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shades mountain
THE LEGAL LYNCHING
of WILLIE PETERSON
and the STRUGGLE for
JUSTICE in JIM CROW
BIRMINGHAM

Melanie S. Morrison

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*To all who fought for racial justice
in Jim Crow Birmingham
and kept hope alive*

To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.

—JAMES BALDWIN, *THE FIRE NEXT TIME*

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INTRODUCTION

How does a white man born in 1918 and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, become so passionate about racial justice?

Growing up in East Lansing, Michigan, in the 1950s and '60s, I frequently heard this question put to my father by friends and acquaintances who were perplexed by the strength of his antiracist fervor. It could have been one of my father's sermons that provoked the inquiry. Or his leadership in the campaign to abolish the restrictive real estate covenants that barred people of color from obtaining mortgages or purchasing homes in our university community until 1968.

My father believed racism is a white problem and that he, as a white man, would be held accountable by his Creator for what he did or failed to do to confront, name, and mend this deep wound in the soul of America. As he was fond of declaring from the pulpit: "To love God you must work for justice, and justice cannot be realized in this country until racism is eradicated!"

His response to the question of how he had become so passionate about racial justice usually came in the form of short stories about people who

made a deep impression on him as a young person. His childhood mentor and pastor, the Rev. Henry Morris Edmonds, topped that list. Founder of Independent Presbyterian Church in downtown Birmingham, Edmonds was a prominent and sometimes controversial figure during his tenure as senior pastor from 1915 to 1942.¹

“As a teenager in the 1930s,” my father recalled, “I sat on the front pew of Independent Presbyterian Church every Sunday, come rain or come shine. I took copious notes as Rev. Edmonds held forth on the great issues of our day, including racism. Seeing that kind of courage and clarity modeled by a white man made a deep impression on me.”

My grandparents were members of Independent Presbyterian Church, along with many of the white elite from the Mountain Brook suburb of Birmingham where my father was raised. As the only son of a wealthy entrepreneur, my father—Truman Aldrich Morrison Jr.—was being groomed to take over the family business from his father, who owned gas stations and tire companies all across the city. His father—Truman Aldrich Morrison Sr.—was an ardent segregationist. I grew up hearing stories from my father about the racial apartheid of his youth, the Jim Crow laws that enforced it, and the racist public officials whom my grandfather so admired, including police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor. Years later, Connor became a national icon of white supremacy when, in 1963, he ordered his men to unleash police dogs and fire hoses on peaceful black demonstrators marching with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.²

There was one story that stood out above all others. As my father told it, two sisters and a friend from prominent white Birmingham families went for a ride on Shades Mountain, on the southeastern edge of the city. What began as a pleasant drive on a summer’s afternoon in 1931 ended in a nightmare, with two of the women killed.

The sole survivor, Nell Williams, was eighteen years old. She told police that a black man wielding a gun had jumped on the running board of the car and demanded they drive to a secluded wooded area. In the struggle that ensued, Nell’s sister, Augusta Williams, was mortally wounded, and their friend Jennie Wood died a few days later in a Birmingham hospital. My father’s telling of this story was especially riveting to my three siblings and me, not only because my father was intimately acquainted with some of the people involved, but also because those events proved to be cataclysmic in his young life.

I vividly remember knocking on the door of my father's study as a young teenager, imploring him to tell me once more about the murders on Shades Mountain. When working at home, my father always wore a faded blue cardigan with ink stains on the pockets that sagged from the weight of assorted pens, lozenges, and keys. It was the storyteller as much as the story that I longed to hear. My father was fully present when he told this story, undistracted by the ubiquitous pastoral duties and deadlines that usually held him captive. He invited me into an intimate domain where few others were granted entrance. Being entrusted with the whole story made me pulse with pride and feel suddenly older than my years. He never said, "It was those events that changed my life forever." He did not need to. His story told me.

"No one knows for sure what happened on that fateful day in August 1931," he usually began, leaning back in his chair, crossing his long legs and gazing out the study window.

I leaned forward, impatient for details. He looked through the window as if he saw the three young women in the distance moving toward him.

