`AND THE HARVEST OF BLOOD COMMENCED'

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A CENTURY AGO TODAY, Roanoke was convulsed by mob violence. By the time it was over, the Riot of 1893 had killed nine people, wounded two dozen more and forced the mayor to flee the city. Some scholars see a race riot; others a workers' uprising.

Midway through a perfectly ordinary autumn morning, the dark rumble of rumor swept through the Roanoke City Market. In no more time than it took a man to shout, the amiable hubbub of commerce abruptly stopped, gasped, then instantly passed on the "tale of horror" with "the rapidity of lightning."

Within moments, there were as many varieties of the story circulating among the farmers as there were apples stacked up in bushel baskets. A woman had been robbed. Worse, beaten. Nearly murdered, they say. Nay, murdered, indeed.

The loudest commotion seemed to be coming from the Roanoke and Southern saloon, where a clamorous crowd was already swelling outside the establishment.

Inside, lay Sallie Anna Bishop, an "aged and respectable" market vendor from Botetourt County. "Her long, black hair was matted with gore," the Roanoke Times later reported, "and her clothes had been torn to tatters and her hands and whole body were covered with blood, dirt and slime." She was so disfigured that when her 14-year-old son, George, was brought in to identify her, he at first assured the men gathered around the body that this couldn't possibly be his mother.

However awful her appearance, though, Sallie Bishop was still alive - and apparently responding well to the "stimulants" the saloon provided. Soon, she was "entirely conscious and collected" and began describing what had just happened to her "without excitement and in a straightforward manner."

Bishop had come to town that morning to sell her farm's produce. She had nearly unloaded her wagon by 10 a.m. when a black stranger approached her and said he had come to buy a box of grapes for a certain Mrs.

Hicks, whom he said lived only a few blocks away on Salem Avenue. To deliver the grapes and receive her pay, Bishop "unsuspiciously" followed the man into the cellar at 134 Salem Ave. - a vacant address, as it turned out.

"As soon as they were inside," newspapers later said, "he threw down the box of grapes, locked the door and dashed a pail of water that was sitting on the ground, in her face, evidently intending to blind her."

The man demanded her money; Bishop handed over her pocketbook, containing $1.93, and pleaded for her life. "Heedless of her appeal," the man drew a razor, seized her by the arm, and tried to slit her throat. "A desperate struggle ensued," and for a moment, Bishop gained the advantage, knocking the razor out of her attacker's hand. Before she could flee, the man picked up "a heavy iron top of an ice cream chest" and "struck a fiendish blow on the head." That knocked Bishop to the ground, and the attacker seized a nearby brick and a heavy stone, with which he struck "blow after blow" until she lay bloody and still.

Despite the severity of the attack, Bishop came to in about half an hour, and crawled back into the Market to seek help.

To the men now gathered around her, Bishop described her attacker as a black man in his early 20s, wearing a faded black frock coat with gray pants and, most importantly of all, "a large, black slouch hat."

Armed with that description, the citizens swarming outside the saloon - augmented by some of Roanoke's small police force - set out to find the culprit. It was an ungainly mob that headed into Southeast Roanoke, some on foot, some by horseback, some in buggies, and Bishop's fellow market vendors rolling along in their farm wagons.

Far out in front of the crowd galloped William G. Baldwin, the head of the railroad's detective force, a position that effectively outranked any of Roanoke's police officers in the young boom town the railroad had created.

Along Buena Vista Boulevard near what were then the city limits, Baldwin spotted a black man at the edge of the woods. Baldwin drew his revolver and ordered the man to halt.

It was Thomas Smith, an "idle vagrant" from Vinton, once employed at the Crozer Iron Co. furnace.

"Boss, I didn't hurt that woman," Smith begged.

Baldwin hoisted Smith onto his horse anyway and galloped back toward the market. An "angry mass of citizens which was increasing at every step" surged around Baldwin and the prisoner. Cries of "hang him!" and "lynch him!" went up. Baldwin waved the crowd off with his revolver and made his way back to the saloon for Bishop to identify her assailant.

"Blinded with blood, the sight of one eye temporarily destroyed," Bishop wasn't sure. "He looks like him," she said. "I think he is the man. If I could see his hat, I could tell."

Smith desperately tossed his hat away. Baldwin retrieved it and handed it to Bishop. She examined the headgear, then pronounced the fateful words: "He is the man."

