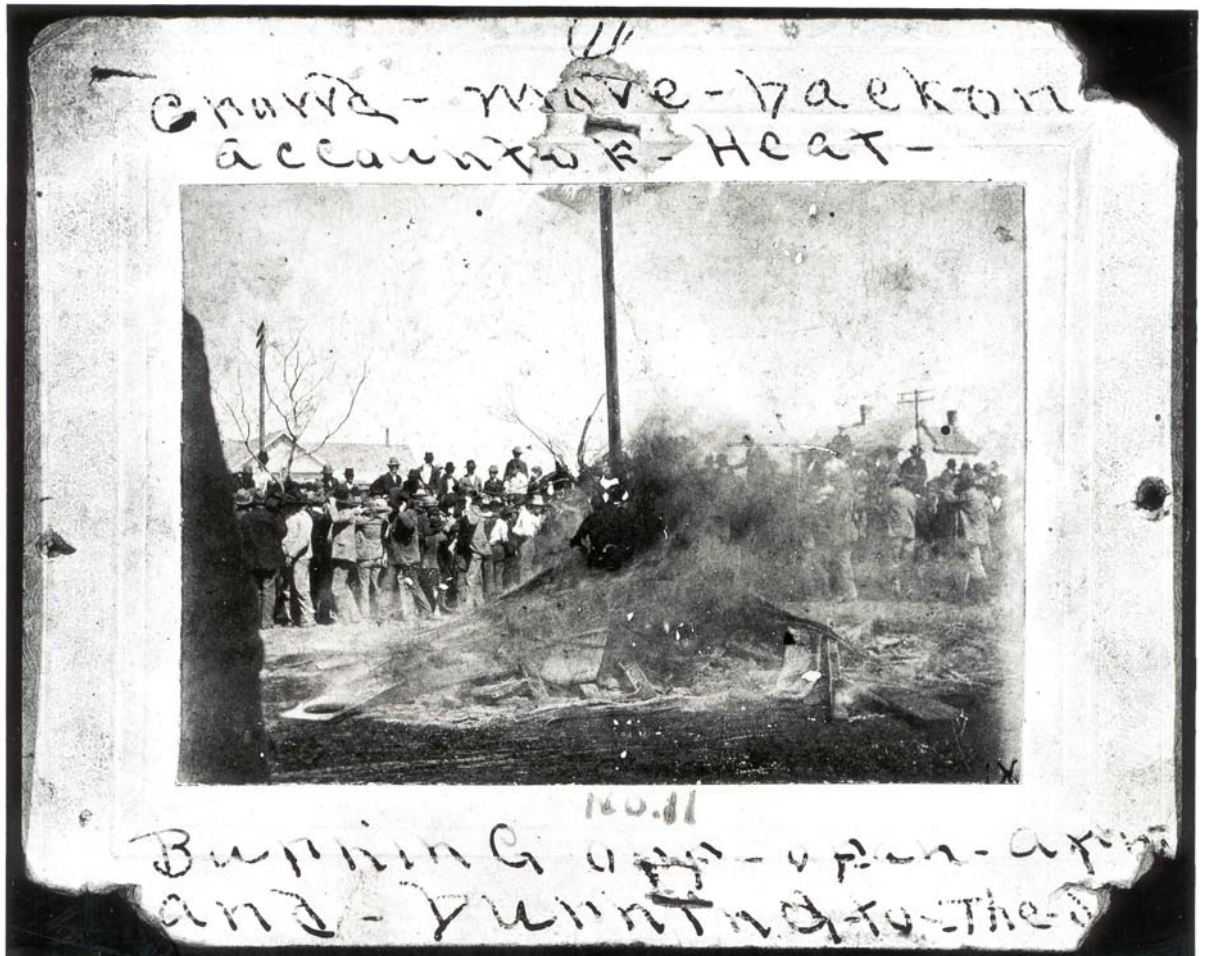


Figure 12 "Crowd Moves Back on Account of Heat" "From the collections of the Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library."

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 13 "John Henderson Burned at Stake" "From the collections of the Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas Public Library."**

Although this horrible event was the last major act of a lynch mob within the city of Corsicana and Navarro County, racial tensions continued for some time after. African American citizens became rightfully concerned over their protection shortly after the lynching of Henderson. On March 16, 1901, four days after the event, a prominent attorney who owned a large farm in the western portion of Navarro County, received a letter from several of his African American tenants. The letter stated:

You told me if anything went wrong out here to let you know. Now is the time we want your assistance. Our schoolhouse has been burned down and a notice posted to the negroes to leave this place within forty-eight hours and notice to a man living close by that a crowd will wait on him tonight. Twenty-five or thirty shots were fired into a colored man's house last night. Ain't gone yet, because I wanted to hear from you first. I have no law or protection here and I need your protection. I want to hear from you at once. This can't be put off; something must be done if possible. This is a fact. You come and you will see how they are treating us. Now Mr. ----, I must hear from you at once, but would rather see you. Yours, ect. [sic] Corbet, Texas.<sup>74</sup>

From this letter we can once again see that some outside of Corsicana proper were the instigators of racial violence. These individuals would have been the cotton farmers or sharecroppers who had seen the most change in their way of life since emancipation. Now not only were these individuals attempting to survive in a difficult agricultural economy they were also forced to compete with free blacks for available resources. It is also telling that the African American man is asking for the protection of a prominent Corsicana citizen. This once again points to the two very different elements of society that had developed in Corsicana.

On this same night, several African Americans arrived in downtown Corsicana asking for protection. These individuals were from Corbet, Texas as well, and possibly the same individuals who had earlier written the letter. They reported that African American section men, on the Cotton Belt railroad line, had been ordered to leave by angry whites, and all of the African Americans in the area were terrified to return to their

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<sup>74</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 16, 1901.

homes.<sup>75</sup> Several days later on March 26, 1901, the paper reported that in Dresden, fifteen miles west of Corsicana, a band of fifty African Americans had organized a group to “thin out the white trash of Navarro County.” This band was allegedly armed with shotguns, and many of the group had purchased as much as five pounds of buckshot apiece. One of the members of the group announced that they planned to make a raid on the “white trash pretty soon and thin out some of them so they will not be so fresh.”<sup>76</sup>

These new threats of violence apparently amounted to nothing, and both the Caucasian and African American populations returned to a fragile peace. Although a lynching never took place again in Corsicana, sporadic incidents of racial violence continued for some time. One such event occurred on May 22, 1901, when a young white man “accidentally” shot an African American. According to a telling article, in the *Dallas Morning News*,

The “unloaded” pistol got in another piece of its customary work in the city last night, the victim being a negro boy named Les McClintock. The incident occurred in the Opera House saloon. A young white man pointed his 38 double action revolver at McClintock, and after some playful remarks pulled the trigger. The result was an explosion. The ball struck McClintock in the chest just above the right nipple, and following a rib lodged under the right armpit. He was taken to the drug store and given medical attention. He was not seriously hurt.<sup>77</sup>

Another similar article found in the *Dallas Morning News* on July 13, 1901 exposes the racism and violence that remained prevalent in Corsicana after the Henderson lynching. According to the article, an incident occurred at a local baseball park when a

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<sup>75</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 17, 1901.

<sup>76</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 28, 1901.

<sup>77</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, May 22, 1901.

white man pointed a pistol at an African American named Amos and made “playful” remarks when the gun exploded, striking the man in the side of the forehead. The bullet caused an injury to Amos’s forehead but the wound was not serious. The article stated, “That but for the proverbial thick skull of the colored race the incident might have proven a tragedy.”<sup>78</sup> On July 28, 1901, *The Dallas Morning News* published another article, which showed the mentality of the Anglo citizens of Corsicana. The article states, “A negro employed in an oil well in Corsicana was hurt pretty seriously by a large hammer falling on his head. The negro will recover, but as nothing is said about the hammer, it is inferred that it is smashed out of shape.”<sup>79</sup> These overtly racist incidents were not the last to take place in Corsicana, but none equaled the violence that took place in the case of John Henderson. After the end of 1901, few references to racial unrest in Navarro County or Corsicana were reported in *The Dallas Morning News* or other local sources. The growing threat of violence, exacerbated by disfranchisement and the spread of de jure segregation, had effectively rendered the black community silent and submissive.