"Nell Williams, her older sister Augusta, and their friend Jennie Wood had gone for a ride up Shades Mountain . . . just to take in the sights. It was a beautiful vista atop that mountain."

I pictured three girls laughing and talking as they drove up the winding mountain road with a sheer dropoff to the left, like the roads we took through the Smoky Mountains on our way to visit our maternal grandmother in Virginia. I had no memories of the vistas or the valleys in Birmingham. The estrangement between my father and his father prevented us from taking family trips to see my paternal grandparents.

"Only Nell survived to tell the tale."

"What happened on the mountain, Dad?"

No matter how many times I had heard the story, I did not want him to skip any part of it.

"Back in those days, automobiles had what we called running boards. Sort of a step into the car. . . . Autos were higher off the ground back then. Nell Williams said that a Negro appeared suddenly, jumped on the running board of their car, held them at gunpoint, and made them drive to a secluded spot off the beaten track."

He reached for his pipe and turned the pipe bowl upside down over the green enameled ashtray. He tapped it gently to dislodge old ashes.

"Tragically, Augusta and Jennie died of gunshot wounds." He unzipped the plaid vinyl pouch and rubbed the moist new tobacco between his fingers. I wondered if he was stalling for time.

"Only Nell lived to tell the tale." He shook his head, while transferring three small pinches of tobacco into the pipe bowl.

"Poor Nell. She lost her sister and her best friend that day."

We sat in silence while he held a flame above the pipe bowl and sucked in short staccato breaths to start the smoke flowing. I don't remember that he ever offered a physical description of Nell or that I asked for one. I simply imagined her looking like our former babysitter, Angela: tall and slender, with dark brown shoulder-length hair pulled back from her face with copper-colored barrettes.

"Nell was under so much pressure to identify the assailant. Weeks went by. Suspects were rounded up. But Nell couldn't identify any of them as the culprit. You can't imagine how tense things were in Birmingham. Everyone was on edge."

I actually had some inkling about the tension because of other stories my father had told me about the brutality of Southern white supremacy.

"Poor Nell," he said again. "It's no surprise she finally cracked under the strain. Weeks after the killings, she and her mother were driving downtown, and she pointed at a Negro walking nearby. 'That's him!' she shouted, pointing at poor Willie Peterson, a black man in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Poor Nell Williams. Poor Willie Peterson. Closing my eyes today, I see my father shaking his head and hear the empathy tinged with pity in his voice.

"Willie Peterson didn't resemble the description Nell had earlier given the police. Except for the fact that he was a Negro. But she never wavered. She insisted he was the man."

My father told me how the white citizens of Birmingham were more than ready to pronounce Willie Peterson guilty without a trial. Some wanted to lynch him on the spot, needing no further proof than Nell's assertion that he was the assailant.

"In all of Birmingham, there were very few people who dared go against the tide. But my mentor and pastor, Rev. Henry Edmonds, was one of them."

He did not need to add those identifiers. I knew full well who Henry Edmonds was. I had heard so many stories about this man. Besides, his portrait

hung directly above my father's desk, and my youngest sister was named in his honor: Stephanie Edmonds Morrison.

"Henry Edmonds condemned this rush to judgment, imploring his fellow citizens to behave with decency, insisting that Willie Peterson deserved a fair trial." Quoting Edmonds, my father's voice assumed the tenor and modulation he himself used when preaching.

"What about Genevieve?" I asked. "How come you haven't mentioned her yet?"

"I'm getting to that," he said, smiling. "I'm impressed you remember Genevieve."

How could I forget Genevieve Williams? She was Nell and Augusta's younger sister and my father's first love. The idea that my father had been romantically involved with someone besides my mother thoroughly captivated me.

"She was a lovely young woman. The belle of the ball . . . and highly sought after by my contemporaries, I might add." He winked at me and glanced over his shoulder to see if my mother was within earshot. "But, mind you, beautiful as she was, Genevieve could never hold a candle to your mother."

He told me that Henry Edmonds's advocacy for Willie Peterson enraged Genevieve's family. It insinuated Nell was either delusional or lying.

"I experienced their ire on more than one occasion. Genevieve and I spent many summer afternoons on the back porch of the Williamses' house in Redmont. As fate would have it, their house was perched on a hill overlooking the Edmondses' home."

