



THE BURNING OF JIM MCILHERRON
AN N. A. A. C. P. INVESTIGATION

By Walter F. White, Assistant Secretary
THE facts given below were secured by Mr. White within the week following the burning of McIlherron in interviews with a number of the citizens of Estill Springs, largely white, including the proprietors of several stores, farmers and others. The account is not a compilation of opinions, but is based upon statements of inhabitants of the town, some of whom were eyewitnesses to the burning. All of the accounts of the burning were given by white people.

THE TOWN

Estill Springs, the scene of the third within nine months of Tennessee's burnings at the stake, is situated about seventy-four miles from Chattanooga, being midway between that city and Nashville. The town itself has only two hundred inhabitants; with the territory within the radius of a half-mile, about three hundred. Franklin County, in which Estill Springs is located, had a white population of 17,365 and 3,126 colored inhabitants in 1910, according to the census. Estill Springs is not incorporated and, therefore, has no mayor or village officials. It is a small settlement located midway between the larger and more progressive villages of Decherd and Tullahoma, each having about 2,000 inhabitants. Winchester, fifteen miles from Estill Springs, is the county seat.

Estill Springs is made up of a small group of houses and stores gathered about the

railway station. The main street is only three blocks long. Its few business establishments are located on one side of this street. There is one bank, the Bank of Estill Springs, purely local in nature; a barber shop, a drug store and five general merchandise stores of the type indigenous to small rural communities in the South. The settlement's sole butcher left on the day that the investigator reached there, to work in a nitrate factory in a nearby town as the butcher trade of the community was not sufficient to support his shop. Simply stated, Estill Springs is one of thousands of small settlements of its type, poorly located from a geographic and economic standpoint and with little prospect of future growth. Its static condition, naturally, tends to make the minds of its inhabitants narrow and provincial. The people of the surrounding country are farmers and because of the failure of the cotton crop last fall, occasioned by an early frost, corn was the only crop on which they made money. Such of the people as were interviewed were leisurely of manner and slow of speech and comprehension.

Paradoxical as it may seem, in the light of the event which has put Estill Springs on the map in a kind of infamy of fame, the settlement seems to have a strong religious undercurrent. Small as the community is, it has four white churches, two Baptist, one Methodist and one Campbellite. In addition, there are two colored churches, one a Baptist and the other a Methodist, of which latter the Rev. G. W. Lych was pastor. There is a local Red Cross unit among the white women which

was planning to inaugurate meetings to knit for the soldiers. In the windows of a number of homes, the emblem of the National Food Conservation Commission was displayed. The son of the proprietor of the only hotel is local agent for the sale of Thrift Stamps. The town purchased its allotment of both the first and second Liberty Loans.

THE CAUSE OF THE TROUBLE

About one mile from the railway station of Estill Springs, there lived a Negro by the name of Jim McIlherron. He resided with his mother, several brothers and father, who bears the reputation of being wealthy "for a Negro," as he owns his own land and is prosperous in a small way. The McIlherrons do not appear to have been popular with the white community. They were known as a family which resented "slights" and "insults" and which did not willingly allow its members to be imposed upon by unfriendly whites. However, there appears to have been no serious trouble between them and their white neighbors up to the time of the street fight which resulted in the shooting for which Jim McIlherron was later burned at the stake. One white woman expressed in a local phrase the opinion of the family when she said that the McIlherron family were "big-buggy niggers," meaning that they were prosperous enough to have a few articles other than bare necessities, among these being a larger buggy than was common in the section. Most of the whites in the locality, it must be explained, were of the poorer country folk.

Jim McIlherron bore the reputation in Estill Springs of being a "bad sort." It was gathered from remarks made that this implied that he shared the family characteristic already alluded to of resenting "slights" and "insults." In other words, he was not what is termed "a good nigger," which in certain portions of the South means a colored man or woman who is humble and submissive in the presence of white "superiors."

McIlherron was known to be a fighter and the possessor of an automatic revolver. (Laws against "gun-toting" are observed in the breach, apparently, in this region.) He was, therefore, classed as a dangerous man to bother with. A little over a year before the lynching, he became involved in a fight

with his own brother in which the latter was cut with a knife wielded by the former. For this he was arrested by Sheriff John Rose, the sheriff of Franklin County. At the time of this affair, McIlherron threatened to "get" the sheriff if he was ever arrested again by that officer. It is an admitted fact in the community that the sheriff was afraid of McIlherron. Soon after the trouble with his brother, McIlherron went to Indianapolis where he worked in an industrial plant, proceeding later to Detroit. In Detroit he had an attack of rheumatism and was forced to return to his home shortly before the shooting. His having lived in the North tended to increase his disfavor with the white people of the community, as he was credited with having absorbed during his residence there certain ideas of "independence" which were not acceptable to the white citizens of this small rural community.

Sharing popular disfavor with McIlherron was the pastor of the Methodist church in Estill Springs, the Rev. G. W. Lych. He had repeatedly advised the colored people to assert their right to be free from the petty tyranny alleged to have been imposed upon them by the white people, assuring them that they were made of the same clay and were as good as anybody else.

THE SHOOTING

On the afternoon of Friday, February 8, Jim McIlherron went into a store in the town and purchased fifteen cents' worth of candy. In Estill Springs it had been a habit of an element of young white men to "rock" Negroes in the community—i. e., throwing rocks or other missiles at them to make them run. This had occasioned frequent tilts between the races none of which, however, had previously been serious. McIlherron had been the victim of one of these "rockings" and had declared that if ever they got after him again, somebody was going to get hurt. When the trouble started on February 8, it was about five o'clock in the afternoon, in the gloom of early night-fall. It is probable that the Negro believed that they were after him again. He walked down the street eating this candy, going past Tate & Dickens' store in front of which he encountered three young white men, Pierce Rogers, Frank Tigert and Jesse Tigert by name. As McIlherron passed them a remark was made by one of the