The lynching of John Henderson remained in the memories of those who were present and those who heard of the event for many years. African American residents could never escape the memory of the heinous events of March 1901. Supposedly, John Henderson’s heel bone became a souvenir stored in a wooden box by a longtime Corsicana resident Holle Gorden.<sup>80</sup> Henderson’s thighbone reportedly hung in the front yard of local Judge Bay Owens for decades.<sup>81</sup> Although these alleged incidents remained

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<sup>78</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, July 13, 1901.

<sup>79</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, July 28, 1901.

<sup>80</sup> Wm. A. McGlohen, interviewed by D. Wiley Whitten, April 13 1990. Fort Worth, Tex., Transcript, Navarro County Historical Society, Corsicana, Tex.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*



as disturbing reminders of the Henderson lynching, the railroad rail remained the most potent of all. The rail served for many years as a hitching post for visitors to the Navarro County Courthouse. Eventually, Corsicana received its first cinema, the Ideal Theater, on February 13, 1913.<sup>82</sup> As the theater was constructed, the Henderson rail was set in the fresh concrete curb directly in front of the entrance as a reminder to all that passed. This monstrous relic remained on display until the destruction of the theater in 1989 that made way for a new parking lot.<sup>83</sup> Today the whereabouts of the rail have been lost to history, and local citizens do not often discuss the horrible events of their town's history.

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<sup>82</sup> "Ideal Theater," Navarro County Historical Society Website, [http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~txnavarr/historical\\_society/index.htm](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~txnavarr/historical_society/index.htm). (accessed 12 Jun 2008).

<sup>83</sup> Wm. A. McGlohen, interviewed by D. Wiley Whitten, 13 April 1990. Fort Worth, Tex., Transcript, Navarro County Historical Society, Corsicana, Tex.

## Chapter 3

### Why a Lynching in Corsicana?

Before the 1890s there is little record of mob lynching mentioned in Navarro County. Beginning in the 1890s, this area, along with the South in general, experienced an increasing amount of mob violence, but this mostly disappeared by the mid-twentieth century. Several trends appear to have led to a climate in which the lynching of John Henderson could occur. These trends were exacerbated by the changing social and economic structure of Corsicana and Navarro County. Where blacks and whites had once lived in relative peace, or at least in a set racial hierarchy, fundamental changes in Corsicana's society led to a situation where a mob lynching could occur. Corsicana's white citizens were concerned with the dynamics of social change and adjustment that were consuming the entire southern United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Not coincidentally a separate drama was being played out in Corsicana—the transformation of a southern agricultural community into a modern oil boom town. In the years leading up to the John Henderson lynching the community had undergone an unprecedented transformation that touched almost everyone in the community in some manner. The petroleum industry of Corsicana fueled the town's prosperity, but it also acted as a magnet for an influx of outsiders to enter the community. Longtime residents who had lived under a strict racial hierarchy and code of honor now saw the stability of their community disappearing before their eyes.

People of different socioeconomic backgrounds looked at lynching across the Progressive Era South differently. Many people of rural and working class backgrounds

felt that harsh retribution toward African Americans was justified and should be carried out by the community. Those of middle class backgrounds and law enforcement officials often relied more on the formal criminal justice system and on the letter of the law.<sup>84</sup> In the case of the Corsicana lynching, Sheriff Robinson strove to protect Henderson and to carry out his duties to the law. The committee that was originally formed, primarily of prominent citizens, to discuss the return and safety of Henderson, seemed to be truly concerned with carrying out due process of law on the surface, but in actuality they appear to be merely attempting to gain control of Henderson. This is demonstrated with their pledge to assist Sheriff Robinson and the order to close saloons as to not incite violence, but their actions contradict their statements. Throughout the Henderson narrative, the Democrats of Navarro County are the primary organizers of the return of the prisoner, but it is unclear if they were the majority of the lynch mob. It does appear that the majority of the mob consisted of rural farmers. This is evident from the fact that many mob members traveled into the city of Corsicana from the outlying rural communities of Navarro County. It is also apparent from the racial violence that erupted throughout the rural areas of the county after the lynching of Henderson took place.

Lynchings were more likely to occur when and where whites felt threatened in some way by their African American neighbors. After studying the historical background of the city of Corsicana, we are able to see that as the Jim Crow system replaced slavery an institution, whites attempted to hold on to the lifestyle to which they were accustomed. As Corsicana became an industrialized modern society, the white citizens felt more threatened than they had in previous years. With the rise of the oil industry and the influx of outsiders into the community, more white citizens saw their

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<sup>84</sup> Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 68.

lifestyles slipping away. This was especially true for poor farmers who saw the rise of tenancy farming, sharecropping and a deepening agricultural depression. The fact that the institution of slavery had a substantial historic base, within Navarro County, also must play a significant role in the lynching culture. The ideals of white supremacy would have been deeply engrained into the society by the year 1901. From its very founding, Corsicana had operated under a system of total white superiority. This can be seen in the Navarro County population graph in Figure 14. In 1860, of the 1,891 African Americans in the community 1,890 were slaves. After Emancipation and Reconstruction, as the people of Corsicana sought a new method, to force their racial structure upon African Americans, lynching served this purpose well.

From the end of the Civil War into the twentieth century, no region of the country was judged more backward than the South, and it is argued that lynching and the ideas of Populism were both rooted in Southern soil. There is no doubt that race was a powerful force in Southern politics during the Populist era, but to some historians it is unclear if Populism contributed to racial violence or offered a new opportunity for racial cooperation in the South.<sup>85</sup> Since Navarro County contained a large number of Populists during this period of increase in racial violence, it can easily be inferred that Populism definitely played a role in the upsurge of violence.

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<sup>85</sup> Dennis B. Downey and Raymond M. Hyser, *No Crooked Death* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 5.

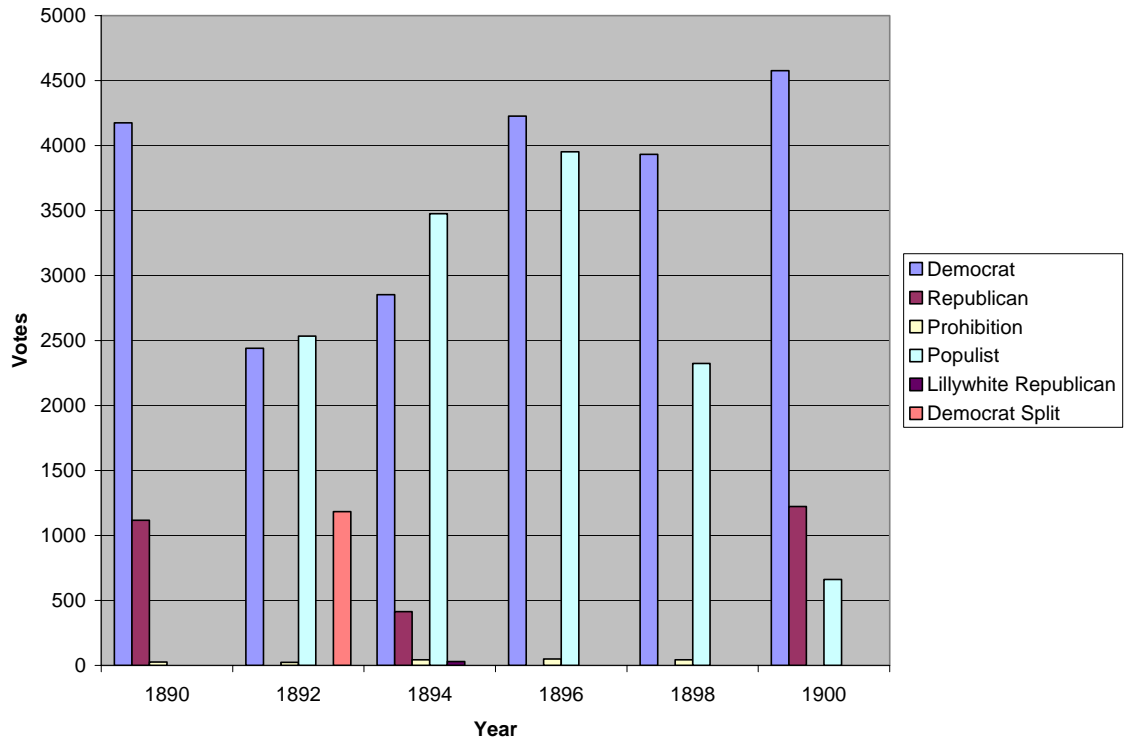


Figure 14 Navarro County Governor Election Results<sup>86</sup>

Throughout the elections of the 1890s, the battle between Navarro County Populists and Democrats was particularly bitter. In the election of 1892, populists were able to gain control of the entire county ticket by a majority ranging from 10 to 750 votes. Navarro County voters also supported several Populists on the state and national levels. Voters supported Populist candidate Thomas Nugent over Charles Culberson, for governor, by 657 votes. They also supported Marion Martin, a Populist from Navarro County, for the position of lieutenant governor. The voters of Navarro County also cast the majority of their votes for Populists Jerome Kearby for Senator and DeArman for Representative. According to *The Dallas Morning News*, many Navarro County Democrats, in the city of Corsicana and throughout the rural areas of the county,

