

*“Frenzied Thousands Join  
in Orgy of Blood and Fire”*

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# Morning World-Herald.

## MOB IN OMAHA LYNCHES NEGRO; ATTEMPTS TO HANG MAYOR SMITH

### MAYOR CAUGHT BY MOB AND HANGED TO TRAFFIC TOWER

Saved From Death by Police Officers Who Cut  
Rope and Rush Him to Hospital—Emergency  
Car Driven Through Crowd, Knocking  
Several Down.

### CITY OFFICIALS ON ROOF OF COURT HOUSE AS GANG STORMED

With the mob's entrance from the court house at 10:30 a. m., Mayor Smith was dragged to sixteen and Harney streets and hanged to a traffic signal tower at the intersection. The mob's entrance was made by the breaking of the door of the court house and the killing of a police officer. The mob then rushed to the roof of the court house and attempted to hang Mayor Smith. The police officers who cut the rope and rushed him to the hospital were praised for their bravery. The emergency car driven through the crowd, knocking several down, was also praised for its actions. The mob's actions were described as a "frenzied orgy of blood and fire."

### Negroes Shoved Brown Into Mob

When the fire had made the cell room so hot that it was intolerable, I took the man and woman prisoners to the roof. The women immediately became hysterical. They screamed and howled and threw themselves down on the roof in a frenzy of fear. I decided that it was better to get the women out of there so I told them that they could go out free, and they went. There were fifteen of them and they were wearing blue pajamas. When the male prisoners were left alone the negroes among them attempted to throw Brown from the roof of the building into the crowd below. My deputies and I intervened and prevented them from so doing. When three members of the mob reached the third floor, I saw a black streak shoot by me. I knew it was Brown. He had been shoved by the other negroes into the hands of the mob. They dragged him down the stairs to the first floor and out into the street.

### BIG AK-SAR-BEN WEEK INCLUDES TWO PARADES

Electric Display Wednesday  
Night, "Famous Love  
Stories" Thursday.

Coronation Ball Friday Evening and "Kids' Day"  
Again Saturday.

AK-SAR-BEN, begins its big week this morning at 11 o'clock, when the festival gates will open at the fair grounds. The fair grounds were burned up over Sunday and ex-

### DEATH BY THE ROPE, IS VERDICT OF MOB

Negro Is Beaten Senseless When Dragged From Blazing  
Court House—Is Hung, Shot and Burned.  
Pieces of Rope Sold as Souvenirs.

It was shortly after 11 o'clock Sunday night when the mob which had for some hours besieged the court jail finally battered their way through the magnificently burning structure to the jail on the top floor and dragged forth the senseless form of their prey, William Brown, negro, accused of having assaulted Agnes Loebeck, 19-year-old white girl. Five minutes later Brown's lifeless body, riddled with bullets, swung from a telephone pole at Eighteenth and Harney streets. Still later the body formed the center of a blazing pyre at Seventeenth and Dodge streets, while members of the mob sold as souvenirs pieces of the rope with which he had been hanged. The lynching took place on almost the identical spot where another negro was hanged by a mob more than twenty years ago.

With a battering ram twenty-five members of the mob, who had gained entrance to the jail by climbing the ladders constructed from the fire department, smashed the bars to Brown's cell down and seized the victim. He was lying almost prone on the floor when the mob arrived.

Say Police Submit.  
Reports say that the police men and county officials, who were scattered through the building, offered so resistance to the mob. The mob then started with him to the main floor of the building. Before they arrived with him to the ground floor he had been beaten unconscious and every vestige of clothing torn from his body. "Here hang 'em!" yelled the captors. The news spread from each corner to another like wild fire.

### SAYS NOTE FROM JAIL CALLED MOB UPSTAIRS

Leaders of the mob tell a strange story of how they got possession of the negro. A young man, with a shotgun was the speaker. "A man in a policeman's blue uniform threw a note from the fourth floor window on the west side of the court house. It read: 'Come to the fourth floor and you will get the negro.'"