Baldwin put "the frightened" Smith back on his horse and rode up Salem Avenue toward the jail. It was "perilous" ride. The "excited crowd" had now "increased into an angry mob" that followed along, "demanding the prisoner." Some tossed rocks and threatened worse. Baldwin implored the crowd not to shoot and reminded them that Bishop couldn't positively identify the suspect.

"Make way!" others shouted.

Baldwin hustled Smith into the jail, and the door clanked shut behind them. But within minutes, the jail was surrounded "by over a thousand men clamoring for revenge and blood."

Up until this point, the events in Roanoke of Sept. 20, 1893, were little different from any of the other lynchings that bloodied the South during the last decade of the 19th century.

In fact, it fit the pattern, in which a black-on-white crime was the only spark needed to ignite the ugly passions of mob violence.

The 1890s marked the height of such so-called "rough justice," and 1893 - by no mere coincidence, the year of a severe economic downturn - was "the bloodiest year of all," says Fitzhugh Brundage, a historian at Queen's University in Ontario who has authored a new book on lynchings. More than 100 black men were killed that year, says University of Maryland historian Gordon McKinney, about one every three or four days.

Usually, mob violence flared up wherever two or three conditions were present, says University of Georgia sociologist Woody Beck, another national authority on the lynchings during the period. "In Roanoke, there were all three," he says. "First, an idealogy of racism that dehumanized blacks. Second, a weak government body. In Roanoke, the police were perceived as ineffectual. Third, a competition for jobs."

Moreover, in Roanoke that autumn morning, there was another factor that contributed to the volatile mix - the city's rapid growth in its first decade. "This was not a stable community," Beck says. "You had a new, mobile population, at the same time as economic difficulties. This was a social situation just ripe for this type of mob violence."

This wasn't a condition unique to Roanoke. With the coming of the railroad and the opening of the coalfields, much of Southwest Virginia was going through the same wrenching metamorphosis of industrialization and rapid population growth during the 1890s.

Furthermore, many of those people moving into the region were black. Southwest Virginia still may have had the smallest black population in the state, but by local standards, the black population was swelling. Some whites were "deeply disturbed," Brundage says. "A lot of the blacks coming into the region were young black males, migrants, who worked on the railroad or in the coal mines. They were the blacks with the lowest

reputation of all. It's not that the blacks became scapegoats, but the black men became the most visible manifestation of the changes in the region."

The result: Whites often responded "with great ferocity" when newly arrived blacks committed crimes and in the 1890s Southwest Virginia became the most lynching-prone part of the state.

In 1891, Clifton Forge had been rocked by a civil disturbance that attracted national attention. Six exuberant black miners from Iron Gate had come to town one Saturday for a weekend of carousing. They hit all the bars and, sporting cowboy hats and a brace of pistols that made them look like "Western desperadoes," even stopped by a studio to have their pictures made.

When a town cop tried to halt their rowdy behavior, the miners resisted and headed home. Embarrassed, the cop organized a posse and set out to find the miners. The posse wound up in a gunfight that killed one white. When word reached Clifton Forge the next morning, "armed white men poured from the town and began scouring the mountains." By day's end, four of the black miners had been captured, jailed, then dragged through the streets, hanged - and their dangling bodies riddled with bullets.

The following year, Roanoke witnessed its first lynching. Alice Perry, a 12-year-old white girl, came running home to report that she had been accosted in the street by a black man, identified as one Allen Stevens who wore rubber boots. A mob quickly formed and hunted down a black man named William Lavender - whose only crime appeared to have been wearing rubber boots - and hanged him near the Wasena Bridge.

In more ways than one, the lynching of William Lavender served as an ominimous foreshadowing of what would happen when Thomas Smith was arrested a year later: When Mayor William G. Evans tried to dissuade the mob, it threatened to lynch him, as well. Nevertheless, the Roanoke Times assured its readers: "Lynching has its place."

That was not, however, the view of Roanoke's image-conscious business establishment, which saw lynching as, well, bad for business. In the aftermath of the Lavender lynching, Mayor Evans appointed a new police chief, John F. Terry. And when Henry Trout - a prominent banker and former Confederate officer who had survived Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg - became mayor later in 1892, his first act was to assemble the police force and lecture the dozen or so officers on the need for law and order. He vowed that never again would a prisoner in Roanoke be taken by a mob.

Trout might well have expected trouble, for by 1893, lynching was becoming all too common in Southwest Virginia. In February of that year, five blacks were lynched in Tazewell County. In April, Tazewell saw another lynching. In May, there was one in Smyth County.