<sup>86</sup> Navarro County Election Results, Texas State Archives, Austin, Tx

neglected to cast their votes.<sup>87</sup> A possible explanation for this occurrence could be the coalition between African American Republicans, African American Populists, and Anglo Populists. With the African American population casting votes for the Populist candidates rather than the Democratic candidates, this could have enabled the Populists to overtake the Democratic vote. It might also appear that many Democrats did not cast votes because in actuality many votes for Democratic candidates in past elections were forced African Americans votes. In previous years the Democratic Party often had been able to manipulate the votes of African Americans through coercion.

At times both the Democrats and the Populists attempted to gain the support of the black vote, often through coercion. Realizing the dangers of a Populist's attempts to court the black vote, Democrats used many methods to control black voters. Bribery and intimidation, the stuffing of ballot boxes, and the falsification of ballot returns were all used to change the outcome of elections. The Democratic leaders took no chances on a Populist victory. There is no doubt that Populists were also responsible for such activities, but election results tend to show that the Democrats were at least more successful in their attempts to control the black vote. One Texas Populist stated that "the Democrats rely on the negro to perpetuate themselves in office, and that the people's party is the only white man's party in the South."<sup>88</sup>

By the election of 1894, the Democratic Party had grown aggressive and hopeful that they would regain control of the county by large majorities. The Populists realized that they would have a difficult time in retaining control of the county government.

According to an article in *The Dallas Morning News*, just before the election began, the

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<sup>87</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, November 3, 1994

<sup>88</sup> John D. Hicks. *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmer's Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1931), 25.

Democratic Party managers began an extensive campaign to persuade local voters. It was also stated in the article that there had been a mass exodus of African Americans from the city of Corsicana into the cotton fields. The article points out that this action by the African American community would cut down the opposition to the Democrats considerably. Interestingly the newspaper fails to mention the reason why the African American community fled to the cotton fields. It can be assumed that Democratic officials were behind their actions, due to the distinct advantage they would receive from the absence of the African American populist voters. When the elections took place the Democratic Party received a greater victory over the Populists than they had expected. The Democrats managed to make a clean sweep of the county in every office except for the position of County Attorney. Marion Martin, the former lieutenant governor of Texas, managed to secure that position running on the Populist ticket.<sup>89</sup>

Corsicana was experiencing a great deal of change in a short time. The citizens of Corsicana, who had lived under the old honor system of the South, now saw their traditional way of life threatened by all of these changes. This was particularly true for the traditional cotton farmer or sharecropper, due to the coming of the petroleum industry. The cotton farmers of Navarro County had demonstrated their discontent by their strong support of the Populist Party throughout the 1890s. Navarro County nominated candidates on what the *Southern Mercury* later was pleased to call the first People's Party ticket.<sup>90</sup> Some sociologists adhere to the Populist movement being a result of the structural strain theory. This theory states that protest movements like Populism, were a by-product of strains from disruptive social changes. The structural strain

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>90</sup> Martin, *The Peoples Party in Texas*, 33.

perspective states that most members of society share a common set of values. Since the society's social, economic, and political structures are patterned in accordance with these shared values normally there is no conflict. Conflicts and protest occur only when there are structural strains, and such strains are most likely to occur during periods of rapid social change.<sup>91</sup> Richard Hofstadter, in his work The Age of Reform, argues that the Populist revolt was in large part due to status anxiety of the farmers. He stated

Rank in society! That was close to the heart of the matter, for the farmer was beginning to realize acutely not merely that the best of the world's goods were to be had in the city...but also he was losing in status and self-respect as compared with them.<sup>92</sup>

Until the late 1880s many white farmers were reasonably well satisfied under existing conditions or, if not satisfied, they were at least hopeful for a change for the better. In most Texas counties farmers continued to vote Democratic, most of the agricultural areas of the state remained Democratic throughout the period of the Populist movement. The most notable exception was that of Navarro County, but according to Roscoe Martin this can be explained. The People's Party (Populist) was very highly organized in Navarro County and a Navarro County man was on the ticket for lieutenant governor in both 1894 and 1896.<sup>93</sup>

Although the Populist movement had lost its strength by the time of the John Henderson lynching, the farmers who supported the party were still in a state of discontent, especially after the wealth of petroleum entered the picture. Even though the

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<sup>91</sup> Donna A. Barnes, *Farmer's in Rebellion* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 5.

<sup>92</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Vintage Press, 1955), 35.

<sup>93</sup> Martin, *The Peoples Party in Texas*, 61.



Populist Party had failed to meet its goals it is apparent that many of the issue that helped form the party in the South were still prevalent in the agricultural community.

Many middle class businessmen, with capital, were able to profit from the oil industry, while agricultural workers were left to their traditional way of life, which now included competing with free African Americans for land and jobs. Along with the petroleum industry also came outsiders, many from the North as well as many African Americans in search of work. With these new outsiders, free African Americans who had never known slavery, and the fundamental changes in society, the people of the “old” agrarian Corsicana most certainly felt their “Southern” lifestyle slipping away.

A similar phenomenon occurred in Coatesville, Pennsylvania in 1911, but rather than oil being behind the industrialization of society, steel was the stimulus in this incident. Although Coatesville is not located in the South, many of the same factors that instigated the lynching of John Henderson caused a similar condition to explode in Pennsylvania. Much like John Henderson, the lynching victim in Coatesville, Zachariah Walker, had ventured to the town to find a job as an unskilled laborer. After finding such work, he became part of the new working black and immigrant population. On August 12, 1911 Walker and his friend Oscar Starkey were in Coatesville drinking gin for most of the day. Much as in Corsicana for the oil workers, this was common practice on Saturdays in Coatesville as this was payday for the steel workers. It was common in Coatesville for fights to break out without provocation and for the city to be uncontrollable with the throngs of drunken steel workers. The native white residents became angered at the decline in civility that had taken over their quiet town. Increasingly the old residents of Coatesville saw their way of life slipping away. As

night fell on that Saturday in August Zachariah Walker met up with several Polish immigrant workers, when he decided to pull his concealed revolver and fire it over the heads of the men as a “joke.” He did so sending the Polish men scurrying away. These gunshots quickly aroused a local policeman who confronted Walker. Walker and Officer Rice became engaged in a struggle and Rice was shot. Severely wounded Rice made it to the bottom of a hill and collapsed on the porch of a small store. A few minutes later one of the most popular and prominent men in Coatesville was dead.<sup>94</sup> A search ensued and Walker was eventually captured but wounded in the process. Walker was taken to a hospital, but eventually the angered town’s people managed to gain control of the prisoner and decided to lynch him. The prisoner was eventually taken to a field and strapped to a fence where he was then burned alive, much as John Henderson had suffered almost a decade before.<sup>95</sup>

