ANNISTON/GADSDEN REAL-TIME NEWS

Why the story of a 1906 Alabama lynching won't be forgotten

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headline.PNG

Bunk Richardson was lynched from this bridge in Gadsden, Ala., on Feb. 11, 1906 by a mob of about 25 men. No one was ever prosecuted.

Kim Hines has never been to Gadsden. There's a reason, and it goes back 110 years.

She only knows the city from the memories of her late grandfather, William Henry Williams, who left Gadsden at the age of eight on a cold morning in February 1906. Years later, she heard the story from him after asking several times.

"They put him in the back of the wagon," she said, remembering the story. "They put a blanket over him and told him to stay down. They told him they had to get out of town."

As the wagon hobbled out of Gadsden, it passed the Louisville and Nashville Railroad bridge spanning the Coosa River. Young William looked out from underneath the blanket and never forgot what he saw. It was a black man swinging by a noose from the bridge. He had been there since after midnight.

"He could see him hanging," she said. "There were birds picking at him. He remembered that. He looked at that body for as long as they were in sight of it, and then he couldn't see it anymore."

Hines, a Minnesota playwright, is a relative to a man named Bunk Richardson, who this week is getting a historical marker in Gadsden bearing his name. In a ceremony planned for Tuesday afternoon at 5:15 p.m., the plaque will be unveiled at First Street near the railroad bridge.

We know very little about Richardson.

He was probably 28 when a mob killed him. He came from Talladega County, was married and perhaps fathered two children. And he was one of the more than 4,000 black Americans lynched in the United States over an 80-year period beginning in 1882. The only known photographs of him in existence record him hanging from the bridge, and the moment when his body was hauled up.

This is not the first time I've tried to tell his story. In 2000, I wrote a series of articles about the lynching of Bunk Richardson. You'll have to trust me that there's a reason why I'm even mentioning myself.

This marker will be dedicated Tuesday near the site of the Richardson lynching.

But the story of his killing was told and retold in many ways long before anyone ever thought of putting a marker there, and myriad meanings attached to a crime that many wanted to forget.

'Restless and ill at ease'

Most of what we know about these events comes from newspaper reports written at the time, much of which traffics in the racial language and stereotypes of the time. Therefore, we can't know everything, and what we do know we can't fully trust.

Bunk Richardson was one of several people arrested in connection with the murder of a white woman named Sarah Jane Smith.

Just after daylight on the morning of Sunday, July 16, 1905, a 23-year-old black man named Vance Garner, or Gardner as he was sometimes referred to, entered the distillery near the Coosa foundry on Gadsden's Tuscaloosa Avenue and told the men working there that a white woman was dead by the side of Loney Road. Her partially clothed remains were hidden in the bushes, her neck broken.

Smith was known around town as a hard-working 44-year-old woman living near the Hammond Mines with her two grown sons. She had been out looking for them the night of her death, supposedly after being told they were out drinking and in danger of being arrested.

Her killer was thought to have dragged her body by the hair down a steep embankment of rocks, scratching her face and bruising her back. Newspaper accounts erroneously identified her as a widow and stated she had been raped, given her torn clothing, with her shoes and stockings lying nearby.

It was a bloodcurdling crime for Gadsden, then a city of about 10,000 just beginning to feel its oats. The influx of money, newcomers and opportunity seemed a daily occurrence, as symbolized by the new steel mill in Alabama City and a new hospital.

That same day, Gadsden police arrested Garner, along with Richardson and Will Johnson, a 27-year-old railroad baggage handler from Kentucky. In the end, five men and one woman were rounded up, but police still sought another black man, 24-year-old Jack Hunter, Garner's first cousin. He was believed to have left town.

The six prisoners were carried to the Etowah County Jail. By the afternoon, the Gadsden Times-News wrote that "crowds of people...restless and ill at ease" were swarming the downtown area. By 9:30 that night, a mob of about 250 men surrounded the jail, demanding to be let in to lynch those responsible. The town Circuit Judge, John H. Disque, spoke to the crowd to calm them, coolly holding a revolver in his hand. The crowd lacked a leader and eventually went home after members of the state militia arrived.

'Racial relations can't move forward'

Photographer Joshua Kristal snapped this photo from the site where Bunk Richardson was lynched.