Trout was at work in his bank office that September morning when the news reached him about the attack of Sallie Bishop and the mob that was demanding the suspect be hanged on the spot. Trout's response was immediate: He ordered every police officer to report to duty. Then he hurried to the jail to take charge.

His determination to prevent trouble explains why events in Roanoke began to take a very different course from lynchings elsewhere, a course as unique as it was deadly.

One Roanoke official after another stuck his head out of the window of the jail and made a speech trying to calm the crowd by promising a speedy trial. First, the commonwealth's attorney. Next, the mayor. Finally, a judge.

"The excitement subsided and a large part of the crowd dispersed, but a larger number kept the jail surrounded," the Roanoke Times reported.

The mob that remained showed no sign of leaving. Soon, it started growing again. "All day the excitement became more intense and the crowds on the street became larger and an air of subdued excitement pervaded the city." Rumors were rampant that a posse of Bishop's neighbors were on the way from Botetourt County, rumors that appeared to soothe the agitated crowd, in a peculiar sort of way.

"It was apparent to the most casual observer," the Roanoke Daily Record reported, "that the people were only awaiting nightfall to make an attack on the jail."

Inside, the Roanoke authorities haggled over what to do. Police Chief Terry proposed trying to spirit Smith out of the jail and put him on the 4:30 p.m. train to Radford. Trout seemed to favor the idea. But Judge Walter H. Turner was vehemently opposed. Roanoke ought to be able to protect its prisoners, he insisted. Trout's resolve stiffened again. "If necessary, we must fire on the mob," the police chief recalled the mayor saying. "The general instructions were to resist the mob with firearms if nothing else could be done."

For better or worse, the Roanoke authorities were now committed to keeping Smith in town - and in the jail.

Trout thought a show of force might help cow the mob, so about 4 p.m. he made his second crucial decision of the day. He called out the state militia.

The Roanoke Light Infantry Blues were as much a social organization as a military unit. But in rowdy Roanoke, the Blues were often mustered to protect prisoners, black as well as white, from vigilantes. This was, to the part-time soldiers, an especially distasteful chore. Nevertheless, some 30 infantrymen - "some barely out of their teens," according to Ann Alexander, a Mary Baldwin College historian who has written the most definitive account of the incident - soon arrived on the scene.

As the Blues, bayonets at the ready, took up their positions around the jail, two citizens were "tardy" in obeying their orders to stand back - and were promptly arrested. "This proceeding only added fuel to the flame and made the concourse of people indignant."

Trout called some of the men in the crowd by name, and warned that he was prepared to use force, if necessary, to defend the prisoner.

But the mob - by now, estimated to be 5,000 strong - ignored him. As one witness later testified: "I didn't think there was such a fool in Virginia that would fire into an innocent lot of men."

In defending a black prisoner against a howling mob, Roanoke officials were doing something quite extraordinary by the standards of 1893. Most Southern leaders made only token attempts to stop lynchings, say scholars who have studied the period. Sometimes, the authorities even assisted the mob.

"But there was a growing feeling among upper-class Southerners that lynching was something that was giving the South a bad name," says McKinney, the Maryland historian.

This was becoming especially true in Virginia. "Virginia was quite different from other Southern states," says Brundage, the Queens University historian. "The local political elite, both in Roanoke and the state as a whole, viewed lynching as an unfortunate and even dangerous threat to the social order." To them, Brundage says, lynching had as much to do about social class as it did about race. Virginia's aristocratic leadership frowned on lynching as a lower-class phenomenon.

But frowning on lynching still wasn't the same thing as trying to stop it.

"You can count, quite literally on two hands, the incidents in the late 19th and early 20th century, where white authorities ever fired on a white mob," Brundage says. "It was just unheard of. You just didn't fire on white people to protect a black criminal."

But they did in Roanoke.

The sun was setting when a wild cheer went up from Campbell Avenue. Some 50 to 100 men on horseback came riding up the street, followed by a rabble of Roanoke citizens. Bishop's son had returned home and rounded up a posse of his own.

"Rally men, Botetourt is here!" the riders shouted.

"Come on, boys, they won't shoot," others cried.

The Botetourt men rode up to the jail and demanded anew that the prisoner be turned over to them. Some in the crowd started heckling the solidiers. Others hurled rocks and bricks.