According to Dennis Downey and Raymond Hyser in their work No Crooked Death, Coatesville was a community immersed in a broad pattern of social and economic reorganization that characterized much of the nation in the early twentieth century. Within a single generation at the turn of the century Coatesville experienced a demographic change of huge proportions that challenged the very meaning of community for long time residents of the borough. These abrupt changes that came with the reorganization of society demanded that the native inhabitants adjust to the changing environment. Downey and Hyser suggest that the citizens of Coatesville were not only

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<sup>94</sup> Downey and Hyser, *No Crooked Death*, 16.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 39

making a statement about the acceptable limits of conduct in their community but were in fact coming to terms with history in their own way.<sup>96</sup>

Although the coming of the oil industry did not bring to Corsicana the extreme social disorder that the steel industry brought to Coatesville, Pennsylvania, Corsicana did experience many of the similar evils of an oil boom town. Like many other boom towns, Corsicana became permeated with a culture of violence. This violence was intertwined with the honor and racial system of the old South. The oil excitement lured a large transient population of oil scouts, drillers, and assorted oil field workers, who soon filled all available hotel and housing accommodations in the city. The original residences of Corsicana were threatened by the proliferation of saloons and brothels that began to fill the town. Violence began to occur on an increasing level. In one incident a Corsicana resident, Hardy Bowles was incarcerated after severely beating a newly arrived Pennsylvania pipe gauger with a brick.<sup>97</sup> Eventually the city officials did close down a few of the most notorious establishments and decreed that the remainder remain closed on Sundays.<sup>98</sup>

Local churches and fraternal organizations did what they could to counteract these temptations of Corsicana's "sinful" areas. They attempted to provide Corsicana's oil field workers with recreational opportunities and religious experiences. Local members of the Y.M.C.A. established canteens throughout the oil fields and brought Sunday church services to the wells for the men who could not attend church.

Corsicana's racist attitude can be observed in other situations besides those relating to African Americans. Catholic Priest Michael J. Kelly announced his intentions

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 127-128.

<sup>97</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, November 23, 1898.

<sup>98</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, October 8, 1899.

to collect funds to open an “Oil Man’s Club” where off-duty workers could lounge, read, and write letters home. Father Kelly insisted that his project was to be nonsectarian and open to all men regardless of religion. This statement did little to lessen the fears of many of the Protestant ministers of Corsicana. They were aware of the fact that many of the newly arrived oil-field workers were in fact Irish Catholics. The ministers felt that Father Kelly’s club would serve predominantly as a Catholic haven where the unsuspecting Protestant could be easily converted to Catholicism. Local Reverend A.B. Ingram and several other ministers published a note urging Protestants not to take part in the venture. Eventually Father Kelly was allowed to address the men of the Cullinan refinery and he was soon able to accumulate the funds needed for the club. The “Oil Man’s Club” eventually opened in Corsicana’s business section in January 1899 with sixty members.<sup>99</sup> This large number of members demonstrates the diversity that had developed in Corsicana.

Although the longtime residents of Corsicana saw the new oil industry and the changes it brought with it as a threat to their known way of life, the ever changing status of the African American continued to be the biggest threat of all. As explained by Fitzhugh Brundage in his work Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930, the South adhered to a system of a strict social honor. According to Brundage, this system of Southern honor demanded that a person always see himself through the eyes of others because personal worth was determined not by self appraisal but by the worth that others conferred. The code demanded that each man must defend his honor from any attack and in the event of such he must personally seek immediate retribution. In most

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<sup>99</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, January 17, 1899.

situations the retribution for attack on ones honor led to physical violence.<sup>100</sup> Examples of this physical violence are demonstrated by the countless duels that took place across the South in the nineteenth century. Even in the city of Corsicana, as late as 1891, a duel over family honor occurred between the notorious Rufe Highnote and Ennis, Texas resident Bob Cubley.<sup>101</sup> It is telling that Rufe Highnote is the same individual who was later reported to be one of the chief instigators in the capture and lynching of John Henderson.<sup>102</sup>

This code of honor not only applied to the individual's honor, but also to the honor of the entire community. The defense of community honor included a strict adherence to the reverence of southern women's virtue. A man's honor could not be separated from that of his wife or other women in his family. An attack on a woman was considered so heinous that it often merited the response of the entire community. Serious attacks by blacks on prominent whites also often led to a collective response.<sup>103</sup> By the late nineteenth century changes in southern society began to affect the code of honor. Forces such as emancipation, economic diversification, urbanization and industrialization all began to weaken the honor system of the South. All of these changes are especially evident in late nineteenth century Corsicana.

According to Brundage, by the late nineteenth century most whites felt that a massive transformation in racial relations was taking place. The extreme fear of whites over black assimilation into white culture, and the efforts of blacks to advance in society,

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<sup>100</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 50-51.

<sup>101</sup> *The Dallas Morning News*. 9 September 1891, p. 1.

<sup>102</sup> Wm. A. McGlohen, interviewed by D. Wiley Whitten, 13 April 1990. Fort Worth, TX, transcript. Navarro County Historical Society

<sup>103</sup> Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 53.

led to a new generation of white supremacists. These new white supremacists believed that blacks of the new generation, those that had not grown up under slavery, were unschooled in the proper behaviors of southern society. Many whites believed that blacks were returning to a state of savagery and criminality. Whites held a growing fear of blacks, especially the fear of the alleged black rapist. Many whites believed that a new class of criminal blacks was responsible for the epidemic of crime that threatened to overwhelm the region and destroy their known way of life.<sup>104</sup> Whites clung to the belief that lynchings were the natural consequence of black crime, particularly sexual assaults.<sup>105</sup>

Many areas of the South felt that vigilante justice was a justified method of dealing with crimes. White Southerners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century most often agreed with vigilante-based events as long as they represented the consensus of white supremacy and communal prerogatives. Often southern journalists found that they must justify mob actions to those in the North who believed in the due process of law.

An underlying theme of all the incidents of racial violence in Navarro County can be linked to the protection of southern white womanhood, or the fear of the black rapist. Southern editors often argued that the criminal justice system could not deal with the issue of African American rapist against white women. Lynchers claimed that because of the inability of the criminal justice system to deal quickly and harshly with the black rapist, they must take the law into their own hands and protect white women and white

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<sup>104</sup> Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 53.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

communities.<sup>106</sup> This seems apparent at first glance in the Henderson case, as often in the newspaper accounts the idea of the protection of southern womanhood is claimed as an excuse. South Carolina Senator Ben Tillman demonstrated this in 1907 when he argued for the elimination of due process for blacks accused of sex crimes against white women. He stated:

The white women of the south are in a state of siege....Some lurking demon who has watched for the opportunity seizes her; she is choked or beaten into insensibility and ravished, her body prostituted, her purity destroyed, her chastity taken from her...Shall men...demand for the demon the right to have a fair trial and be punished in the regular course of justice? So far as I'm concerned he has put himself outside the pale of the law, human and divine...Civilization peels of us...and we revert to the impulses...to kill! kill! kill!

When Tillman made this speech before Congress, he made it clear to his audience that he did not hate African Americans, but preferred the blacks of the slave days. He stated, "blacks before the Civil War were mere children, but now had reverted to their fiendish ways." According to Robyn Wiegman, Tillman's speech indicates the symbol of white womanhood was used to shape the myth of the black rapist. Using her emblem as a rallying point, white men portrayed themselves as protectors of the purity of the white race and protectors of Southern civilization. When Southern men assumed this role, they assumed a role of superiority. They assign a role to women and place the black man into the position that they wish him to occupy. This mythology of the black male rapist engineers race and gender hierarchies and enables the white male to exercise control over

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<sup>106</sup> Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice*, 83.

the potential relationships between black males and white females.<sup>107</sup> It is interesting to note that in the Henderson case it is insinuated that rape was a motive for the attack on Mrs. Younger, but later in Henderson's confession it is mentioned that the virtue of Mrs. Younger was not violated. This appears to support the idea that rape was often sighted as a justification for the act of lynching. According to Ida B. Wells, the white southerner's description of the African American as a "beast" and rapist served as a ruse to cover several realities that would be unflattering to southern white males. She believed that the rape charge served to cover up the economic and political competition that fueled hostilities between southern white males and African Americans, and that the rape charge often hid the consensual sexual contacts between southern white women and African Americans.<sup>108</sup>

According to William Carrigan in his work, The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas 1836-1916, whites in central Texas often justified their pre-Civil War attacks on Indians and Mexicans as necessary steps in protecting the women and children of Anglo households. During this time vigilante violence against blacks was rarely based on this assumption. African Americans as slaves were considered part of the household of the antebellum South; therefore using this argument to justify mob violence would threaten the very institution of slavery. After emancipation this was no longer an issue and the threat of black attacks on white women could be implemented to justify attacks on African Americans in much the same way it had been done to the Mexican and Native American before. Whites did not resort to this excuse for lynching immediately, but did so after the end of Reconstruction. As

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<sup>107</sup> Robyn Wiegman, "The Anatomy of a lynching," 456-462.

