

READING**SPRINGFIELD RACE RIOT OF 1908**

CHAPTER 22

On the evening of August 14, 1908, a race war broke out in the Illinois capital of Springfield. Angry over reports that a black man had sexually assaulted a white woman, a white mob wanted to take a recently arrested suspect from the city jail and kill him. They also wanted Joe James, an out-of-town black who was accused of killing a white railroad engineer, Clergy Ballard, a month earlier.

Late that afternoon, a crowd gathered in front of the jail in the city's downtown and demanded that the police hand over the two men to them. But the police had secretly taken the prisoners out the back door into a waiting automobile and out of town to safety. When the crowd discovered that the prisoners were gone, they rioted. First they attacked and destroyed a restaurant owned by a wealthy white citizen, Harry Loper, who had provided the automobile that the sheriff used to get the two men out of harm's way. The crowd completed its work by setting fire to the automobile, which was parked in front of the restaurant.

In the early hours of the violence, as many as five thousand white Springfield residents were present, mostly as spectators. Still angry, the rioters—minus most of the spectators—next methodically destroyed a small black business district downtown, breaking windows and doors, stealing or destroying merchandise, and wrecking furniture and equipment. The mob's third and last effort that night was to destroy a nearby poor black neighborhood called the Badlands. Most blacks had fled the city, but as the mob swept through the area, they captured and lynched a black barber, Scott Burton, who had stayed behind to protect his home.

The next day began quietly, but at nightfall rioters regrouped downtown. The new mob marched west to the state arsenal, hoping to get at several hundred blacks who had taken refuge there, but they were driven off by state troops who charged the crowd with bayonets fixed to their rifles. The crowd then marched to a predominantly white, middle-class neighborhood and seized and hung an elderly wealthy black resident. After this second killing, enough troops arrived in the capital to prevent further mass attacks. Nonetheless, what the press called "guerilla-style" hit-and-run

attacks against black residents continued through August and into September. Several more black homes were damaged, and a few blacks caught alone on the streets were beaten by small groups of whites. The riot's toll, for a city this size, was high: two blacks and four whites dead; hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of property destroyed; more than forty black families displaced when their homes were burned; and dozens of citizens of both races injured. Beyond the physical damage was injury to the reputation of the Illinois capital. The nation's newspapers carried many stories about the riot, and the name Springfield was associated in the public mind with corruption, savagery, and criminal blood lust.

Anti-black race riots in northern cities were nothing new in the first decade of the twentieth century. White hostility towards blacks was just as strong in the North as the South in this period. Segregation of the races was frequent in the North, and in Springfield and elsewhere blacks were barred from many restaurants, hotels, parks, and other public facilities. Numerous race riots had occurred in the North as early as the first half of the 1800s. In the years from 1900 to 1908, anti-black riots broke out in cities such as New York, and in smaller places such as Evansville and Greensburg, Indiana, and Springfield, Ohio. But not until the riot in the Illinois capital did the nation's newspapers pay much attention to these early-twentieth-century outbreaks. Anti-black rioting in Springfield shocked the nation and attracted extensive press coverage because the city had been Abraham Lincoln's home. The northern public was presented with the startling spectacle of whites lynching blacks and burning their houses just blocks from the historic home of the president who had freed the slaves. Apparently white rioters understood the symbolism of their acts as well, for some reportedly shouted as they attacked black areas, "Lincoln freed you, now we'll show you where you belong!" From that day forward, Springfield residents, and later historians, have struggled to understand why one man's alleged crime led to such extensive anti-black violence.

