“Thy Brother’s Blood”: William Walthall, Commodore True, and a Thanksgiving Tragedy in Hiawatha

By Bill Sroufe and Gary R. Entz

In late November 1892, the newspapers in Brown County, Kansas, burst out with news of a horrific double killing that had transpired in Hiawatha during the Thanksgiving weekend holiday. A young African American man named Commodore True, who stood accused of murdering another African American man named William Walthall, had been hung from a tree amid a spectacle lynching that had taken place in Hiawatha’s central courthouse square. The journalists alleged that it was a case of black-on-black violence. Whites were cast as innocent bystanders, and an African American lynch mob was depicted as bearing full responsibility for the lynching.

That Commodore True may have been lynched by African Americans for murder is not outside the realm of possibility. The historian Christopher Waldrep has demonstrated that during the 1880s, “whites had convinced not only themselves but also many blacks that truly horrific crimes that excited or infuriated the public might, in some cases, justify lynching.” However, during the 1890s, once lynching violence had become effectively linked to Jim Crow methods of enforcing racial caste boundaries, African Americans rarely participated in lynchings. The True lynching falls within a transitional period during which blacks turned from accepting the legitimacy of vigilantism in certain cases to condemning extralegal lynchings. Although the assertion that True was lynched by an African American mob is by no means irrefutable, it is similarly debatable that a white mob lynched True in retaliation for murdering a black man.

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A deep strain of social conservatism permeated late nineteenth-century Kansas, notwithstanding the state’s reputation for progressive policies. The historian Brent M. S. Campney’s recent research has demonstrated that many white Kansans remained deeply conservative and “articulated an increasingly rigid, if *de facto*, system of Jim Crow practices.” He makes evident that to “enforce these practices specifically and white domination generally, they employed racist violence that included lynching, police brutality, and other forms of personal and collective violence.” Although historians have given differing figures, Genevieve Yost’s oft-cited 1933 study found 206 cases of extralegal lynchings that occurred in Kansas between 1850 and 1932. Yost’s compilation demonstrated that lynchings began to decline after 1870 and that, overall, more whites than blacks were lynched in Kansas.

The ratio of difference between white and black led Yost to conclude in regard to lynchings “that the race problem cannot be considered an especially important factor in the state.” Nevertheless, statistics rarely tell the whole story, and Yost’s assemblage of data was incomplete and largely an undercount of racially motivated lynchings. In 1979, the historian Harvey Richard Hougen demonstrated that even though the sheer number of lynchings appeared to decline in Kansas, most white lynching victims had met their fate in the state’s earliest years. After 1890, “the proportion of blacks in the total increased significantly, exceeding by far the proportion of blacks in the state

lynching violence in the 1890s escalated beyond isolated instances of frontier vigilantism, and perpetrators came to recognize the terror and intimidation that accompanied lynching as emblematic means of enforcing communal social control. Consequently, spectacle lynchings became more frequent and intense. Spectacle lynchings were calculated public events. They were carried out before crowds of spectators and had a dual purpose: to satisfy the crowd members' sense of justice being served while simultaneously inspiring fear in a marginalized (usually black) community. Amy Louise Wood, professor of history at Illinois State University, wrote that a spectacle lynching “assumed this tremendous symbolic power precisely because it was extraordinary and, by its very nature, public and visually sensational.” It was the shocking aspect of a spectacle lynching that imbued it with such malevolence, for no one who witnessed such an event walked away unscathed. Wood continued, “Those lynchings that hundreds, sometimes thousands, of white spectators gathered and watched as their fellow citizens tortured, mutilated, and hanged or burned their victims in full view were, for obvious reasons, the most potently haunting.”