### MARTIAL LAW RULES WHERE MOB HELD SWAY

Secretary of War Orders All  
Soldiers at Fort Omaha  
to Patrol City.

Machine Guns Guard Court  
House While Armed Veterans Walk Streets.

Omaha went under martial law about midnight last night when Colonel West, commanding officer at Fort Omaha, received instructions from Secretary of War Baker over long distance telephone from Washington, authorizing him to use the federal troops at Fort Omaha and any others available in the suppression of the rioting.

### FRENZIED THOUSANDS JOIN IN ORGY OF BLOOD AND FIRE

Douglas County Court House Fearfully Damaged as Howling Avengers Storm Jail With  
Bullet and Flame—One Man Killed and  
Many Injured—Police Overwhelmed and  
Soldiers Summoned.

### CROWDS SEARCH THROUGH STREETS, ATTACKING NEGROES EVERYWHERE

Red terror reigned in Omaha yesterday and last night when an infuriated mob attacked and virtually wrecked the court house, lynched William Brown, the negro identified as the assailant of Agnes Loebeck, attempted to hang Mayor Ed P. Smith and then launched forth into a wild debauch of bloodshed and destruction.

At least one white man was killed, scores of men were shot or beaten, store fronts were smashed by rioters in search of weapons, police automobiles were overturned and burned and the whole heart of the business section thrown into grisly fear. The police were powerless to stem the avalanche of fury after it had once gained momentum, and a shortage of ammunition brought about the final collapse of the defense of the beleaguered garrison in the county jail.

Dragged Through Streets.  
The negro Brown, nearly dead of fright, was then dragged from his cell, hanged to a pole at Eighteenth and Harney streets, and his body torn to pieces by savages of pistol shots. It was then dragged through the streets by cheering thousands and burned into ashes at Seventeenth and Dodge. A woman wildly inclined youth sold bits of the lyncher's rope at 10 cents each. Many women in the throng struggled for a view of the prey.

Mayor Smith was assaulted by the mob before the burning of the jail. He was leaving the court house, which then resounded with explosions and the reports of pistols, several of the big officers being in flames, when an unknown soldier shouted that the mayor had shot him through the hand. Smith was dragged from the police emergency automobile, into which he had stepped, a rope placed about his neck, and he was hanged to the signal station at Sixteenth and Harney streets. Officers, assisted by an unknown

Courtesy Nebraska State Historical Society

## Who Was to Blame?

When it was all said and done, three people — starting with Will Brown — were dead, the courthouse had sustained thousands of dollars in damage, irreplaceable records were destroyed, and the Smith administration had been thoroughly discredited by the lynching.

The Army confiscated photographs of the riot from the public and began identifying and arresting 100 men accused of taking part. They were arraigned on a variety of crimes from arson to murder. The police compiled their own list of 300 alleged participants. One of the names high on the list was Milton Hoffman, who had worked as Dennison's secretary. Hoffman was accused of leading the mob from south Omaha to the courthouse and whipping them into a frenzy. Dennison got Hoffman out of the city to Denver before he could be arrested, where he worked for another gambler for seven years before returning to Omaha.

A beleaguered city council decided not to order a special investigation of the police. So, on October 8 — within two weeks of the riot — a grand jury was convened to investigate. After a six-week session, the grand jury issued a report that criticized the Smith administration for ineffective leadership and police incompetence. According to some witnesses and the Army, proper police leadership could have dispersed the mob between 3:00 and 6:00 p.m. But the police chief and commissioner weren't at the courthouse at critical moments. However, the grand jury said the immediate cause of the riot was the raping of white women, and that the situation was made worse by "undue criticism given to courts, police, and public officials by the press of the city."

"The press", of course, was widely interpreted to mean the *Bee*, which practiced sensational reporting and was relentless in its attacks on the police department.