Springfield in 1908 did not seem to be a troubled place on the verge of a social explosion. Apart from serving as the state capital, it was a

fairly typical, middle-sized midwestern city. Its population in 1908 totaled about forty-seven thousand persons, of whom approximately twenty-five hundred (a little under 5½ percent) were black. Springfield had a stable, mixed economy based on coal, transportation, and manufacturing, as well as many businesses—such as restaurants, hotels, and taverns—that catered to the large number of tourists, government officials, and traveling businessmen that the capital attracted. Sangamon County's thirty-seven coal mines stood second only to the mines of Williamson County in production in the state. Mines ringed the city itself, and by the 1950s, all but the central core of Springfield was undercut by mine tunnels. Six railroad lines converged on the city—including the famous Illinois Central—adding many jobs to the local economy. Factories that produced everything from bricks and flour to watches dotted the northeast, working-class quarter of the capital. Just days after the riot, a local newspaper noted that Springfield's economy was very healthy and that "there is work for all." Not surprisingly, then, no one who commented on Springfield's riot at the time blamed it on white frustration over economic hard times.

Some historians have suggested that perhaps whites believed blacks were taking jobs away from them or were driving down wages by taking lower pay. But little interracial job competition existed in Springfield. Whites had succeeded in freezing blacks out of good jobs in both manufacturing and transportation. Indeed, out of more than a thousand black wage earners in the city, only four had skilled jobs in factories. As for the railroads, only a few blacks could get work as porters—men who carried baggage on and off trains and who kept train stations swept. Skilled railroad positions such as engineer or brakeman went to whites only. Springfield's streetcar companies hired no blacks at all. Most blacks were forced to take low-paying jobs as unskilled laborers, wagon-drivers, or waiters in restaurants and other jobs that whites regarded as dirty, dangerous, or beneath their dignity such as shoeshiners, janitors, or servants. Coal mining was the one area of employment open to both blacks and whites (mostly immigrants), but it was extremely dangerous work. A few fortunate blacks ran small businesses, such as grocery stores, restaurants, and saloons, but did not pose a threat to white shops because they served mostly black customers. Since whites had a near monopoly on good, skilled jobs, it is unlikely that they were afraid of losing their jobs to black competitors.

As for Springfield's black community, no one knows exactly when the first blacks came to the area, but tradition has it that the first settler was a

West Indian, a barber named William Florville. Florville arrived in Sangamon County in 1831 and, as the story goes, met Abraham Lincoln, who encouraged him to set up a barber shop in Springfield. Florville did so, and was very successful. The black community remained very small (about two hundred people) until the Civil War. In the 1860s, freed slaves from nearby southern states such as Tennessee and Kentucky flocked to the capital, increasing its black population by almost 300 percent. After 1870, however, the black community grew steadily but more slowly, until it reached twenty-five hundred in 1908. It was not the case, as some later writers claimed, that a "huge Negro influx" into the city fueled interracial conflict. The growth of Springfield's black population was not rapid. Moreover, the percentage of blacks in the city's total population had steadily declined in the previous twenty years.

In Springfield, as in many other northern cities early in the century, black neighborhoods tended to be scattered throughout the city. Very few cities had what later would be called ghettos. No one large, predominantly black neighborhood had yet emerged in Springfield. Still, most blacks—almost 90 percent—lived in the eastern, heavily working-class half of the capital. Many of the poorest black residents lived in what was called the Badlands: an area just northeast of downtown with the oldest, most rundown housing in the city. Part of the reason for the neighborhood's nickname, apart from its poverty and bad housing, was that city authorities, anxious to keep vice activities away from white areas, had allowed cheap saloons, houses of prostitution, and gambling dens to spread into it from downtown.

Springfield was not unusual in trying to hide away shady activities in poor black areas: many cities early in the century followed the same policy. Poor black residents might complain, but they often lacked the organization and political power to defend their neighborhoods against such policies. Thus, the Badlands was "bad" in part because it supported some of the city's vice industry and the high crime rates that inevitably came with it. Still, as bad as the neighborhood was, most people lived in single-family homes with large yards. Many could and did keep gardens to help maintain their families.