In 2012, a professional photographer named Joshua Kristal went through three states taking photographs of the sites of race lynchings. He used photographs taken at the time as a reference, showing how the sites had changed since. Photographs were a common ritual of lynchings, with the images occasionally made into postcards as a reminder to some and a warning to others.

Kristal told me last year he started the project "after many years of considering what I could do to bring attention to the history of lynching and ideally bring about some sort of memorial at the sites of these atrocities."

Bunk Richardson's site was one of the easiest to find, as it was a bridge that was still standing. And the photograph of his corpse is one of the most evocative among scores of horrific images.

"I feel strongly that until these crimes are recognized and memorialized and we, as a society, reconcile our past, our racial relations can't move forward in a positive and productive way," Kristal stated at the time about the project.

'A polite, inoffensive Negro'

News of the unrest in Gadsden made its way into papers in Texas and Wyoming. Though the prisoners were transferred to Birmingham's Jefferson County Jail, peace had not yet returned to the city.

The day after the murder and near-lynching, two houses occupied by blacks on Sixth Street were reported burned. No one was injured. Then about 3 p.m., a black barber named Bill Smith, described as an "inoffensive, polite Negro," boarded the train near the Printup Hotel heading to his home on Ninth Street. Unknown to him, the train was also occupied by members of the previous evening's would-be lynch mob.

Making his way to the railway car's rear, Smith was met at the door by Boyd Pinkerton, a miner who worked in Crudup.

"Howdy, white folks," Smith was reported as saying. "Where you going?"

Pinkerton said a few words to him, prompting a laugh, then shot Smith in the face with a .38, letting his body fall to the ground as the train pulled away. The train was stopped and Pinkerton was arrested. He was later convicted of manslaughter after a near mistrial.

The ongoing search for Hunter was aided by a $500 reward and resulted in sightings of him all over Alabama. A week after the murder, he was found hiding under his mother's house. He had gone all the way to Birmingham but left after he heard people in the street mentioning his name. He surrendered to the sheriff, who disguised Hunter as a woman in order to get him safely on a train out of Gadsden to the Jefferson County Jail.

'The memory of it is still so strong'

Jake Adam York was a poet who spent his childhood in Etowah County and published three volumes of his work before his sudden death in 2012 from a stroke. Much of his writing deals with victims of racial violence - though, as one critic said, not so much as an accusation of America as a memorial to people whose lives might otherwise be forgotten.

One of his best-known poems is "Bunk Richardson," a work inspired after he read stories of the Richardson lynching in The Gadsden Times and saw the photo in a 2000 book entitled, "Without Sanctuary."

In a 2005 interview, York said he wrote about Richardson because "the memory of it is still so strong that though people would not do the same things now, their response to it at a distance is such that you can still feel that these problems, these wounds, these crimes have not been recognized, they have not been atoned for."

'An innocent man'

Did Bunk Richardson have anything to do with the murder of Sarah Jane Smith? By all accounts, no.

A period photograph shows downtown Gadsden and the Etowah County Courthouse.

In November 1905, Hunter, Garner and Johnson were tried for her murder and all sentenced to death. The trial was big news in Alabama, the Montgomery Advertiser sending a reporter to Gadsden to cover the trials and other papers offering updates. Richardson was briefly called as a character witness for Garner but his charges were dropped.

The story that emerged from the trial was that Garner and Richardson were walking down railroad tracks the night of the murder, on their way to purchase whiskey. Then they heard a woman scream.

Garner told Richardson he thought it sounded like his sister. He ran into the woods to find out. Richardson, perhaps conscious of all that could happen in such a situation, would not follow.

In the woods, Garner found Hunter drunk, strangling Smith, trying to shove a towel in her mouth.

"What are you doing here, Jack? You are going to get your neck broken," he warned Hunter.

"Go on away from here," Hunter replied. "I know my damn business better than you or anyone else."

Garner turned to leave. Just then, Smith called out to him. "Mister, pull him off. He's killing me!"

Garner ran on and overtook Richardson on the tracks, telling him what had happened. They did not return.

In the hours after, news spread among the other three as to what Hunter had done. Johnson learned the details of the murder and later spoke to police the next morning, inadvertently implicating himself. Hunter staggered home, while Garner stayed awake all night, unable to sleep after what he'd seen.

