

LA PLATA LYNCHING

Joseph Cocking, the Wife Murderer, Hung.

A MOB OF BASE BALL PLAYERS DID IT

Many of Them Dressed in Women's Gowns.

A SINGLE EYE WITNESS

From a Staff Correspondent of The Star.

LA PLATA, Md., June 21.—Joseph Cocking went to his death at an early hour this morning by decree of a mob of determined men, illegally arranging the brutal murder of his wife and sister-in-law about two months ago. For a few moments the usually staid and quiet county of Charles is wrought to an almost unprecedented state of excitement. It was the first time in the history of the county that Justice Lynch held court here.

About 1 o'clock this morning Washington Birch, the colored jailer, who lives about seventy-five yards from the jail, was aroused from his sleep by a rapping at the



Joseph Cocking.

front door of his house. He yawned, stretched his arms, and, when the knocking was repeated with unmistakable emphasis, left his couch and looked out of the window.

"Who's there?" he inquired, in a tone that was anything but pleasant.

"No matter," was the answer, in a voice evidently disguised, which proceeded from the darkness below.

"We want the keys to the jail. Hand them up!"

"Come not," replied Birch.

A Glimmer in the Moonlight.

A glimmer of moonlight at that moment was reflected from the shining barrel of a revolver and Justice Birch became aware that the weapon was directed with pretty good accuracy at the point where his heart was beating in a rapid and unusual measure.

"Come down or we'll break in the door," said the voice from the darkness.

"All right, I'll be right down," said the jailer, deciding that discretion was the better part of valor. On opening the door Justice Birch saw a body of human beings, which, he states, consisted of from fifty to one hundred and fifty persons, all wearing the garb of females. The key was handed to the leader of the party and the visitors left for the jail. It was a merry, good-natured throng and some folks declared to me today that they carried lunches and horns, and a small number indulged in a game of marbles while waiting in the moonlight for the jailer to descend from his room.

It will be remembered that late in May Cocking was brought back to La Plata from Baltimore, where he was taken soon after the discovery of the murder of Mrs. Cocking and her sister, Miss Daisy Miller, for safe keeping, and arraigned on an indictment charging him with the double crime. He pleaded not guilty, and a hearing of the case was postponed until the full term of the court. Cocking was then taken to Fort Tobacco, where he has been held. The place of confinement was the ancient, well-known and notoriously insecure room—

No Time Lost.

To that building the party of alleged females made their way. There were no guards in attendance and no delays occurred in reaching and laying hold of Cocking. He was rudely awakened from sleep and at once realized his fearful position. A young boy, who was confined in an adjoining cell to that occupied by Cocking, informed me that the alleged murderer begged piteously for his life, and when he saw such pleadings were useless he implored that he be allowed a few minutes to offer prayer. He was answered:

"You have had plenty of time to pray during the past two months. If you have not done so it is too late now."

Clad Only in Night Shirt.

Attired only in his night shirt, Cocking was then dragged from the building in no gentle manner. His hands were pinioned and he was hurriedly taken to a bridge but a stone's throw from the jail, and which spans a canal dug in order to drain the surrounding marsh lands. Upon arrival there a rope strong enough, so it is said, to hold an ox was tied about the neck of the miserable man, with the other end fastened to the rail of the bridge.

Cocking was then tossed over. During his struggles with his captors the face of the prisoner was badly cut and bruised. The lynching party lost no time in making itself scarce, and all was quiet until shortly after daylight, when a colored boy passing along the road saw the frightful spectacle of a man hanging from the bridge dead, with his tongue out and up to his knees in the water. It was not many minutes later before a crowd had gathered about the spot.

The body was cut down and removed to the jail. Sheriff George A. Wade declining to permit any one to view the remains until after an inquest, which was held this afternoon.

Nobody Knew It.

The ignorance of the residents of Fort Tobacco and the surrounding country concerning the lynching is astonishing. Shortly after the body was discovered Sheriff Wade denounced the affair in strong language, and openly expressed his opinion of the men who would indulge in such an outrage against law and order.

This statement almost incited a riot, and for a moment it looked as though Sheriff Wade stood in danger of also being lynched. A number of citizens of the county, among whom was Julian Cox, became excited. It is said, and it was necessary for Sheriff Wade to draw his revolver for protection.

Don't Know Who They Were.

As stated, everybody is densely ignorant of the personnel of the lynching party. One well-known citizen, speaking seriously, informed me that the lynchers were really women, who, becoming disgusted with the delay on the part of the men in arranging the matter of the two members of their sex, finally determined to take matters into their own hands.

