

Never Forget: America's Forgotten Mass Lynching: When 237 Black Sharecroppers Were Murdered In Arkansas

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In 1919, after the end of World War I, Black sharecroppers in Arkansas began to unionize. This attempt to form unions, triggered white vigilantism and mass killings, that left 237 Blacks dead.

Towards the end of 1918, attorney **Ulysses S. Bratton** of Little Rock, Arkansas listened to Black sharecroppers tell stories of **theft, exploitation, and never ending debt**. One man by the name of **Carter**, explained how he cultivated 90 acres of cotton and then had his landlord confiscate the crop and all of his possessions. Another Black farmer, from Ratio, Arkansas said a plantation manager would not give sharecroppers an itemized record of their crop. No one realized that within a year of meeting with Mr. Bratton, **one of the worst incidents of racial violence in U.S.** would take place. In a report released by the **Equal Justice Initiative**, **white people in the Delta region of the South, started a massacre that left 237 Black people dead.** Even though the one-time death toll was

unusually high, it was not uncommon for whites to use racial violence to intimidate Blacks.

Mr. Bratton represented the deprived sharecroppers who became members of a new union, the **Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America**. The new union was founded by a Black Delta native named **Robert Hill**. With no prior organizing experience, all Robert Hill had going for him was ambition. Mr. Hill said "the union wants to know why it is that the laborers cannot control their just earnings which they work for," as he asked Black sharecroppers to each persuade 25 new members to join a lodge.

The white elites of the region understood that the only way they could maintain their economic prosperity was to exploit Black sharecroppers and laborers. A well-to-do Northerner, **E.M. "Mort" Allen**, came to Arkansas and founded a new town called **Elaine**, which became a hub for the lucrative lumber industry. Mort Allen said the "Southern men can handle the negroes all right and peaceably," but peaceable techniques were far from what was used to destroy the sharecroppers' union. In an attempt to disrupt a union meeting, a white landowner was shot and killed. The sharecroppers braced for reprisals that were sure to come and formed **self-defense forces**. The local sheriff, **Frank Kitchens**, deputized a large white militia that was headquartered at the county courthouse. In the end, **237 Black people were killed** because they wanted fair compensation for the crops they harvested.

No one was ever charged or any trials held for anyone that took part in the mass lynchings. The basis for these heinous crimes was the reassertion of white supremacy after veterans returned home from World War I. The white militias wanted to send a message that they were going to keep the Blacks in their 'place.' But what made 1919 unique, was the willingness and fortitude, of the Black sharecroppers and their community to engage in armed resistance against white oppression.