<sup>108</sup> "The Anti-Lynching Papers," Illinois During the Gilded Age, <http://dig.lib.niu.edu/gildedage/idabwells/pamphlets.html>. (accessed June 12, 2008).



Reconstruction was ending, the overt political justifications for white attacks on blacks were no longer apparent, so whites reached for attacks on women to justify their violence against African Americans.<sup>109</sup> By doing so they were able to hold the African American into the racial hierarchy of the old South.

According to Carrigan, whites in central Texas believed in the importance of law and order. They did, however, feel that mob violence was justifiable when courts were ineffective.<sup>110</sup> In Corsicana, the statement of a local journalist demonstrates the white citizen's lack of trust in the courts. When questioned about the causes of the lynching of John Henderson local citizen A. W. Hartman, editor of the *Corsicana Sun* and member of the Corsicana committee, stated that the lynching occurred due to the reversals of upper court tribunals. He stated:

The state of affairs that brought about this thing is caused by the decisions of the court of Criminal Appeals. This court has recently reversed cases where negroes have been found guilty for reasons that there were no negroes on the grand jury or petit juries. The people feel that under this decision there is no hope of justice being delt out to such negroes, and they have come to the conclusion that negroes cannot be convicted, and that they will take things into their own hands.<sup>111</sup>

At Corsicana the argument was also made that lynchings that had previously taken place at Paris and Tyler had prevented future crimes by blacks in those cities. The citizens of Corsicana stated that they believed the murder of Mrs. Flosie French, who had

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<sup>109</sup> William Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836-1916* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 149.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>111</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 18, 1901.

been killed three months prior to Mrs. Younger by Anderson Norton, had actually encouraged Henderson to commit his crime due to the lack of immediate retribution. They stated that people living in the rural areas of the county away from the protection of peace officers felt that something was necessary to protect their wives and children at times when they were forced to be away from home.<sup>112</sup> These two theories can easily be discounted when examining the facts. In reality lynchings continued to occur in the cities of Paris and Tyler. On December 25, 1901 a J.H. McClinton was lynched in Paris, and on May 25, 1912 a Dan Davis was lynched in Tyler for the crime of rape.<sup>113</sup> In the case of Mrs. Younger, she did not live in the remote part of Navarro County, but rather near the city of Corsicana within reach of law enforcement officials. Moreover, the murderer of Mrs. French did not escape justice as the citizens of Corsicana implied to justify the lynching of John Henderson, but rather faced a trial by jury and was convicted and executed for his crime. This is positive evidence that the court system was functioning properly in Navarro County and thus could not be used to justify the mob lynching of John Henderson.

Lynching became an event of extreme social significance for southern communities. Mass mobs amplified the meaning of punishments for particular offences for an avid audience of the local citizens. Lynch mob executions enacted the perceived values of the local community. The ritual of the lynch mob imitated the procedures of a traditional legal court at times. This is the case with the Henderson lynching. The citizens of Corsicana strove to maintain an official appearance by implementing “official” committees and “allowing” the prisoner to confess. This appeared to offer the

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<sup>112</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 15, 1901.

<sup>113</sup> *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1919) 98-99.

sense that the lynchings were a valid cultural alternative to the criminal justice system. The location of the lynching often demonstrates the values that the mob wishes to enforce. In the case of John Henderson and many others, the choice of the courthouse square signifies a defiance of legal institutions and the invocation of popular authority.<sup>114</sup> The courthouse setting may also give the mob the sense of legality to their illegal actions. Lynchings habitually imitated the customs of traditional executions by allowing the victim to make a confession or to write last words to loved ones. In the John Henderson affair, Henderson gives both a confession and a farewell letter. A confession could be used to confirm the guilt of the victim or if he chose not to confess to demonstrate the accused lack of truthfulness.

In Corsicana, the confession was used to confirm the suspect's guilt and to justify the extreme actions of the lynch mob without waiting for a trial. The confession often played an important role in the protocol of the lynchers. The confession helped to appear as if the lynch mob was exercising social control.<sup>115</sup> The methods of the killing also made an important statement. Lynch mob executions ranged from a traditional hanging to a medieval burning, as in the case of Henderson. When burning was chosen as the means for execution, this was often done as a way to include members of the whole community. This act of overkill and torture expresses power and prowess of the lynchers. When a community lynched a victim, individuals were not singled out for the responsibilities of the mob's murder.<sup>116</sup> When John Henderson was lynched so many individuals rushed forward to fasten him to the rail and to ignite the fire, no one could be singled out for prosecution. The action of the mob after the lynching event also plays a

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<sup>114</sup> Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice*, 44-45.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

part in the overall event. Often the body was left in plain view for several hours after the event, as a warning to others who might consider considering a similar offence. This appears to have taken place in Corsicana, but only for a short period. A characteristic of lynching in the West and South was the appearance of sadism in the mistreatment of the victim's body and the ghoulish act of artifact collection. The degradation of the corpse, as in burning in the case of Henderson, seems to play a role in reaffirming the superiority of the victors and maintaining the racial hierarchy.<sup>117</sup>

Whites who collectively lynched African Americans in the South not only made a statement about the hierarchy of race, but also the law. For the people of the South, the law was too unpredictable, too abstract, and too concerned with fairness. Racist whites throughout the South viewed lynching as the most effective way to deal with African American resistance to the superiority of whites. For most southern whites the criminal justice system was not trustworthy in the protection of white supremacy, when African Americans challenged it. This was especially true in the case of the punishment for the rape of white women as mention previously. Whites along the Cotton Belt often kept the criminal justice system in a weakened state, in order to punish what they considered African American deviancy. They believed that informal violence and a weak system of law could help to regulate the racial hierarchy, now that slavery could no longer fill this role.<sup>118</sup> In Corsicana, Henderson was in the hands of the legal law enforcement official, but the citizens made the decision to apprehend the prisoner. It appears that the citizens of Corsicana, in fact, did prefer the extralegal forms of retribution.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 68-67.

The sheer advancements in technology, available to the population of Corsicana in 1901, were also at least partially responsible for the mob lynching of John Henderson. As Grace Elizabeth Hale has argued the “spectacle lynching” was a product of the modernization and industrialization of American society.<sup>119</sup> This is most evident in the lynching of Henderson. The railroad system was exploited in order to both transport Henderson back to Corsicana as well as to bring the masses of mob members into the city. Without the transportation provided by the modern railroad system it is unlikely the mass of people from the areas surrounding Corsicana would have been able to congregate in the quantities necessary for a large lynch mob. New inventions such as the telephone enabled the lynch mob to grow to the proportion that it did. Without the use of telephones or telegraphs for communications, it would have been difficult for the lynch mob to organize and plan over such a large area of the county.

While lynching could and did occur across Texas, Corsicana did not experience severe racial violence until the 1890s. Interestingly this corresponds to the time of both the rise of Populism and the founding of the Texas petroleum industry. Both of these factors played a significant role in creating a climate in which the lynching of Henderson could take place. No single factor can be singled out for the cause of the John Henderson lynching, but rather a multitude of situations converged to create a climate where such an act could take place.

First and most important was the fundamental shift in society after the end of slavery and Reconstruction. Southern whites were now being forced to come to terms with African Americans who were born after the destruction of slavery. These young

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<sup>119</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, “Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940,” in *A History in Documents Lynching in America*, ed. Christopher Waldrep (New York, 2006), 23.