At this point in the story, my father always stood up, put his hands behind his back, and walked in a circular fashion around the room, mimicking Henry Edmonds's habit of composing his sermons by walking the circumference of his backyard.

"So there I was, sitting with Genevieve and her family on Saturday afternoons. Drinking iced tea, looking down at the man whom I respected above all others. But the Williams family couldn't bear the sight of him. In their eyes, he was a traitor."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I was torn up inside. I identified with the Williams family in many ways. They'd lost Augusta. Nell had suffered terribly. And I was in love with Genevieve. On the other hand, I felt such allegiance to Henry Edmonds, whom

I deeply admired. His integrity was above reproach. And it weighed heavily on me that Willie Peterson might very well be innocent.”

“So, what did you do?” I asked again. He seemed not to hear me.

“Worst of all, I had to endure the ranting of Dent, Genevieve’s older brother. He shamelessly bragged about going to the jail shortly after Willie Peterson’s arrest and shooting him point blank with a pistol. Dent’s only regret was that he hadn’t succeeded in killing him.”

That part of the story always stunned me: the fact that Dent Williams could just brazenly walk into the jail and shoot Willie Peterson. When my father reached that point, I interrupted and voiced my outrage and disbelief, as though my indignation could alter events that transpired decades before.

“Wasn’t anyone guarding Willie Peterson?” I shouted. “How could the police let that happen?”

“Oh, they let a lot of things happen in those days, Melanie. And they caused their own share of violence and mayhem.”

A Three-Time Traitor

Torn by conflicting loyalties to his girlfriend and his mentor, my father’s parochial white world began to come apart. He became obsessed with the possibility that Willie Peterson was innocent. Whenever he attempted to voice this concern at home, his father reacted with rage and his mother changed the subject. I learned years later from my Aunt Harriet that, much to the amazement of most everyone at the time, my father suddenly stopped dating Genevieve and became sullen and reclusive.

“Mother and I were utterly baffled when Truman ended the relationship,” she told me. “He was head over heels in love with Genevieve. They were perfect together, and she was as sweet as they come. It was like Truman suddenly became a different person. He was a Beau Brummel one day and a recluse the next. He shut himself off from the family, locked in his room, reading the Bible and all those other books.”

Inspired by Rev. Edmonds to pursue ministry and a call to racial justice work, my father eventually left Birmingham to attend seminary in Chicago. When my father left the South, my grandfather considered him a three-time traitor, betraying his class, his region, and his race. This estrangement between father and son is one of the reasons I only met my grandfather twice before he died at age eighty-four.

Later in life, when asked how and why he had become so passionate about racial justice, my father often hearkened back to the murders on Shades Mountain and the arrest of Willie Peterson. “That’s where it started,” he explained. “I began to recognize the disparities between what my white world had taught me and the ravaging inequities of segregation and Jim Crow racism. Those inequities had been there all along, but I hadn’t seen them. I began to see them when every white person in my world except Henry Edmonds pronounced Willie Peterson guilty despite the evidence pointing to his innocence. I also began to see it when those same people defended Dent Williams tooth and nail, saying he’d only done what any respectable white man *should* do to avenge the honor of his sisters.”

It was on the Williamses’ porch, holding Genevieve’s hand and hearing Dent brag about trying to kill Willie Peterson, that my father knew he could not straddle both worlds any longer. The chasm had grown too wide, too deep. He would have to choose: stay with Genevieve, take over the Morrison family business, and live out the privileged destiny in Mountain Brook that his parents and Genevieve’s envisioned for them. Or break with everything familiar and give himself to a wholly different kind of work. On that porch, the foundations of his white and privileged world had been shaken by this event of seismic proportions. Rather than try to patch them over and continue on, he broke rank with most of the people in his world and began to align himself with Christian socialists and racial justice activists. In the solitude of his upstairs bedroom, he fervently prayed that God might use him to help repair the devastation and inequities that his ancestors had wreaked. Already in his teenage years, he had the inkling that he would spend his lifetime trying to repay this grievous debt.

