

From Sammie's relatives and many others I got the story.

A bit of information here. A bit there. Put together here it is. Until last May, Sammie worked for a white man named Preston Lee at Smyrna Tenn., eight or ten miles from Nashville. One day in that month Lee beat Sammie Smith. Sammie quit and went to Nashville where he got a job with the Atlantic Ice Company. All summer he worked there turning over his wages to his mother to help provide for the mother and nine children. Cold weather came and the need of ice dropped off so Sammie was discharged. He then went to live alternately with his uncle, Eugene Smith, and grandmother at Arrington.

On Friday, December 12th, Sammie and his uncle went to Nashville in the latter's Ford. Late that night they started back to Arrington. As they hurried along near Nolansville about one o'clock in the morning the car went into a ditch, turning over. The man and boy righted it but found one of the parts broken. Leaving Sammie in the car, Eugene went to a garage nearby to get a new part for his car. When Eugene did not return Sammie went to search for him. He met Eugene coming towards the car and behind him walked a white man holding a gun on Eugene. The garage belonged to the owner of the gun and he had caught Eugene in the act of stealing what he needed.

"This boy with you?", the white man asked Eugene.

"Yes sir", was the answer.

"Then come along with me -- I'm going to put you in jail, too!"

The white man declared to Sammie.

Sammie whipped out a gun and fired. The white man returned the fire, shooting Sammie through the stomach. Sammie dropped his gun and fled while the white man held his gun on Eugene until others roused by the shots came and took him to jail. All the rest of the night they sought Sammie. Early the next morning they found him in a field nearby, lying unconscious from the loss of blood and the raw, stinging cold. Sheriff Bob Briley carried him to the county jail but soon removed him to the Nashville General Hospital on Nance Street. There it was seen at once that Sammie's wound was a fatal one -- but they took no chances with this desperate fifteen-year old, 110 pound criminal -- they chained him to the iron bed.

Through Saturday, Sunday and Monday he lingered on while life slowly slipped away from him. On Sunday afternoon around two o'clock two white boys from Smyrna called at the hospital to see if Sammie was yet alive. Monday afternoon two others from the same neighborhood called and told the dying lad, according to one of the last statements he made, "It won't do you no good to get well for if you do, we're going to put you in the electric chair." They more than hinted he wouldn't live twenty-four hours longer. Of them more will be said later.

Just after midnight Monday Larry Hardeman, custodian of the hospital was sitting in his office, according to his story. Hearing a noise he turned and looked into the barrels of several shotguns. Leaving him covered by two of the masked men, ten

or twelve others cut the telephone wires and hurried towards the Negro ward on the west end of the first floor. One of the masked figures clad in khaki was left to guard the hallway with orders to let no one pass. In the Negro ward there was a lone nurse, Miss Amy Weagle, all the other attendants being, according to later statements issued, "at the time eating their supper." The mob demanded of Miss Weagle that she point out the bed in which Sammie Smith lay. She refused. The mob began a systematic search of the ward examining each bed to see in which the occupant was chained. Miss Weagle stood in front of Sammie's bed trying to hide the tell-tale chain. Helpless, his eyes wide in terror, his life so far gone already he could not possibly live until morning Sammie Smith, fifteen-year old desperado watched the half-score of his executioners approach. A shout of exultation greeted the discovery of the chain. Miss Weagle was thrust aside. The chain was rapidly sawed apart. "Get up!" demanded the leader. "I Can't -- I can't!" tremblingly, piteously pleaded the terrified, half-dead boy.....

Forty-five minutes later the telephone rang in the office of the Nashville Tennessean. "It's all over, partner," the newspaper office was informed. The unknown voice went on to tell where Sammie Smith's body was to be found. "The members of the mob have disappeared to the four winds of the earth," he ended after describing the lynching in detail.

Out near Nolansville at the spot where he had been found unconscious on Saturday morning hung the naked body of Sammie Smith. Around his ankle the manacle was yet clamped. From it dangled the severed chain. A plow rope was about

his neck, the other end tied firmly to the branch of an oak tree. Through his abdomen forty, perhaps fifty, loads of buckshot had plowed their way. My young undertaker friend must have been right -- Sammie's abdomen must have looked "like a sifter."...