Hunter, who later admitted on the gallows that he killed Smith, laughed that Johnson tried to "make the white man think he knew something. But he talked so much he hung himself."

After his death sentence, Johnson sent a statement to the Times-News proclaiming his innocence.

"I hope the white citizens of this town will take notice, as this is the truth in my heart," he wrote. "I am a poor colored man, have a poor wife and one child in Chattanooga to look after. O think how hard it is to put an innocent man to death, but God will right it all."

Will Johnson, whose sentence commutation resulted in the Richardson lynching, from a contemporary newspaper photograph.

Some in town listened. Sheriff William Chandler, and three local lawyers wrote letters to Gov. William Jelks, asking him to re-examine Johnson's case. Two lawyers went so far as to travel to Montgomery to lobby for the man's innocence.

On Dec. 29, 1905, a crowd estimated at 1,000 surrounded the Etowah County Jail in downtown Gadsden shortly after daybreak, though they could not have witnessed the executions taking place inside. Admission to the jail was limited to deputies, the four ministers serving as spiritual advisors to the condemned men and their families.

Will Johnson did not mount the gallows. Jelks delayed his execution until Feb. 9, giving the Pardons and Paroles Board a chance to review the case. Chandler later told reporters if Hunter had given a full confession, he would not have executed Johnson.

Jack Hunter said he was the only one responsible, and Vance Garner thanked authorities for keeping the mob out "and giving me time to get religion." He said he had nothing to do with the murder.

The two were executed at 10:07 a.m.

'We got your boy Bunk.'

Kim Hines first heard as a little girl that a member of her family had been lynched. Barely knowing what the word meant, she learned her grandfather William Henry Williams could tell her. "That's not something you should know," he originally replied.

Years later, he recounted for her the story of his father, Brewer Earl Williams, and his mother, Mamie Lawler Williams. Like their cousin Bunk Richardson, they came from Talladega County's Mardisville to settle in Gadsden. Brewer worked at a quarry and later became a stone mason, fashioning fire places for the homes of well-to-do white families. He was so sought after, his son remembered, that the white competitors felt they could not compete with him, since he didn't charge as much.

"My great-grandfather had a business, and a lot of young black men worked for him," she said. "My great-grandmother had a laundry business, and they had a store."

Hines said the night word spread among Gadsden's black community that a man had been lynched, families began hurriedly checking on the welfare of loved ones. Brewer soon heard it was his cousin Bunk.

And word got back to Brewer - *We got your boy Bunk. Keep doing what you're doing, and we'll go after your kid.*

"They didn't hesitate," Hines said of her great-grandparents. "They left that day."

'We want Bunk Richardson'

Bunk Richardson and Will Johnson were still in the Etowah County Jail on Feb. 9, 1906. The parole board found no reason to overturn Johnson's verdict, but the three lawyers again wrote the governor on behalf of the condemned man. "We do not make this request for one we think guilty of any violation of the law. We believe him innocent of the crime for which he is convicted," they wrote. "You know us well enough to know we would not have sympathy for a Negro rapist, and the appeal we make is to prevent what seems to us a great wrong."

Johnson had grown despondent. For weeks, he had contemplated suicide, first asking a guard to bring him morphine, later soaking the heads from a box of matches in water to make poison he could drink.

Then a wire arrived from Jelks' office, directing that Johnson be moved to Jefferson County Jail. He was quickly out of town, but he remained in state custody the rest of his life, until he died of tuberculosis in prison at Wetumpka on July 17, 1911, almost six years to the day after his arrest.

The Gadsden Times-News the evening Johnson left stated this "news...will not be favorably received by the majority of the people of Etowah county, who do not doubt his guilt."

Around 1 a.m. Sunday, Feb. 11, someone knocked on the door of the county jail. Sheriff Chandler, asleep in the jail's living quarters, awakened and opened the door. Three hooded men grabbed him and pistols were pressed to his face. Some fired shots into the ceiling.

"We want Bunk Richardson," they told him.

"I begged them to go away and let the law take its course," Chandler testified at a coroner's jury two days later. "They told me that was an old chestnut."