The second major area of black settlement—a solidly working-class area with many black coal miners—lay in the southeast quarter of Springfield, about two miles from downtown. Unlike the Badlands, where most people rented, blacks in this neighborhood were more likely to own their own homes. Five smaller concentrations of blacks dotted the rest of the city. What is interesting

about black residential patterns is that with one exception, they were about the same in 1908 as they had been in 1890. Some historians have claimed that one cause of the riot was housing competition between the races, that blacks had angered whites by “invading” their neighborhoods so often. But we now know that not only was the supply of housing good in Springfield, but that blacks tended to settle in “traditionally” black areas.

The one exception to Springfield’s stable residential pattern was the “Levee” downtown on East Washington Street. The Levee was an area several blocks long that included many saloons, small shops, restaurants, and part of the vice district. After 1900, small black businesses grew up along one short stretch of the Levee, and poor blacks began to rent small rooms above them. Although the movement of blacks into the Levee involved only a few blocks, it may have had an important effect on race relations. Now, after 1900, for the first time, many of Springfield’s poorest and most desperate blacks lived downtown. Their sudden, new visibility in the heart of the city may have disturbed some whites. We do know that black ministers and black newspapers often scolded Levee blacks for “hanging around saloons” and for being “loafers and loud” in public. Middle-class blacks warned again and again that public misbehavior by a few Levee blacks might somehow create serious trouble for the majority of law-abiding black citizens.

A healthy economy, a small, slow-growing black population, a very low level of interracial job competition, and mostly stable residential areas: this does not look like a city on the verge of race war. What went wrong, then? One place to look for clues is in Springfield’s newspapers for what whites said after the riot. Here whites blamed the riot on two things: corrupt city government and the “saloon evil,” both of which encouraged lawlessness, such as rioting. Candidates running for office bought votes, and once in office took bribes from saloons and houses of prostitution. In return, politicians saw to it that the police did not enforce vice laws. Therefore, the argument ran, a large class of criminals collected in the city who did not fear the law and who would riot at a moment’s notice. Adding to the problem was saloons: Springfield had too many saloons, the newspapers complained, over two hundred in a small city! Drunken, criminal blacks were committing crimes that angered whites. The dangerous white criminal class—riff-raff soaked with whiskey—broke the law to take revenge—looting, burning, and killing. If the city had a clean government, the newspaper claimed, there would

have been fewer criminals, less drinking, and therefore no riot.

Springfield’s newspapers suggest that whites were fearful of crime and disorder in the capital. And they were afraid of black crime, too. What had shocked the city about the report of the alleged rape of a white woman in August was that the incident had occurred in a neighborhood far removed from the Levee and Badlands. Whites usually ignored most crime and violence in poor neighborhoods, even if it was interracial in nature. But the alleged rape that sparked the riot occurred in an all white, working-class, suburban neighborhood well away from the vice district. Perhaps it suddenly seemed to whites that crime was spreading into previously safe neighborhoods. Perhaps because they felt that the police were unreliable, whites believed that they had to take the law into their own hands. We do know that white rioters targeted first the two poorest black neighborhoods—the Badlands and the black part of the Levee. It is possible that the association of these neighborhoods with saloons and vice made them prime targets for whites worried about crime. Perhaps the worst fears of the black middle-class had come true. But even if all this were true, though, it is clearly not the whole story.

Another place to look for clues is in the identity of the white rioters and their black victims. Knowing who the rioters were lets us rule out old explanations for the violence and get a better picture of what actually happened. As we have seen, the press reported that the rioters were drunken, criminal riff-raff. Historians later said they were southerners or children of southerners, that is, people with more hostile attitudes towards blacks than northerners. Other historians say that the rioters were mostly immigrants, especially those immigrants who labored in coal mines along with black miners. What we actually find is that the typical white rioter was a young man in his twenties, single, employed in a working-class job, and a native of Illinois. He was not poor riff-raff, as the newspapers had suggested, and had never been in trouble with the law before the riot. He was not of southern background. He was unlikely to be an immigrant or the son of immigrants. Outsiders such as immigrants and southerners, then, cannot be blamed for the violence. It was a “home-grown” riot. We also find that a significant minority of the white rioters had ties to the two whites supposedly victimized by blacks. In fact, these friends, neighbors, relatives, and co-workers of the two white victims probably played an important role in starting the riot. For these people, the violence would have been simple revenge for attacks on people close to them. Finally, few white

coal miners rioted, even though they were the one group who might have faced job and housing competition from blacks. In fact, the typical rioter had little if any contact at all with blacks: he lived well away from black neighborhoods and worked in trades that totally excluded black workers.