The Roots of a Legacy

For many years, I retold the Shades Mountain story just as it was handed down to me. It was one way of accounting for the legacy of antiracist activism I inherited from my father. I have always known that my passion for racial justice and my work as an antiracist educator were seeded by the stories my father told and the life he modeled for me. He was a pastor, but the work of dismantling racism was his deepest calling; it is what got him out of bed in the morning and kept him up late at night.

My father was an avid reader of literature about the black freedom struggle. He could not contain his enthusiasm for certain books and was impatient

for me to reach the age when it would be developmentally appropriate for him to hand me James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* or Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*. Whenever he lent me a volume from his sacred canon, he would always preface this act with the same words: "Melanie, I can guarantee that you won't be the same when you finish this book. You'll wonder how you ever lived without it and say to me, 'Dad, why didn't you show me this before!'" In the stories he shared, and the books we read and discussed, my father wanted me to know that white people have a critically important role to play in the struggle for racial justice. Most of all he wanted me to hear, *You are of consequence in this struggle*.

Two years after my father's death in 2006, I took a three-month sabbatical from my work as a racial justice educator and headed to Durham, North Carolina. Being my father's daughter, I packed every book I owned about racism and white privilege. I did not want to be 750 miles from home, regretting that I had left behind the one book I needed most.

I began my sabbatical by reading *An Enduring Ministry*—a recently published biography of Henry Edmonds written by Marvin Yeomans Whiting, former chief archivist at the Birmingham Public Library. I devoured the biography, searching for evidence that might corroborate the stories we had heard about my father's mentor. When I came upon six pages of single-spaced narrative in a footnote, all of it pertaining to the Williams/Wood murders in 1931, I felt a rush of adrenaline akin to what archaeologists must feel when they unearth the precious remnants of an ancient city. Here in print were details of the incident that rocked Birmingham and proved to be so formative in my father's young life. Whiting stated that he initially intended to include a detailed account of "this largely ignored event in Birmingham history" in the main text, but space and balance had prevented it.³

Curious as to why a case of this magnitude had been largely ignored, I launched an online search for other books and articles about the Willie Peterson case. I was surprised at how little I found, in contrast to the preponderance of literature about the Scottsboro trial that had begun a few months earlier in 1931, when two white women claimed they were raped by nine young black men aboard a freight train in northeastern Alabama.⁴ I was excited that historian Robin D. G. Kelley addressed the Williams/Wood murders and the arrest of Willie Peterson in *Hammer and Hoe*. His analysis of the fierce competition waged between the Communist Party and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

for control of Peterson's defense intensified my desire to read everything I could about this case.⁵

In the sources I discovered, I was surprised that none featured the role Henry Edmonds played in the Peterson case. I knew my father's adoration of his mentor might have given way to hyperbole in his telling of the story, but why was there no mention of Edmonds whatsoever in these sources? More significant still, these sources highlighted the reign of terror carried out by law enforcement and white vigilantes in the aftermath of the murders on Shades Mountain. My father never mentioned those harrowing events. He had not told me that white vigilantes burned black-owned businesses to the ground and fired shots at a group of black people who stood peacefully talking on a Birmingham street corner.⁶ Nor did my father tell me that the NAACP and the Communist Party launched campaigns in defense of Willie Peterson.

I doubt that my father forgot those parts of the story or chose to keep them from me. I suspect he never knew those things as a teenager living in his insular white enclave of Mountain Brook. Discovering these gaping holes in my father's story, I became intensely curious about what else I might unearth were I to undertake a serious and sustained study of this case. In November 2010, I made my first field trip to Birmingham, compelled to learn more about the Williams/Wood murders and the arrest of Willie Peterson, as much by what my father did not tell me as what he did.

Discoveries on the Journey

During that first visit to Birmingham, spending time in the archives and seeking out people who might know about the murders, two things dawned on me with great force. More than ever I felt compelled to research and write about this extraordinary case, and I wished that I had begun this journey twenty years earlier. Almost eighty years had passed since the attack on Shades Mountain, and it was no longer possible to find and interview people who were old enough in 1931 to remember that event or its significance. In subsequent trips, I spoke with elders in Birmingham's black community one generation removed who might have heard from their elders about the murders on Shades Mountain or the arrest of Willie Peterson. None recalled the Peterson case, but several informed me that such gross miscarriages of justice were all too common in Jim Crow Birmingham. As

one man put it, “I’m surprised to learn Willie Peterson wasn’t lynched by a white mob during his first night in jail.”