The foreman of the grand jury, a Mr. Towle, went even further than the official report. He charged that:

" . . . a 'certain Omaha newspaper' had set out to discredit city government and the police department. Several reported assaults on white women had actually been perpetrated by whites in blackface."

Towle said the riot was planned and begun by "the vice element of the city." The riot:

" . . . was not a casual affair; it was premeditated and planned by those secret and invisible forces that today are fighting you and the men who represent good government."

Despite the grand jury's words, and despite several photographs clearly showing the faces of participants, all of those arrested by the Army were eventually released

For his part Police Commissioner Ringer issued a statement one week after the riot defending the police against the *Bee*. He stated, "The crystallization of mob spirit . . . by vicious, unprincipled and false newspaper criticism of the police department" was a direct cause of the riot.

Ringer also felt that the criminal element in the city (many of whom Ringer associated with Dennison) had taken part in the riot and was gratified to see a weakening of the Smith administration.

Reverend Titus Lowe echoed Ringer's words and bluntly proclaimed the lynching was the result of calculated planning by politicians of the "old gang." Those calculations were understood to include the *Bee's* campaign of sensationalism and the actions of Dennison's political machine.

In addition, Major Gen. Leonard Wood had announced within days of arriving at Omaha that the attack could be traced to "the old criminal gang" and one newspaper. As his investigation continued, Wood claimed the riot was an organized effort, with alcohol distributed freely and "a regular taxi cab service was maintained to bring men to the scene of the riot."

Were Tom Dennison and his political machine responsible for the riot? Or was it just a bunch of young "punks" who initiated the riot? It was no secret that Dennison, Dahlman, and Rosewater were obsessed with the desire to regain political control of the city and stop any additional reform efforts. But were they responsible?

A nephew of the 'old Man' Dennison, who served many years with the fire department, maintained that the Dennison machine had no role in instigating the mob; it was kids who really were responsible for setting the affair in motion. "Maybe there was some help from the organization," he suggested, "but Tom didn't know about it."

Old-time machine worker William "Billy" Maher said Dennison was not responsible for the riot. "That's the silliest thing in the world, for anybody to ever dream that." Sheriff Mike Clark was one of Dennison's best friends, and Dennison would not have placed Clark's life in danger. "Tom Dennison would have no more tolerated any of his outfit having anything to do with hurting Mike Clark than he would of putting a gun to his own head. There were no Dennison men up there ... they were not leading anything."

There doesn't seem to be any firm evidence that the Dennison machine actually instigated the specific events of September 26-28, 1919. However, it does seem clear that Dennison and the *Bee* helped create conditions that were ripe for the outbreak of racial violence. Will Brown may well have been the victim of impersonal political machinations.

The Smith administration was never able to recover from the scandal, even though they added 100 new officers to the police department and ordered riot guns and machine guns. In the next election, the reform administration was voted out, largely as a result of the courthouse riot. The "Old Man" was a central figure in Omaha political life for another decade.

The *World-Herald* earned a Pulitzer Prize for an editorial it ran titled, "Law and the Jungle." The story drew attention to the city's disgrace, humiliation, and the consequences of inefficient government. Reliance on the authorities to maintain order had been misplaced, said the editorial, and Omahans would henceforth seek a stronger police force and more competent leadership.

"There is the rule of the jungle in this world, and there is the rule of law. Under jungle rule no man's life is safe, no man's wife, no man's Mother, sisters, children, home, liberty, rights or property. Under the rule of law, protection is provided for all these, and provided in proportion as law is efficiently and honestly administered and its power and authority respected and obeyed." Omaha has had an experience in lawlessness. We have seen, as in a nightmare, its awful possibilities. We have learned how frail is the barrier which divides civilization from the primal jungle — and we have been given to see clearly what that barrier is. It is the law! It is the might of the law, wisely administered. It is respect for the obedience to the law on the part of the members of society! May the lesson sink deep!"

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