Further insights into the riot's origins appear when we turn to the question of whom the rioters targeted for attack. First, it is very clear that what rioters wanted to do was to drive all blacks out of Springfield permanently. The Levee and Badlands, since they were close to where the riot began, were probably attacked first simply because they were the nearest targets. When the troops made it impossible for large crowds to form, some whites turned to threats. For a month after the riot, whites who employed blacks or who had black customers received threatening letters telling them their homes and businesses would be burned unless they cut all their ties to blacks. Even the mayor got letters threatening violence if he refused to fire the city's small number of black policemen and firemen. Apparently some whites thought that those blacks who had not been frightened away by the violence might be starved out of town if they lost their jobs and if white shop owners refused to sell them food.

If we look at who was targeted for attack over a period of days, an important pattern appears. Beginning late the first night of the riot and continuing through the second night and the later hit-and-run attacks, we see rioters carefully selecting wealthier blacks as targets. The longer the violence lasted, the more it was aimed at better-off black citizens. By the second day of violence, rioters passed up chances to attack the homes of poor blacks and instead singled out for burning and looting the houses of successful blacks, such as shopowners, barbers, government workers, and real estate dealers. Springfield's white newspapers said that rioters only attacked "bad Negroes," and that peaceful, "law-abiding" blacks had nothing to fear. Black residents, however, knew better, and so did the rioters. One black woman who was a little girl in a middle-class family in 1908 recalled: "See, the people that they harmed and hurt were not really the no-gooders. They were very busy hurting the prominent, and so, of course we were frightened. We owned property; many poor whites didn't. There was a great deal of animosity toward any well-established Negro who owned his house and had a good job."

The pattern of attacks supports her opinion that black success brought danger. The first area targeted was the black business district. The two blacks killed were well-off, successful businessmen who owned their own homes. All of those targeted for hit-and-run attacks were also well-off. Although what triggered the riot may have been anger over black crime, very clearly whites were expressing resentment over any black presence in the city at all. They also clearly resented the small number of successful blacks in their midst.

Although the black community in Springfield was angry and resentful long after the riot, the city quickly returned to normal. The many hundreds of blacks who had fled to the countryside and neighboring towns soon returned and rebuilt their lives. The city began arrangements to make payments to those who lost property. Joe James, the black man accused of murdering a white, was found guilty and hanged. The dozens of whites arrested for rioting also went to trial, but the all-white juries refused to convict most of them. In the end, only one rioter was punished. He was sentenced to thirty days in jail. As for the black man accused of rape, he was freed. Much to the shock and dismay of residents, the woman who had accused him of the crime confessed that she had lied. It soon was revealed that she had probably invented the rape story to help hide from her husband her affair with a white man. Not surprisingly, she and her family quickly moved away from Springfield once the news came out.

For both blacks and whites in Springfield, the riot was a costly and painful disaster. Few it seemed, learned any lessons from the violence in the capital. Just several years later, in the World War I era, the "Great Migration" saw southern blacks arriving in large numbers in northern cities for the first time. Many anti-black riots followed, and the Illinois cities of East St. Louis (1917) and Chicago (1919) would again find themselves criticized by the press for their violence. For all this, however, one good thing emerged from the Springfield race riot. In 1909, northern white and black reformers, outraged by the violence in Lincoln's hometown, called a small meeting. Out of this meeting grew the first strong national organization to fight for African-American rights: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which has fought many long years to end anti-black discrimination and violence.