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The Hopeful Outcome of the Ossian Sweet Ordeal

The September 1925 case of Ossian Sweet began after two highly publicized and short-lasting move-ins during the summertime. It was foreseeable – when the black couple Ossian and Gladys moved into the east side of Detroit in a white neighborhood they soon were forced to defend against their neighbors who (organized by a Waterworks Improvement Association) attacked Otis Sweet and eventually threw a stone into the window. One white protester was shot, and another was wounded¹ when the incident caught Detroit's attention. While the outcome for the Sweet family and other like-minded families is tragic, I want to outline how the case remains a tragic but crucial victory with regard both to the verdict and to the illumination of long-standing, broader injustices which transcend class boundaries. Because (an NAACP newspaper noted) forced residential segregation in the North mirrors institutional lynching in the South², the Sweet ordeal is important in symbolizing the struggle against such institutions.

During the leadership of Detroit's mayor John Smith and the shorter rule of Charles Boyle in 1929, the NAACP-backed white attorney Clarence Darrow had eventually convinced an all-white jury to acquit Henry Sweet³. More importantly, Darrow justified the use of arms in self-defense by African-American citizens. Furthermore, he used certain aspects of northern racial liberalism – a combination of verbal aggression and neglect – to justify the Sweets'

¹ Miller, p. 79.

² Boyle, 201.

³ Miller, p. 80-81.

perception of an existential threat. The case also gained broader context (Ossian Sweet witnessed a lynching as a young child⁴) as a non-local issue. The ruling associated Southern lynching with residential segregation in the North, with Darrow working within this system to highlight Ossian Sweet's humble background and Gladys' middle-class virtues (she was cooking a ham when the shooting took place⁵). The result is that we see Northern segregation as a product of an unjustified white mob. The reflection of this violence by the Sweet family garnered such hatred simply due to their racial identification and their assumption of self-determination, pride and justice.

While Detroit mayor John Smith shied away from civil rights in favor of civic order⁶, the Sweet ordeal directly increased the membership of the 1926 NAACP to 3,000⁷. Smith's contentions (which serve as a barometer of the white public consensus) that "it does not always do for any man to demand to its fullest the right which the law gives him⁸" and that the Klan supported black protest⁹ demonstrate the hypocrisy of the Detroit elite. And when Smith proposed state-sponsored solutions to unemployment and transit he was rejected¹⁰ because activist government and pro-union liberalism became so associated with African-Americans¹¹

⁴ Miller, p. 81.

⁵ Ibid., p. 82-83.

⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

⁷ Ibid., p. 84.

⁸ Ibid., p. 85.

⁹ Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 122-123.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 123.

that even northern racial liberals such as Smith lost support in the public eye. Unemployment was an issue for everyone including Judge Frank Murphy¹² during the Depression and so this hypocrisy became more evident.

Thus, the Ossian Sweet case tested the boundaries of African-American citizenship and brought attention from labor unionists; the CRC, CP and UAW reached out to African-Americans (as Henry Ford fought to maintain control over the black church¹³). So African-Americans gained some measure of political consciousness against the acceleration of racial distrust and conservatism. In addition to its individualistic aspects of Second Amendment support and criticism of eminent domain¹⁴, the Sweet case tested the laws by winning an acquittal and thus belatedly brought attention to widespread attacks on affluent African-Americans.

Certainly, the NAACP took many years to overturn the Supreme Court restrictive covenant ruling (1948) and twenty more years after that to federally outlaw discrimination in buying homes¹⁵. But the facts of the case – Clarence Darrow’s reexamination of admitted jurors (one of whom was in the KKK)¹⁶, the expansion of small organizations like the NAACP and the long-term struggle against the institution of segregation – are not to be understated during the early years of the First Great Migration. The long freedom struggle is called long for a reason; it takes many sacrifices to begin the process of amending long-lasting discrimination and lack of

¹² Bates, p. 115.

¹³ Discussed in class.

¹⁴ Moreno, *The Detroit News*.

¹⁵ Boyle, 343-44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 260.

concern for civil rights. The Sweet family paid the price but contributed to this long civil rights movement in a positive way.

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