Chandler tried to divert the men, saying the jail keys were upstairs. The mob of about 25 streamed into the jail, escorting Chandler's wife and children out the back door at gunpoint. Chandler said it was obvious the men had been drinking.

The jailer, W. M. Dixon, was behind a large iron door. When he heard the commotion, he said he thought it was the usual business - deputies bringing in the familiar round of prisoners from Saturday night raids. When he opened the door, the men seized him and again began firing their pistols. In a few minutes, they opened the door to Bunk Richardson's cell and demanded he step out. Richardson, huddled in a corner, was remembered by the jailer as being "so frightened he couldn't speak a word."

He was dressed only in his nightclothes, barefoot. He asked that someone write to his sister, who lived out of town. The prisoner in hand, the mob rushed up Chestnut Street and another two blocks to the railroad bridge. Witnesses said they saw Richardson "repeatedly jerked down and kicked" by members of the mob.

Sam O'Bannon, who later became Gadsden's police chief.

The gunfire also attracted city patrolman Sam O'Bannon, who came on duty at midnight. He followed the sounds until he encountered the mob. One of the voices told him to go back. Then one voice called out, "Just kill him."

O'Bannon, who the next year became Gadsden's police chief, let them pass.

The mob took Richardson about 200 yards out onto the bridge. They had about 20 feet of rope to hang him. A few members of the mob fired shots, one hitting him in the head.

"If he made a confession, it was to the mob on the bridge," a story reported.

'The community can be made whole'

Putting a historical marker near Gadsden's railroad bridge is part of a larger project by Montgomery's Equal Justice Initiative. The EJI announced earlier this year it is building a memorial in Montgomery to the victims of racial lynchings, and is slowly putting markers at the lynching sites. Other markers have been installed in the past few years at several locations, such as Brighton.

The EJI has paid for the marker and is offering scholarship money to local students who write an essay on themes of racial justice.

EJI director Bryan Stevenson has said on several occasions the reason for the markers is to acknowledge the painful realities of America's racial past in order to bring about reconciliation.

Why a marker now? The Gadsden Public Library earlier this year picked Stevenson's book, "Just Mercy," as part of its "Gadsden Reads" program, with Stevenson coming to town to give an address on the book. The drive to erect a marker grew from there.

Bobby Welch, director of the Hardin Center for Cultural Arts in Gadsden, said the timing is right.

"I'm not sure anyone thought it would happen this quickly," Welch said. "But it all came together."

Gadsden City Council President Deverick Williams said erecting the marker was "a historic step."

"These are the kinds of things you don't like to have to commemorate, but it's necessary in terms of social responsibility," he said. "You understand that social mistakes have been made in our state and the process of memorializing them helps to insure that people learn from them, and the community can be made whole again."

'They killed him, and they can bury him.'

Etowah County court files record when prosecutors dropped assault and murder charges against Bunk Richardson in 1905.

News of the lynching in 1906 traveled as far west as the pages of the San Francisco Call, where the victim was identified as "Bunkie" Richardson. Gov. Jelks offered a $400 reward to catch those responsible.

Some editorial pages in Alabama blasted the lynching, noting Richardson's presumed innocence. Within days, the Gadsden Bar Association and Commercial Club both passed resolutions condemning the mob's actions. The Bar Association's resolution was mentioned in the pages of The Nation and commended for the fact that it passed within 48 hours of the lynching.

There were other opinions. The Tuscaloosa Gazette said the governor was responsible for the lynching because of his "abusing pardon power." The Birmingham News said Jelks' actions "have done much to shake the confidence of the people in the courts."

Once he was taken from the bridge, Richardson's body was claimed by his relatives. Up until this point, there had been no mention in the papers of Richardson having been married. But the Gadsden Times reported that when his wife was notified the body was at her disposal, she said, "They killed him, and they can bury him."

"Accordingly the negro was buried in the pauper cemetery at the county farm Monday afternoon," the newspaper reported. That would have been the Sixth Street Cemetery, then the town's burial ground for blacks and the indigent. He did not have a coffin.

The unmarked grave of Bunk Richardson at Sixth Street Cemetery. A marker will soon be placed there.

Burials at the cemetery, sometimes known as Southern Hills, ended in the 1940s when the City of Gadsden took the neighborhood through eminent domain, and the graves were largely abandoned. In 2013 it was added to the Alabama Historic Cemeteries Register. An effort has been going on over the past three years to restore the cemetery and catalog the graves, largely through the work of Chari Bostick's Grace Heritage Foundation.