"Mayor Trout proposed to address the mob," the Roanoke Times reported, "but the tumult was such that it would have been quite impossible. Just as this critical moment, some one or several persons began battering on the western door of the jail and immediately a rock crashed through the window. Then it was that someone cried `get back! get back!' and shots were fired . . . "

No one ever figured out who fired the first shots, whether someone in the militia or someone in the mob. But regardless of who fired first, once the bullets whizzed past, the panicked militiamen opened fired on the crowd

"and the harvest of blood commenced."

By some accounts, more than 150 shots were fired; worshippers at Wednesday night services at Greene Memorial Methodist Church ducked beneath their pews to avoid the bullets ricocheting off the walls.

The streetcar tracks filled with "large pools of blood and brains." The courthouse and jail looked like "they had been struck by a cyclone," their windows shot out.

When the shooting finally stopped, eight men - all supposedly bystanders - lay dead or dying and 34 more wounded. The mayor, wounded in the foot, was among them. He was hustled away to the Ponce de Leon Hotel.

A number of scholars have studied Roanoke's Riot of 1893, and it's here that their academic judgments diverge. They agree it started - and eventually ended - with a racial lynching. But in between, some scholars see evidence of class warfare.

"This is one of the few lynch riots in American history where more white people died than black people," says McKinney, the Maryland historian whose speciality is violence in the Appalachians. "Primarily, this was a response to the very rapid industrialization that had taken place in Roanoke at the time."

The opening of the coalfields had thrown many mountaineers off their land; they tended to gravitate to upstart cities like Roanoke to work on the railroad or factories. "They were confused and often upset by the requirements of the industrial age," McKinney says. "All it took was one incident to bring that out into the open."

The militia's gunfire into the mob was that incident, McKinney contends. To the mob, he says, Trout personified the forces that had uprooted them from their land, herded them into the city, and set them into competition for jobs against blacks.

So now the mob came after him.

The mob stormed through the hotel, demanding that Trout "produce the negro or die." But the rioters forgot to look in the hotel's servants' quarters, where the mayor was holed up. Instead, the mob headed for Trout's home on Campbell Avenue. Some 200 men stormed through the house, but found only the mayor's son.

In the midst of the riot, the police chief turned up in the hotel lobby and told onlookers to send word to the mob that they could have the prisoner. Terry was too late. Other police officers had already slipped Smith out of the jail into hiding.

With no prisoner left to guard, the militia went home, leaving downtown Roanoke in the hands of the mob. The timing of their departure was fortuitious.

"The excited mass of people" had, by now, "lost all reason." Unable to find the mayor, the mob "determined to exterminate Captain Bird and his men and weapons of death were necessary to accomplish this." They burst into two hardware stores and forced the clerks "to hand out a large number of guns and pistols." Others emptied the contents of Roanoke's many saloons.

Still more fanned out to search "the residence of every city official and policeman" for Smith.

About 3 a.m., the police made the mistake of trying to whisk Smith back into the jail. "Near the corner of [Second] Street and Franklin Road, some twelve or fifteen men sprang suddenly from the weeds in the vacant lot and with cocked guns and revolvers, demanded the surrender of the prisoner."

The police, at gunpoint, complied.

The vigilantes dragged Smith to the corner of Franklin Road and Mountain Avenue. "Oh Lord, have mercy on me!," bystanders heard Smith shout. The men tied a noose around his neck and hoisted him from the limb of a hickory tree.

Then they shot him.

A sign announcing "Mayor Trout's friend" was pinned onto his shirt.

By dawn, "an immense crowd" had gathered to view the body. Many people "eagerly struggled for small pieces of the rope, or stripped fragments from the coat of the dead man until the upper portion of the body was almost devoid of clothing."

Authorities demanded the body be turned over to an undertaker, an order that again sent the mob into a frenzy.

"The leaders swore they would drag the remains to the residence of Mayor Trout and hang them in the yard and then bury them in the front of the residence," the Roanoke Times reported. Others in the mob threatened to burn the entire city.

"Strong men caught hold of the rope" and began dragging the body down the street, headed for Trout's home.

Just then, the Rev. William C. Campbell, the minister of First Presbyterian Church, stepped from the crowd and seized the rope. While he tussled with the lynch leaders for control of the twine, Campbell appealed to the mob to halt the mutilation of the body.

Finally, the mob relented. Instead, the lynch leaders lifted Smith's body into a wagon and hauled it to the river "amid the deafening cries of 4,000 people saying `take him and burn him!' "

A funeral prye of tree limbs and dismantled fences was thrown together and soaked with oil. Precisely at 10 a.m., the match was lit.

