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Sherman Riot Abstract

On May 9, 1930 famed Texas Ranger Frank Hamer was tasked with protecting George Hughes, a black man charged with the rape of a white woman in Sherman, Grayson County, Texas. At the end of a day of jury selection, a mob surrounded and eventually burned down the county courthouse. Hamer fled the courthouse following a directive purported to be from Texas Governor Dan Moody to “protect the negro if possible, but do not shoot into the crowd” and left the accused to die in the district clerk’s safe. Rioters removed Hughes’ body and dragged it through the town before hanging the body from a tree to serve as a warning to the black population. The mob then moved to the jail, hoping to quell their bloodlust by lynching any black prisoners. Texas Ranger Manuel T. “Lone Wolf” Gonzauillas waited for them, heavily armed, and without the do not shoot directive from Governor Moody. Dissuaded by the well-armed Gonzauillas, the mob abandoned their attempt at the jail and moved on to destroy the Sherman Black Business District.

The violence and destruction across Sherman continued for days and caused a large number of black inhabitants to flee the city. In response to the situation in Sherman, Governor Moody imposed martial law, and more Texas Rangers joined Frank Hamer and “Lone Wolf” Gonzauillas in Sherman to bring order and security to the small town. Both Hamer and Gonzauillas were famed prior to the event and would go on to lead storied careers as Texas lawmen following what is now known as the “Sherman Riot,” despite their failure to both protect the prisoner and stop the mob before the riot began. Using original telegrams from the Rangers to their superiors, newspapers chronicling the riot, adjutant general records, and Governor Moody’s personal correspondence, the Sherman Riot can be seen through a new lens. The circumstances surrounding the riot and the role of the Texas Rangers in failing to protect Hughes and in the aftermath of the lynching begs the question: were the Texas Rangers, the most revered lawmen in the state, responsible for their failure to curb the mob violence because of a dereliction of duty, or were their hands tied by the rumored memo attributed to the Governor, rendering Hamer and Gonzauillas unable to fulfill their motto of “One Riot, One Ranger?”