Bostick learned about the location of Richardson's grave from then-97-year-old Jack Lowe Sr., a former hardware store owner, who went up to the cemetery to confirm it. The plot will soon have a marker.

"They always used to leave quarry rocks on his grave when they came to decorate the graves," she said. "We looked for where it might be and we found it there - these big handfuls of quarry rocks. Just to make sure people would always remember where he was."

'Why can't we forget it?'

I have lived in and around Gadsden most of my life, but I first learned Bunk Richardson's name in 1999. It was sandwiched in among a list of lynching victims in the back of a book, and curiosity about it led me to look up the story in old newspapers. When I learned a photo existed of the event in an Atlanta library, I drove there just to see it. Now you can see it doing a Google search, though it is hard to look at. (Warning - the photo is graphic)

His face is swollen, his eyes half closed, his mouth slightly open. His bare feet are curled beneath him, a pair of worn longjohns clinging to his body. Next to him, a well-dressed man in a suit, overcoat and derby stands, looking down. He appears ready for church. It was, of course, Sunday morning. To the right is a man with a long-brimmed hat pulled low on his head, holding a handkerchief in his left hand over his nose.

Looking over their shoulders, I was staggered by the reality of it all. There was the Coosa River, and the outline of a shore I knew from my earliest memories. From that moment, I knew I had to learn everything about this story and recount it.

Why? Probably for the same reasons as Jake York. All I could think of was that man trembling in the corner of a jail cell, knowing what was waiting for him with that mob, maybe wondering if anyone would ever remember him at all.

Not everyone saw it that way. A story went around that I had to leave Gadsden after the stories appeared in the paper for my own safety. Not so. I got an anonymous phone call thanking me, and an anonymous fax saying the stories were shameful. One person did write an angry letter, saying there was plenty of news in the present to pay attention to. That's how my father saw it as well.

"All those people who did that, they're all dead," he told me angrily, one day. "Let's leave that in the past. Why can't we just forget it?"

I understood what he meant, but I replied, "Do you feel the same way about Pearl Harbor?" He didn't see it that way, but we moved on. Yet the story of Bunk Richardson never quite left me. Over the years, some new item or kernel of information would disclose itself and set the thing going in my mind again.

Then last year, I got a chance to do something I hadn't been able to in 2000. I was granted permission to look at the old court records in the attic of the Etowah County Courthouse. The minutes of the trials of Jack Hunter, Vance Garner and Will Johnson - the closest thing to a transcript for that time - are long gone. But their names reside in the hand-written court records bound in large volumes of flaking yellow paper.

What I was curious about were the two grand juries that investigated the lynching. Gov. Jelks sent a Birmingham detective, George Bodeker, to look into the case and turn any evidence over to the jurors. The lynching was an embarrassment to Jelks, as it was the first during his administration to have involved a mob taking control of a jail.

Bodeker was so highly thought of that he later became Birmingham's police chief.

Nine months after the lynching, the Times-News reported that there were "grave faces" in town because the grand jury was still meeting, and a big announcement was expected.

But nothing came. The panel reported it was "unable to obtain evidence sufficient to connect anyone with said crime." That wasn't surprising, of course.

I don't know what I expected to find up there, but a familiar, unsettling sensation of icy fingers closed around my stomach when I looked among the names of those on the grand jury, and found my great-great-grandfather's name as the grand jury bailiff, and his brother as one of its members.

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Alabama schools could be required to allow student-led prayers if voters approve amendment Apr. 8, 2026, 10:21 p.m.

What did this mean? What could it mean? How connected to all of this was I, really?

Did I want to know?

The answer to that question is probably larger than one man, or one community's connection, to a death a century ago, and more enduring than any historical marker.

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William Thornton is a business reporter for AL.com. He has been full-time in media since 1993, with experience reporting on local government, education, courts, crime and sports. His printed and online work has...more

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Florida doctor indicted after Alabama man dies when liver 'believed to be a spleen' removed during surgery

Dr. Thomas Shaknovsky, 44, is charged with second-degree manslaughter in the death of a 70-year-old William Bryan.

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