Nashville awoke the next morning horrified. Apparently everything that can be done after a lynching was done. The Chamber of Commerce held an indignation meeting, denounced the mob, and offered a reward of \$5000 for the arrest and conviction of the lynchers. One member, W. D. Trabue, moved that the amount be made \$15,000. After some argument the amount was reduced to \$10,000. Still later it dropped to \$5000... Governor Austin Peay offered on behalf of the state an additional \$1500 and denounced the lynching as "a horrible thing and added, "Nothing has happened since I have been governor so regrettable."... Hilary E. Howse, mayor of Nashville declared the lynching was like a "horrible dream," and asserted that "the fair name of this city has been besmirched".... Sheriff Bob Briley daily stated through the press that arrests were momentarily expected but on Friday following the lynching when I was in Nashville no arrests had been made----Resolutions condemning the mob were passed by the men's club of the First Lutheran Church, the Lion's Club, the faculty of Treveca College, the Rotary and Exchange Clubs, the heads of all the educational institutions (white and colored) in Nashville, and others----The Negroes of Nashville were not to be outdone -- even they met and passed a resolution expressing gratification that "the law-abiding and better class of

our white citizens had taken such a bold and strong stand--- both by resolutions and the subscribing of a reward..." I don't think their act was intended as irony...

But with all the reservations in their disapproval of the mob, the city - and state-wide execration of the lynching does indicate a very distinct advance on the part of the South. Twenty -- fifteen-- even ten years ago it will hardly be claimed by even the most ardent champion of the South that a lynching like that of Sammie Smith would have brought forth so unified and articulate an expression of condemnation from those who represent the very best elements of a city like Nashville. With all due credit for what was done in this particular case, the problem of Nashville, of Tennessee, of the South, and of the United States lies much deeper than in this isolated case. The remedy must go much further than the offering of rewards and the writing of forceful editorials. The lynching of Sammie Smith is not a phenomenon but instead fits very snugly into the frame of absolute disregard of the right to protection of life, person and property of Negroes in Nashville and Tennessee and the South and the United States. As long as Negroes can be murdered with impunity, as long as they can be denied even elemental decency other Sammie Smiths can and will be lynched in Nashville, even in New York City.

Do my statements savor of bombast? Do they have an echo of Fourth of July or Emancipation Day Speeches? Then let me give just a few of the things that have taken place almost without comment in Nashville during the past few years. One can then more easily understand why Sammie Smith was murdered.

On Thanksgiving Day of this year a respectable colored woman, working as a domestic in the home of a prominent citizen of Nashville, boarded a street car and sat on the end of the long seat at the rear of the car -- a seat to which she had every right under the "Jim-Crow" law of the state. A well dressed white man sat on the other end. He jumped up when she sat down, seized her by the throat and neck, pulled her out of the seat and shouted at her, "You sit down there again and what I did won't be a patching to what I will do to you!" There were no colored men on the car -- only women. The conductor and motorman said and did nothing -- nor did any of the white passengers. The white man rode on to his destination while the colored woman stood up.

During the same month a young colored girl, a student at the State Agricultural and Industrial School for Colored Youth, started to board a Jefferson Street car. Waiting for the same car was a notorious gambler who operates unmolested a gambling place in the heart of Nashville. With him was a white woman. The colored girl, being nearest the door when the car stopped, started to board it. The white man jerked her off the step, struck her in the face breaking her nose, and got aboard the car with his companion. He was not arrested nor molested in any way until the mother of the girl at the insistence of colored citizens of Nashville swore out a warrant for his arrest. He immediately swore out one for the girl. The mother, knowing the man's reputation as a professional "bad man" became frightened and dropped the case.

Early this year the Rev. W. C. Matthews, a Negro minister

was returning to Nashville in his Ford one night after holding a service in his church just outside of Nashville. He was hailed by an officer who noticed that one of his lights had gone out, unknown to the minister. When Rev. Mr. Matthews did not stop as quickly as the officer thought he should have, the latter jumped on the running board and began cursing the minister. He protested that he had stopped as quickly as he could. The officer drew his revolver and killed the minister. Nothing has ever been done to the officer.