There is no doubt, however, that the party consisted of men, and were not more than twenty in number, Judge Church's declaration to the contrary notwithstanding.

Worked Like Professionals.

The lynching party evidently knew their business. The rope was tied with a hangman's knot, and looked as though it was the work of an expert. This fact caused Mr. Samuel Turner, clerk of the county court to remark:

"I know of two men in the county who can tie a knot like that, and they are Capt. Ferguson and Jim Shank."

There seems to be no doubt that the reason for lynching Cocking at this time was because it was the intention to transfer him in a few days to the new jail recently completed at La Plata.

The authorities were merely waiting for the plaster to dry in the new structure. The lynchers realized that even in the jail at La Plata Cocking would be beyond their reach, so they determined to make use of a golden opportunity and take him from the insecure jail at Fort Tobacco, the walls of which, it is claimed, can be easily penetrated by ropes.

Guards Released Last Week.

Up to last week the jail was guarded by two men, Deputy Sheriff Barber and Frank Murphy. It was costing the county \$4 per day for their services, so they were released from duty in spite of protestations on the part of Cocking that he was afraid to stay in the jail unguarded. All danger of lynching disappeared when word was sent Cocking was not being taken care of. He was taken by Sheriff Wade three times daily to the house of the lynchers, about seventy-five yards from the jail, for his meals, and was also taken out often for exercise.

It seems that the relatives of Cocking believe him innocent of the crime, and Mr. John Miller, a brother of the murdered woman, visited the prisoner almost daily, carrying to him literature. The lynching party kept its plans remarkably quiet, and it is not likely that the identity of any of the lynchers will be discovered.

Ghostly Apparitions.

An interesting feature in connection with the withdrawal of the guard from the jail is the open statement of Deputy Sheriff Barber that several weeks ago he was startled by the sudden appearance of two ghostly figures in white, apparently females, in his room at the jail. Barber claimed not to believe in ghosts, and, he says, is superstitious, but adds emphatically that he saw the apparitions, as stated.

Every one with whom I have conversed seems to think that the lynching was the proper thing, and it is believed upon all sides. Had not John Miller requested that no extreme measures be followed, it is claimed that Cocking would have been strung up on the day of the discovery of the crime.

The men and the rope to end his earthly life were on the spot, it is claimed.

Sheriff Wade is conducting an inquest over the body of Cocking this afternoon at the jail. It is believed closed doors, and as yet the details of the proceedings are secret.

Deputy Barber Describes It.

About 1 o'clock last night about fifty masked men called at the house of Washington Hark, the jailer in Fort Tobacco, went in and took him out of his chest, where he had hid himself, having seen them through the window before they entered. They tied him and carried him to the jail and made him unlock it. They then seized Joseph Cocking, who was in jail awaiting trial for the murder of his wife and sister-in-law at Hill Top last April. A rope was put around his neck. He begged them to stop and let him talk with them, but they told him he had "better a damned hell be among his prayers." He was dragged out of the jail and hurried out of town across the bridge and hanged to the end of the bridge, the lynchers taking care to lock Hark in the jail and carry the keys with them before they departed with Cocking. About 2 o'clock I got wind of what had happened, and walked over toward the bridge, and found Cocking suspended by a rope, still in death.

Fear of a Mob.

Cocking was taken to Baltimore April 21 in order to escape the vengeance of the mob, and was returned to the Charles county authorities May 23, as his trial had been set for the day following. His counsel asked for a two weeks' extension of time, which was refused, and upon the usual affidavit the case was returned to an adjoining county, and would have come up for trial in September. There has been considerable talk of lynching Cocking ever since he was returned to Charles county, but not much evidence was given in the reports.

The Crime.

The story of the crime is as follows: Early on the morning of April 23 a colored man, Nicholas Jones, went to Cocking's store at Hill Top to make a purchase, and found the door ajar and the cash drawer open; having grown from the collar, he went down there and found Joseph Cocking tied with ropes about the feet, and slightly wounded. He released Cocking, who urged him to go upstairs and knock out. There Jones found Mrs. Cocking and her sister, Miss Lucy Miller, murdered in their beds, in separate rooms.

Cocking claimed that during the night he had been attacked by two robbers, who beat and wounded him and then threw him through a trap door into the cellar. All the evidence, however, though circumstantial, pointed to Cocking's guilt, and he was arrested and indicted. The state has never been able to show any motive on Cocking's part for the brutal murders.

Story of an Apparition.

Special Inquirer to The Evening Star.