African Americans were in search of work and in many cases competing for jobs with Anglos; the social antebellum hierarchy had been disrupted, and a new one was still evolving. Agrarian Anglos were already showing their economic discontent through the Populist Party. This appears to be the situation with Henderson as he journeyed to Navarro County in search of work as a cotton picker.<sup>120</sup> Although he may or may not have been guilty of the murder of Mrs. Younger, he also fit the role of the “outside” invader perfectly. This outsider, or young black man who had never known the days of slavery, threatened the very institutions that the old South adhered to. This honor system of the old South became threatened under all of these converging situations and the people of the old South took the law into their own hands to hold on to their hierarchy. This was especially true due to the murder of Mrs. French just a week before Mrs. Younger. Only with these converging factors was Corsicana forced into a climate where such a heinous inhumanity could occur.

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<sup>120</sup> *Dallas Morning News*, March 14, 1901.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Conclusion**

The conditions in Corsicana and the surrounding area that made a spectacle lynching possible developed over time. There was no one single factor that facilitated the event, but rather a multitude of simultaneously occurring situations developed that enabled the event to take place. If the historian investigates antebellum Corsicana, it is apparent the area consisted of a cotton-based economy, equal to that of any southern agricultural district. Along with the cotton economy came the South's peculiar institution. This substantial African American population would be the basis of the later racial conflict that would envelope the area. Corsicana supported the Confederacy throughout the Civil war and continued to be for the cause until the bitter end. This base of rural farmers who had lived under the South's racial and social hierarchy and honor system of the antebellum period would later make up the basis of the lynch mob of John Henderson.

As time passed and Reconstruction ended, the rural residents of Navarro County found themselves in a changing world. The collapse of cotton prices created strife among the cotton farmers across the South of the 1890s. This was demonstrated by the agricultural worker's enthusiasm in joining the Populist movement. Along with the Populist movement of the 1890's came a surge in racial violence. The honor and racial hierarchy of the old South was also quickly evaporating. Now new African Americans were moving into the area in search of work. Most of these young blacks had never know the institution of slavery as they were not born yet or too young to remember. This was the situation of John Henderson, who was a young African American man born after

the end of slavery. Henderson had come to Corsicana in search of work as a cotton picker; this could very well have played a role in the decision to target him as the alleged murderer. With the falling price of cotton white residents of Navarro County in search of work would have seen outside African Americans as a threat to their livelihood.

Although Corsicana had managed to grow into a prosperous small town the most important change that occurred in the growing city of Corsicana was the discovery of petroleum. Along with the petroleum industry came the problems and issues of a modern society. Many in the city of Corsicana were able to benefit from the situation, but other southern traditionalists saw this as one more affront to their lifestyle. The oil industry brought with it outsiders, mostly of which were petroleum experts from the North. Along with these outsiders came the boomtown mentality. Saloons, brothels, and the like sprang forth challenging the traditional structure of Corsicana. The petroleum industry managed to exacerbate the already growing rift between the rural farmers and the industrializing city residents.

Due to all of these many different aspects that were affecting Corsicana and Navarro County, a climate became possible that a spectacle lynching could occur. Throughout the 1890s the situation escalated until it finally exploded in the lynching of John Henderson. Although minor racial incidents continued to occur, a large mob lynching never took place in Navarro County again. There can be several interpretations as to why this situation never occurred for a second time. One explanation could be that after oil was discovered near Beaumont, Texas in January 1901, shortly thereafter many of the oil workers in Corsicana packed up and left for the new field. At 100,000 barrels of oil a day, the gusher tripled U.S. oil production overnight, ensuring the second



industrial revolution would be fueled not by wood and coal but by oil and its byproducts. Some of the companies chartered to exploit the wealth of Spindletop are some of today's largest and well known corporations such as ExxonMobil and Texaco. This new discovery removed the spotlight from Corsicana and helped to eventually tame the boomtown which had developed in Navarro County. Never again, even to the present day, has Corsicana ever reached the prosperity and population levels that it achieved during its oil boom period of the 1890s.

Another explanation of why a lynching never occurred again in Navarro County is most likely due to the strong antilynching and prohibition movements that developed in the South during the late part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. Seemingly-contradictory doctrines of racism and progressivism flourished side by side in the South in the early twentieth century. According to Mary Jane Brown in her work *Eradicating This Evil: Women in the American Anti-Lynching Movement 1892-1940*, Ida Wells was the chief architect for the eventual eradication of lynching. She explains that through her pamphlets she created the format for all anti-lynching activists by defining the problem, attacking the rape and lynching myth, and devising strategies of investigation and exposure of facts and statistics.<sup>121</sup> According to Patricia Schechter of Portland State University, Wells's anti-lynching pamphlets of the 1890s comprised a comprehensive view of southern racialized sexual politics: a vindication of black men as true men, a critique of white southern would-be male protectors as corrupt, an expose of white women as active participants in white supremacist sexual politics, and a re-

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<sup>121</sup> Mary Jane Brown, *Eradicating This Evil: Women in the American Anti-Lynching Movement 1892-1940* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000), 8.

centering of black women's experiences in the dynamics of rape, lynching, and sexualized racism.<sup>122</sup>

Although racial violence took place across the state of Texas and the South throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the situation that developed in Corsicana was unique in itself. In no other Texas city did so many volatile situations coexist simultaneously. Not only did Navarro County represent the old antebellum South through its agricultural community, it also represented the new Progressive Era with its advancements and modernizations. Adding to this volatile mix was the prosperous petroleum industry. Without these three colliding ideas and lifestyles it is unlikely that the situation could have existed that enabled the horrendous lynching to take place.

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<sup>122</sup> “The Anti-Lynching Papers,” Illinois During the Gilded Age, <http://dig.lib.niu.edu/gildedage/idabwells/pamphlets.html>. (accessed June 12, 2008).

Appendix A – Governors Sayers' Correspondence

C.C. Weaver to Governor Joseph Sayers, Itasca, TX, March 13, 1901

Gov. Jos. D. Sayers,  
Austin Texas,  
Dear Governor,  
Referring to the matter of taking  
the negro off train here on last  
night beg to say that it occurred  
about as follows.

Two officers were on the north  
Bound M. K. & T. train in charge  
of the negro. Several parties  
arrived in Hillsboro from  
Corsicana, & boarded the  
train on which the negro was  
being conveyed, just before  
arriving in Itasca they  
disarmed the officers & took charge  
of the negro & took him off the  
train & went to the livery stable

REPRODUCED FROM THE HOLDINGS OF THE TEXAS STATE ARCHIVES

OFFICE OF  
**CITY COUNCIL.**

Officers:  
C. C. Weaver, Mayor,  
J. H. Young, Mayor pro tem.,  
M. S. Wood, Attorney,  
D. H. Reavis, City Secretary,  
J. W. Bratton, Marshal,  
Dr. J. A. Lawless, Physician.

Itasca, Texas, 3 - 13 - 1901.

Gov. Jos. D. Sayers,  
Austin Texas,  
Dear Governor,  
Referring to the matter of taking  
the negro off train here on last  
night beg to say that it occurred  
about as follows  
Two officers were on the north  
bound M. K. & T. train in charge  
of the negro. Several parties  
arrived in Hillsboro from  
Corsicana, & boarded the  
train on which the negro was  
being conveyed, just before  
arriving in Itasca they  
disarmed the officers & took charge  
of the negro & took him off the  
train & went to the livery stable

where they ordered rigs for the trip to Corsicana. After they arrived at stable the two officers went to the stable and there the mob ordered them to get in a vehicle & accompany them.

There were seven of the mob according to my best information. They carried two or three drivers from Itasca.

I was at home asleep and knew nothing of the occurrence till this morning at the time I telephoned you. Had I known it I should have done my best to have stopped the proceedings and I am sure I could have

OFFICE OF  
**CITY COUNCIL.**

Officers:  
C. C. Weaver, Mayor,  
J. H. Young, Mayor pro tem.,  
M. S. Wood, Attorney,  
D. H. Reavis, City Secretary,  
J. W. Bratton, Marshal,  
Dr. J. A. Lewis, Physician.

121

Itasca, Texas, ..... 1901.