On numerous trips to Birmingham and other cities that housed archival materials, I sought to recover every newspaper article, editorial, letter, diary, trial transcript, city directory, sermon, photograph, census record, map, and manuscript collection of the organizations related to this case. I soon discovered that extant primary source material provided far more documentation about the white women attacked on Shades Mountain than about the black man accused of being their assailant. The reasons for this imbalance are manifold, with race and class being two decisive factors. Nell Williams, Augusta Williams, and Jennie Wood were daughters of affluent white families that possessed the resources to send all three to college. Willie Peterson, born into a sharecropping family in rural Pike County, Alabama, worked as a child in the cotton fields and never learned to read or write. After moving to Birmingham in 1919, Peterson worked in the mines for subsistence, nonunionized wages, and struggled like most black miners to make ends meet.

Significant events in the lives of the Williams sisters and Jennie Wood—such as an engagement to be married or a debutante ball—were noted in Birmingham newspapers. By contrast, Willie Peterson’s name did not appear in newspapers, white or black, until he was arrested for the Shades Mountain murders. Even then, no journalist spoke with Peterson or his family members directly, as they did with Nell Williams and her family members. Nell Williams’s lengthy and largely uninterrupted testimony about the events of August 4, 1931, can be found in the grand jury transcripts. Willie Peterson’s recollections of that day and night are recorded as responses to belligerent attorneys seeking to coerce a confession, confuse the witness, or discredit what he remembered.

From the start, I resolved to write a historical narrative that would be true to primary sources. I vowed to resist the temptation to cross the line into fiction when writing about the thoughts and feelings of people in this book. Every quote, unless otherwise indicated, can be traced back to a primary source such as a trial transcript or newspaper article. The relative dearth of information about Willie Peterson proved to be a daunting and agonizing challenge as I sought to write about him and his wife, Henrietta, with as much detail and complexity as I wrote about Nell Williams and her family. I considered interviewing the descendants of the key subjects in this case

to supplement the written primary sources. When I discovered that Willie Peterson had no descendants, I decided to abandon that avenue of investigation, fearing that I would replicate another form of imbalance in my sources.

Nevertheless, I have sought to render Willie Peterson the subject he deserves to be in this story, not simply the object of white supremacist injustice. As I researched this case, I came to see more clearly the difference between radical disenfranchisement and actual silencing. Willie Peterson's community of family, neighbors, church members, and friends risked all manner of abuse, harassment, and violence as they stepped up to offer support and testify on his behalf. And in the face of a system that sought to rob him of every form of human agency, Willie Peterson refused to be broken.

Eight years ago, I set out on a journey to learn everything I could about the murders on Shades Mountain and the fate of Willie Peterson. As I researched these events, discovering time and again how partial and inadequate my father's knowledge had been, I was compelled to tell a fuller, truer, and far more complicated story about the social and economic forces at work in Jim Crow Birmingham as well as the individuals and movements at the heart of this case. Recognizing that every historical narrative is shaped by the narrator's choices and social location, I have sought to write about this tumultuous and fertile era with honesty, empathy, and complexity.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- ¹ For a history of Independent Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, see Adams and Whiting, *Forward in Faith*.
- ² For a description of Connor's order to use police dogs and fire hoses on demonstrators in May 1963, see McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 365–78.
- ³ Whiting with Nelson, *An Enduring Ministry*, 140.
- ⁴ To my knowledge, Dan Carter was the first historian to write about the Peterson case in the first edition of *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, published in 1969. Carter's description of the Peterson case can be found in the revised edition, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, 129–35. Other historians who have written about the Peterson case include Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 82–84, 87, 89–90, 109, 141; and Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 170–72, 181–83, 187. Pam Jones, a writer in Birmingham with an interest in unsolved criminal cases, wrote an article titled “Alabama Mysteries,” 4–6.
- ⁵ See Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, especially 82–90.
- ⁶ See Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 82; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 132–35; Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 148–64.