BALTIMORE, Md., June 21.—A traveling salesman for a Baltimore house who does not with his name mentioned, was an involuntary witness of the lynching. He says: "I had been to Hill Top late in the afternoon, and a game of base ball was in progress there. Spectators of lynching were present there, but I did not give them much evidence. Between 12 and 1 o'clock this morning I was returning to Fort Tobacco, when my horse was stopped at a stile bridge about 200 yards from the jail by four or six masked persons, dressed as women. It was claimed afterward that two were women. I saw the mob had somebody on the bridge with a rope around his neck. All had pistols but no shots were fired, and no lights were carried, as the moon gave plenty of illumination for the work. I heard the leader give the man with the rope around his neck time to step or make a statement. He refused to do either apparently, and he was plucked over the side, the other end of the rope having been securely fastened to the bridge. The man's feet dangled in the water, and after a few spasmodic kicks all ceased again, and shortly the mob dispersed."

Worked Like Women.

Mr. E. Jackson of La Plata came to Baltimore this morning and told a reporter for the News what he had been told by a deputy sheriff of Charles county. He said: "Between 12 and 1 o'clock this morning a crowd of thirty or more persons, dressed in women's clothes, came to the jail at Fort Tobacco and demanded the keys of Washington Hark. The old colored jailer, by threats of hanging him the old lady was nearly frightened out of his wits and the keys were delivered without trouble. Cocking was brought from the jail and taken along the country road to a stile bridge which spans the usual road to cross the marshes. He was hung from it and the crowd dispersed."

All the trials for Baltimore left Fort Tobacco this morning under Attorney Finney, Magistrate Lee Pollock and J. P. Thomas E. Church started for the scene of the lynching to hold an inquest.

Placed at a Horse Rail Stage.

Capt. F. N. Thurston, conductor of the Pope Creek express, which arrived at Calvert station at 8 o'clock this morning, delivered a full account of the lynching

from the passengers on his train. It is as follows: "A base ball game was in progress yesterday afternoon at Hill Top, where the Cocking tragedy occurred, and after the game was over the advisability of lynching Cocking was discussed in order to save the county the expense of trying him. The crowd was sober and was composed of some of the leading residents of the county, it is said. The idea of lynching the accused met with general favor, and as calmly as if they were planning another base ball game the lynching of Cocking was plotted. After all arrangements had been made the ball players dispersed and met again near the jail at Port Tobacco shortly before midnight. The lynching party numbered probably twenty-five, and all were masked. A number wore women's dresses to complete their disguise, and it is said several women were with the mob. The rattle-trap old jail, in which Cocking was confined, was in charge of an aged colored man, who was aroused and ordered to give up the keys.

Persuaded by a Revolver.

"He hesitated, but when a revolver was thrust in his face he weakened and promptly handed them over. In another minute the jail door was unlocked and the mob was inside. Cocking, who had been awakened by the noise outside, seemed to fully comprehend the object of the mob's visit, and crouched tremblingly in his cell. Without delay his cell was opened and he was dragged out of the jail. He seemed almost stupefied with fear, and offered little or no resistance as he was hurried to a little bridge over Port Tobacco run, a few hundred yards distant from the jail. A noosed rope was produced and thrown over his head and tightened about his neck. He was then asked to confess. He refused and declared he was innocent.

" 'Well, then, say your prayers, for your time has come,' yelled some one in the crowd.

Would Not Pray.

"The doomed man also declined to pray, and the end of the rope was then thrown over the limb of a tree which overhung the run, and Cocking was pushed off the bridge. The limb of the tree bent until his feet rested in the water. He struggled very little and died of strangulation. After the lynching the mob quietly dispersed. Just as the doomed wretch was about to be pushed off the bridge, the rattle of carriage wheels was heard coming up the road, and a detail of several men was sent down the road to stop the newcomer. He proved to be a traveling salesman going from Hill Top to La Plata. He was the only witness, outside of the mob, to the lynching. It is generally believed that the lynchers were excited after hearing of the hanging of the negro murderer Ford at Washington yesterday, and of Truss, executed at Elkton, and decided that it was time that Cocking should share their fate."

Death of Mrs. Frank Claudy.

The announcement is made of the death in Chicago after a long illness of Mrs. Mary Cathin Claudy, the wife of Mr. Frank Claudy, president of the Washington Saengerbund. Mrs. Claudy was a woman of many admirable and attractive qualities, and possessed a highly cultivated literary taste and domestic virtues of a high degree. The news of her death will be a great shock to her very large circle of friends in this city, although she had been ill for a long time.