*when they ordered rigs for the trip to Corsicana. After they arrived at stable the two officers went to the stable and then the mob ordered them to get in a vehicle & accompany them.*

*There were seven of the mob according to my best information. They carried two or three drivers from Itasca.*

*I was at home asleep and knew nothing of the occurrence till this morning at the time I telephoned you. Had I known it I should have done my best to have stopped the proceedings and I am sure I could have*

done so. The people here however, I am sorry to say seem to be largely in sympathy with the mob and it is difficult for me to get all the data as every one knows I am very much against mob violence.

If I can serve you I will gladly do so.

Very Truly,

C.C. Weaver,  
Mayor of Itasca

TX.

OFFICE OF  
**CITY COUNCIL.**

Officers:

C. C. Weaver, Mayor,  
J. H. Young, Mayor pro tem.,  
M. S. Wood, Attorney,  
D. H. Reavis, City Secretary,  
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Dr. J. A. Lawless, Physician.



(3)  
Itasca, Texas, ..... 1901.

*done so. The people here however, I am sorry to say seem to be largely in sympathy with the mob and it is difficult for me to get all the data as every one knows I am very much against mob violence.*

*If I can serve you I will gladly do so.*

*Very Truly,*

*C. C. Weaver,  
Mayor of Itasca*

*TX.*



H.W. Burton to Governor Joseph Sayers, Corsicana, TX, March 15, 1901

State of Texas  
County of Navarro

Office of  
H.W. Burton  
Justice of Peace Precinct 1  
and Notary Public.

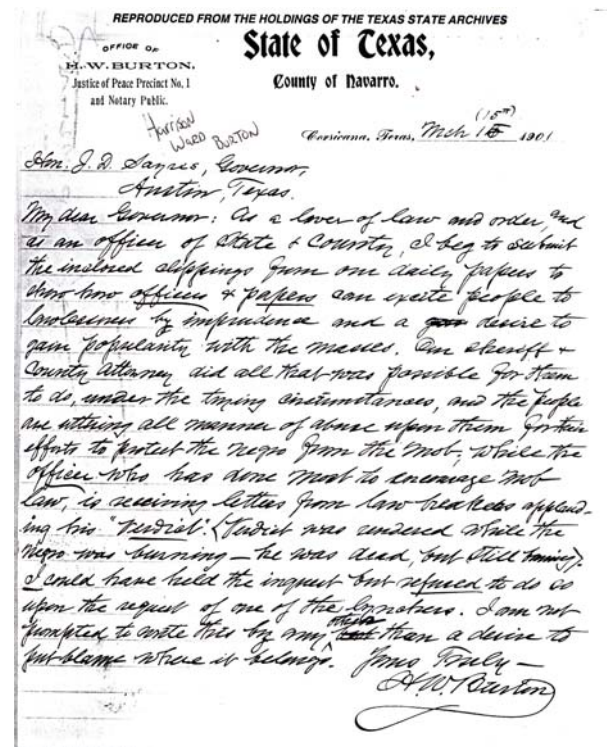
Corsicana, Texas, Mch 15<sup>th</sup> 1901

Hon. J.D. Sayers, Governor,  
Austin, Texas.

My dear Governor: as a lover of law and order, and as an officer of state & county, I beg to submit the inclosed clippings from our daily papers to show how officers and papers can excite people to lawlessness by imprudence and a desire to gain popularity with the masses. Our sheriff & county attorney did all that was possible for them to do, under the trying circumstances, and the people are uttering all manner of abuse upon them for their effort to protect the negro from the mob. While the officer who has done the most to encourage mob law, is receiving letters from the lawbreakers applauding his "verdict". (Verdict was rendered while the negro was still burning- he was dead, but still burning.) I could have held the inquest but refused to do so upon the request of one of the onlookers. I am not prompted to write this by any others than a desire to put blame where it belongs.

Yours Truly

H.W. Burton



O.C. Kirven to Governor Joseph Sayers, Corsicana, Texas, March, 13, 1901

Office of  
Malloy Hotel,  
A.M. Walker, Prop.

Corsicana, Texas 3/13<sup>th</sup> 1901.

Gov. Jos. D. Sayers- Austin-

Dear Sir.

As stated in my dispatch

I arrived here on the 12 o'clock  
train today from Mexia, just  
as the "burning" was over -  
the details of which you will  
see in the press.

Now as  
to the Officer, I wish to  
state, first, that I have never  
known an officer who acted  
with more firmness, zeal  
and courage throughout, than  
Sheriff Robinson- the fact  
is he has been and is  
being censured and cursed  
more by a majority of the  
people, than any officer I  
ever knew, and simply  
because of his devotion

REPRODUCED FROM THE HOLDINGS OF THE TEXAS STATE ARCHIVES

Office of  
Malloy Hotel,  
A.M. Walker, Prop.

Corsicana, Texas, 3/13<sup>th</sup> 1901.

Gov. Jos. D. Sayers - Austin -  
Dear Sir.  
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and courage throughout, than  
Sheriff Robinson - the fact  
is he has been and is  
being censured and cursed  
more by a majority of the  
people, than any officer I  
ever knew, and simply  
because of his devotion

to duty as he understood  
it- he has stood at his  
post, from first to last  
and looked to the law  
and observed your instructions  
to the letter in the face  
of protestations of his friends  
and his boardsmen and  
the demands and [ ]  
of an excited and enraged  
public. I know that he  
had not the remotest idea  
that the negro would be  
captured at Itasca-  
for when this was being done  
he, with the Deputy & myself  
were on the H. & T. C. R. R.  
going south to Wortham  
to see about a negro in  
the caboose there which  
suited the description

Office of  
Melley Hotel, or  
St. M. Walker, Prop.

Corsicana, Texas, 1860

to duty as he understood  
it - he has stood at his  
post, from first to last,  
and looked to the law  
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had not the remotest idea  
that the negro would be  
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for when this was being done  
he, with the Deputy & myself  
were on the H. & T. C. R. R.,  
going south to Wortham  
to see about a negro in  
the calaboose there which  
suited the description



of the supposed murderer.

I went on to Mexia at  
12 o'clock last night (on  
my return home (Fairfield)  
leaving them at Wortham-  
this morning they returned  
here at six o'clock and  
found John Henderson in  
charge of a great number  
of very determined people  
who in few hours burnt  
the negro (after a confession)  
in the court house yard-  
all of this was wholly un-  
expected by the officers  
and could not have been  
prevented by less than a  
thousand soldiers, after the  
prisoner had confessed-  
no blame can be attached  
to any officer, in the least-

REPRODUCED FROM THE HOLDINGS OF THE TEXAS STATE ARCHIVES

Office of  
Malley Hotel,  
S. M. Walker, Prop. 3

Comstock, Texas, 1900

of the supposed murderer.  
I went on to Mexia at  
12 o'clock last night (on  
my return home (Fairfield)  
leaving them at Wortham-  
this morning they returned  
here at six o'clock and  
found John Henderson in  
charge of a great number  
of very determined people  
who in a few hours burnt  
the negro (after a confession)  
in the Court house yard-  
all of this was wholly un-  
expected by the officers  
and could not have been  
prevented by less than a  
thousand soldiers, after the  
prisoner had confessed -  
No blame can be attached  
to any officer, in the least-

Sheriff Robinson had agreed and intended to take witness today to wherever the prisoner was for the purpose of identification and really did not know exactly where the prisoner was- and it was a surprise to all that he was captured & brought here this morning and but for his free & full confession, I have no doubt but that his preliminary trial would have been had here without mob violence, as the main part of the mob from the country dispersed yesterday evening & went to their houses, not knowing or believing that the prisoner moved

Office of  
Motel Hotel,  
S. M. Walker, Prop.

4

Carriacana, Texas, 1900

Sheriff Robinson had agreed and intended to take witness today to wherever the prisoner was, for the purpose of identification and really did not know exactly where the prisoner was - and it was a surprise to all that he was captured & brought here this morning and but for his free & full confession, I have no doubt but that his preliminary trial would have been had here without mob violence - as the main part of the mob from the Country dispersed yesterday evening & went to their homes, not knowing or believing that the prisoner would

Of course all this is  
To be much regretted  
but the vigilance and  
proficiency of the best  
officers could not  
prevent it- for nearly  
all of the best citizens  
of the county seem to  
approve and most of them  
seemed to participate  
in taking the law into  
their own hands-  
Most Respectfully  
Yours &c  
O.C. Kirven  
Dist Att  
I return to Fairfield  
Tonight-

Office of  
Attorney General,  
S. M. Walker, Prof.