Two colored men by the name of Patton owned in Nashville a prosperous pressing and cleaning business. They owned their own trucks and were reputed to be good, law-abiding citizens. A certain notorious divekeeper, a white man, king of the bootleggers of Nashville, suspected one of the Patton brothers of interfering with a colored woman with whom the white man was living. The latter sought out one day Tom Patton in a business place on Cedar Street telling two police officers before entering the place he was "going to shoot a nigger." He walked in the store and shot Patton killing him instantly. He walked out, went with the two policemen to a nearby police station and in five minutes returned to the place of his crime. He has never been indicted. Six months ago he shot and killed another man, this time a white one, who was blind, shooting him on the blind side. The grand jury then in session refused to indict him even for the latter crime and he went unmolested until the local newspapers began to agitate the matter. He was then indicted but when placed on trial the jury was hung. It is generally felt that he will

not have to stand trial again.

Just one more case. Last summer Lem Motlow, owner of the Jack Daniel Distillery in Kentucky and who lives at Lynchburg, Tenn., got into an altercation with a Pullman porter on a train as it left St. Louis for Nashville. The Negro porter was too wise to argue with Motlow and reported the trouble to Pullis, the Pullman conductor on the train. Motlow drew his revolver and killed Pullis. When placed on trial Governor Austin Peay, ex-Governor M. R. Patterson, W. R. Cole, President of the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railroad and other prominent Tennesseans went to St. Louis and testified as character witnesses for Motlow. Motlow was acquitted. It is interesting to note that the town in which are Motlow's distillery and warehouses is on the N.C. and St. L. Railroad, which covers most of Tennessee. Even the Pullman Company which put all its weight behind the prosecution of Motlow was powerless.

And the other side when Negroes are suspected of crime? Last September a policeman by the name of True was killed at midnight at the corner of Fourth and Peabody Streets. By daybreak thirteen Negroes had been lodged in the city jail. Some were released in a few days -- others some weeks later. Three weeks after the murder the guilty Negro was captured at Columbia, Tenn. Three weeks after his arrest the newspapers reported he "had hung himself with a shoe string in his cell."

Though I was in Nashville but a short time, I gathered data regarding a great many more cases like those given above, every one authenticated. Even Negroes themselves have gotten so hardened to them that many of them do not see the direct connection between them and the lynching of Sammie Smith. It is quite easy to understand the psychology of the mob that murdered him, when one views his

lynching against this background. Other Negroes had been killed and no one punished for their murder -- why should there be any fear that they would be punished for killing Sammie Smith? Instead, their action would doubtless be approved by many people in Nashville!

But the causes go even further. I asked many reputable citizens of Nashville if they felt the Klan had had any part in the lynching. No one knew positively -- in fact, the Klan had hastily come out in the local press to disclaim any connection with the crime and declared instead that "this organization is grieved always at instances of mob violence." But always I found myself listening to the ominous and meaningful statement: "The Klan's mighty strong out around Nolansville." Its strong in Nashville, too. The Klan has purchased a home at Sixteenth and Laurel Streets, just five blocks from the exclusive Ward-Belmont School for Girls, only ten blocks from Vanderbilt University and the same distance from the Peabody Teachers Training School. There they hold their meetings with out fear of molestation and the site is, as may be judged from its contiguity to the institutions names, in an exclusive neighborhood. As one man said to me: "The Nashville Klan mightn't have had anything to do with this lynching; but I'm pretty sure the rural Klans did." And his feeling was not an isolated one...

And when I asked several other colored men why Sammie Smith had a revolver if he was such a good boy, never had been in trouble before, and gave his wages to his widowed mother, in every instance I received the same two words as answer. Those words were "The Klan."

But to go back to the four young white men who called at the hospital to see Sammie Smith before he died. I have furnished their names and addresses to Gove. Peay, Mayor Howse, Sheriff Briley,

Chief of Police Smith and to the Chamber of Commerce. Those four may not have had anything to do with the lynching -- but at least an investigation can be started there -- since according to the local authorities no clues have been found as yet.

I talked with one of the most prominent colored men of Nashville. "Its mighty fine for them to offer a reward, don't you think?" I asked him.. "They might as easily have offered a million," he returned cynically, "They know they'll never have to pay any of it!"

"But the editorials and resolutions were fine, anyhow, weren't they?" I inquired. "Oh, they're for Northern consumption," was his reply.