"Lurid flames and dense volumes of dark smoke [rose] high toward the heavens," the Roanoke Times recounted. "The flames roared and cracked, leaping high in the air, while all around stood 4,000 people, men, women, boys and children, on foot, in buggies, and carriaes and on horseback, and numbers of them shouting over the horrible scene. In a short while all was over and all that remained on earth of Thomas Smith, the would-be murderer, was a pile of a white ashes and a few bits of bone. Hundreds of visitors gathered close around the human bonfire and cast in pieces of wood, determined to add something to the cremation. Smith's sister, a girl 15 years of age, stood by and witnessed the terrible fate of her brother's remains."

In mutilating a lynching victim's body, Roanoke's mob was acting no differently from other lynch mobs across the South. In fact, scholars say, the Roanoke mob was comparatively restrained. In a riot, all the normal constaints on human behavior disappear, says Herbert Shapiro, a University of Cincinnati historian who has studied race riots. "And when the human psyche loses its boundaries, you can do anything,"

What was unusual about the Roanoke riot remains how the mob continued to vent its fury on city officials. Trout, fearing for his safety, remained in hiding another day, then fled on the next train to Richmond. The mob milled around the jail for another three days, demanding that the mayor, the police chief and certain police officers be removed. A committee of business leaders negotiated on behalf of the city, finally agreeing to suspend most city officials if the mob allowed Trout to return as mayor.

The response of business leaders, both in Roanoke and across the state, was equally unusual for its day. Many were quick to praise Trout for attempting to maintain order. When Trout gingerly stepped off the train into Roanoke about a week later, he was hailed as a hero, this time by an "enthusiastic" crowd of 300 people.

Moreover, Roanoke officials did something else Southern authorities rarely did. They promptly convened a grand jury to investigate the lynching. This was no token effort, either. The jury soon indicted the police chief and the police sergeant as accessories in Smith's death, charging that they conspired to turn the prisoner over to the mob. Fourteen other men were indicted on less serious charges.

Not much came of these judicial proceedings, though. Witnesses refused to testify against the two police officers, and their charges were dropped. Trout fired the police chief, anyway, and demoted the sergeant.

Of the other 14 people charged, only three were ever convicted and they got off with but a single day in jail. Although the courts treated the incident gently, Virginia's political establishment did not. "What was distressing to authorities was that this could happen to a New South city," says Roanoke College historian John Shelby. "They thought this was something that went on in Southside, where there was rough rural justice, but not in a new industrial city in the new America."

"It really did shock the political leaders of Virginia," Brundage says. "So the governor that followed, Charles T. O'Ferrall, came into office with a commitment to do something about lynching." His concern had little to do with blacks, but everything to do about maintaining order in what to him was becoming a disorderly western part of the state. "He saw lynchings and unions in the coalfields are being parallel, all part of the threat of

anarchy in Virginia." O'Ferrall was quick to send troops to quell unrest, regardless of its source.

Lynchings would persist in Virginia until the 1930s.

But Roanoke's riot of 1893 marked a watershed, Brundage says. "It crystallized an attitude that if there was going to be a racial disturbance, the governor ought to do something about it. They didn't want `another Roanoke.' "

In the years that followed, Roanokers tried hard to forget the riot, Alexander says. Some even refused to talk about it. So 23 years later, in 1916, when this small item appeared in the NAACP's national journal, "Crisis," folks in Roanoke apparently let it pass without much comment:

"The jailer of Roanoke, Va., has recently revealed the fact that the colored man, Smith, who was lynched September 21, 1893, for assaulting a woman was innocent and known to be so by the officials a short time afterward. The real criminal was arrested, but after a conference he was allowed to leave on promising never to return."

- **CITATION (APA STYLE)**
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Caption: PHOTO: Roanoke Valley History Museum file photo. 1. Scene at the courthouse: Members of the Roanoke Light Infantry Blues patrol (center left of photo, with bayonets). Jail is at the rear of the building (note bars on the windows). The photo, which was taken from Campbell and Second Street, is thought to have been taken early in the day of the riot or the day after. 2. Police were badly outnumbered. Roanoke only had about 15 police officers; the mob that lined the streets was estimated to be as big as 5,000. 3. After Smith was lynched at Mountain and Franklin, a large crowd turned out to view the body. When authorities ordered it cut down, the mob's frenzy erupted again, and leaders threatened to drag the body to the mayor's house and bury it in the front lawn.. Map: Roanoke's riot of 1893. color.

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