5

Corpus Christi, Texas, ..... 1900

Of course all this is  
to be much regretted-  
but the vigilance and  
proficiency of the best  
officers could not  
prevent it - for nearly  
all of the best citizens  
of the county seem to  
approve and most of them  
seemed to participate  
in taking the law into  
their own hands -  
Most Respectfully  
Yours &c  
O.C. Kirven  
Dist Att  
I return to Fairfield  
tonight -

Appendix B – Telegram Correspondence

REPRODUCED FROM THE HOLDINGS OF THE TEXAS STATE ARCHIVES

Form No. 1572.  
**THE WESTERN UNION TELEGRAPH COMPANY.**  
 INCORPORATED  
 21,000 OFFICES IN AMERICA. CABLE SERVICE TO ALL THE WORLD.  
 THOS. T. ECKERT, President and General Manager.

Receiver's No.	Time Filed	Check
----------------	------------	-------

**SEND** the following message subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to.

Corsicana, Texas, March 13, 1901.  
 ( COPY )

To General Thomas Scurry,  
 Austin, Texas.

Your message ordering me to order out local companies and report to Sheriff has been obeyed to the extent that I have ordered members of the Cos. and Captain Murphy in person to have their organizations assembled and to report to me at once my information is that the mob is now doing the work this may not be true. Less than five hundred men would do no good but provoke bloodshed and great loss of life. Dont think I have authority to order Waco and Mexia Cos. not in my regiment. Please order Mexia and Waco companies to report to me by first train. I will in person report to Sheriff at once. It seems that Dallas Co. could get here first. Before finishing this message will say the negro is already burned.

G.W.Hardy,  
 11.34 A.M.

READ THE NOTICE AND AGREEMENT ON BACK.

REPRODUCED FROM THE HOLDINGS OF THE TEXAS STATE ARCHIVES

Form No. 1572.  
**THE WESTERN UNION TELEGRAPH COMPANY.**  
 INCORPORATED  
 21,000 OFFICES IN AMERICA. CABLE SERVICE TO ALL THE WORLD.  
 THOS. T. ECKERT, President and General Manager.

Receiver's No.	Time Filed	Check
----------------	------------	-------

**SEND** the following message subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to.

Austin, Texas, March 13, 1901.

To Gen.Thos.Scurry,  
 Austin, Texas.

Your message ordering me to assemble certain companies &c received at 10:35 A.M. today. I proceeded at once to notify officers of local Cos. to assemble and report to me at 11 o'clock come to telegraph office and sent former message then mounted first horse and went in run to court house only to see the lifeless charred form of the mob's victim chained to a post amidst the hottest fire. I immediately returned and countermanded my orders. The mob numbers between three and five thousand, orderly and quiet, no further danger. The negro Jno.Henderson confessed fully.

G.W.Hardy,  
 11.44 A.M.

READ THE NOTICE AND AGREEMENT ON BACK.



Form No. 1572.

**THE WESTERN UNION TELEGRAPH COMPANY.**

INCORPORATED  
21,000 OFFICES IN AMERICA. CABLE SERVICE TO ALL THE WORLD.

THOS. T. ECKERT, President and General Manager.

Receiver's No.	Time Filled	Check
		Charge Executive Office--Official

**SEND** the following message subject to the terms on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to.

Austin 3/13/01.

To Col. G.W. Hardy,

Corsicana, Texas.

Telegram received. As it is too late to afford any protection to the prisoner, ~~the~~ former order to you is hereby countermanded. by command of the Governor.

Thomas Scurry, Adjutant General.

*Copy*

READ THE NOTICE AND AGREEMENT ON BACK.

REPRODUCED FROM THE HOLDINGS OF THE TEXAS STATE ARCHIVES

Form No. 1571.

**THE WESTERN UNION TELEGRAPH COMPANY.**

INCORPORATED  
21,000 OFFICES IN AMERICA. CABLE SERVICE TO ALL THE WORLD.

This Company TRANSMITS and DELIVERS messages only on conditions limiting its liability which have been assented to by the sender of the following message. Errors can be guarded against only by repeating a message back to the sending station for comparison and the Company will not hold itself liable for errors or delay in transmission or delivery of Unrepeated Messages, beyond the amount of tolls paid thereon, not in any case where the claim is not presented in writing within ten days after the message is filed with the Company for transmission.

This is an UNREPEATED MESSAGE, and is delivered by request of the sender, under the conditions named above.

THOS. T. ECKERT, President and General Manager. WESTERN

NUMBER	SENT BY	REC'D BY	CHECK	PHONE
41 DA.	GI.	E.	30 Paid.	47

RECEIVED at  
CORSICANA, TEX. Mch. 13th, 1901.

189

Jos. D. Sayers,

Governor,

Austin, Texas.

Telegram just received Henderson was burned this morning he was brought here by Citizens & was never in my custody since taken from officers I was powerless to prevent results.

W. D. Robinson, Sheriff. 2:53 P.M.

REPRODUCED FROM THE HOLDINGS OF THE TEXAS STATE ARCHIVES

REPRODUCED FROM THE HOLDINGS OF THE TEXAS STATE ARCHIVES

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THOS. T. ECKERT, President and General Manager.

NUMBER	SENT BY	REC'D BY	CHECK
CD.	DR. X.		ANSWER BY

RECEIVED at *Austin Tex* 104-105  
*Parker,* WEST SIX  
*Austin.* 189

Have already given you full particulars in regard to Governor Sayers first telegram and the reply. The messenger reported to me that Mr. Kirvin had left last night at ten o'clock for Fairfield. I then ordered him to deliver the telegram as quickly as possible to county attorney Johnson. This was done and the reply was brought back by the messenger boy signed in Judge Kirvin's name. I have had no opportunity to see about whether Judge Kirvin did go or not, I will investigate and find out if messengers information is correct and who sent message

Form No. 1571.

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THOS. T. ECKERT, President and General Manager.

NUMBER	SENT BY	REC'D BY	CHECK
20. A. R. R.			

RECEIVED at *Spokane - Cassin Lewis.* 189  
*Parker, Austin Tex.*

See My service , Gov. sayers msg this am was delivered to Attorney Johnson who replied to it in the absence of Judge Kirven , atty Johnson signed Judge Kiervens name to telegram.

Bond corsicana tex , arch 13-01.  
 306P M.

REPRODUCED FROM THE HOLDINGS OF THE TEXAS STATE ARCHIVES

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## VITA

### Personal Background

Christopher Don Draper  
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Son of Larry Draper and Terri Kenner

### Education

Diploma, Grapevine High School  
Grapevine, Texas, 1994  
Bachelor of Arts, History, The University of  
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### Experience

Operations Trainer and Lead Steam Train  
Engineer, Six Flags Over Texas, 2008  
Customer Service Agent, British Airways,  
1998-2001  
Operations Supervisor, Six Flags Over  
Texas, 1992-1997

ABSTRACT

**FLAMES ARISING: OIL AND FIRE, THE LYNCHING OF JOHN  
HENDERSON AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF A TEXAS COMMUNITY**

by Christopher Don Draper, M.A., 2008

Department of History

Texas Christian University

Thesis Advisor: Gregg Cantrell, Professor of History and Erma and Ralph Lowe

Chair in Texas History

Committee Members: Todd M. Kerstetter, Associate Professor of History

Rebecca Sharpless, Assistant Professor of History

Although racial violence took place across the state of Texas and the South, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the situation that developed in Corsicana was unique in itself. In no other Texas city did so many volatile situations coexist simultaneously. Not only did Navarro County represent the old antebellum South, through its agricultural community, it also represented the new Progressive Era with its advancements and modernizations. Adding to this volatile mix was the prosperous new Texas petroleum industry. It was in this unstable condition that the young African American man John Henderson met a horrible death at the hands of an enraged lynch mob.