This is the time period during which Commodore True was lynched, and True suffered through the ordeal of a spectacle lynching that hundreds of whites gathered to watch. What makes the True case out of the ordinary for what was already an extraordinary event was the insistence that the lynching was perpetrated by an itinerant African American lynch mob and witnessed by local whites. Andrew N. Ruley, a local chronicler, wrote, “It was about 2 o’clock a.m., Tuesday, Nov. 29, that a mob of colored men broke open the jail, and hung True to a court house yard tree, firing a volley from revolvers into his struggling form. The mob, the leaders of which were from out of town, said to be from Atchison, met at the lumber yard where the necessary ‘enthusiasm’ was aroused by the use of several gallons of whiskey.” Yost’s statistical analysis included True’s 1892 lynching but did not make any reference to his lynchers as African Americans. Such an occurrence was so exceptional that a later lynching in Kansas compelled Yost to state, “In 1899 a negro mob lynched one of their own race for murder, when Charles Williams, a negro, was lynched by his people in Galena, April 27, 1899.” Unlike True, however, Williams was shot to death through the bars of his jail cell. There was no spectacle aspect to the lynching and no crowd of angry whites to watch.

What really happened in Hiawatha during that horrific five-day period bookended by a murder and a lynching? The evidence is scant, much of it hearsay, and witnesses to the incident were predictably tight-lipped about what they may have done and whom they may have seen. Nevertheless, it remains possible to reconstruct a plausible account of events as they transpired on that long weekend. Between the early-evening hours of November 24 and the early-morning hours of November 29, 1892, two African American men suffered violent, agonizing deaths in Hiawatha. Because the fatalities were closely linked, contemporary newspaper accounts interpreted them as a dichotomy between good and evil, injustice and righteous retribution. It was a dualistic Manichaean worldview that helped people to rationalize the barbaric chain of events their community had taken part in, but the truth is that such incidents never unfold into easily pigeonholed black-and-white definitions. The lynching in Hiawatha is a noteworthy case that, like the Illinois case studied by the historian Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, “broadens our understanding of how this form of racist terror adapted itself to different social contexts.”


6. Yost, “History of Lynchings in Kansas,” 199. Yost was off by two days on the date. Williams died on April 25; for an account of Charles Williams’s lynching, see “Lynched at Galena, Kansas,” Wichita Eagle, April 26, 1899.

it is our contention that this was not a straightforward case of black-on-black crime, as per the newspaper reports or Ruley’s telling. Rather, when examined closely, it becomes apparent that there is evidence of racial caste control and social class conflict and that many white residents of Hiawatha were equally, if not fully, responsible for the lynching.

William Walthall and Commodore True were African American men who came from similar backgrounds, yet they grew up to be very different individuals. Walthall was born in Kentucky in 1863 and migrated with his family to northeastern Kansas after the Civil War, probably sometime after 1870. The family settled into a stable life in Hiawatha. In 1882, at the age of nineteen, Walthall accepted a position at the Raff and Bechtel flouring mill. He attained the rank of engineer and remained a valued worker at the company for ten years. Walthall also rose to prominence in Hiawatha’s African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and helped the church obtain a charter in March 1892. He served as a deacon and represented his town and congregation in Philadelphia at a national convention of the AME Church. Although he was not part of the educated black elite, Walthall’s long tenure with Raff and Bechtel and standing within the church positioned him as a recognized leader of the black community and a respected lower-middle-class member of the larger Hiawatha society. He was married by the age of twenty and with his wife, Hattie, had two children. In 1892, Walthall was twenty-nine years old.

Like Walthall, Commodore True’s father, Perry True, was originally from Kentucky. True’s mother, Henrietta (Etta) True, was from Missouri, and the family migrated to Kansas from that state. The True family took up residence near the African American settlement at Powhattan and worked to earn a living by farming the land. Commodore True was born in 1871, either in Missouri or Kansas, but it was in Powhattan that he grew up and there where his life story diverged from Walthall’s. Sometime shortly after 1880, when True was entering his adolescence and old enough to be aware of events around him, his father died a violent death by hanging. Local journalists dismissed Perry True as insane and attributed his death to suicide, but no one could seem to remember any details or even that his hanging had taken place roughly ten years before the younger True’s lynching. However, one person who claimed to have known the family since True’s birth insinuated that “every influence that would tend to bring forth murder was about his mother daily, and crime, self-inflicted or otherwise, was the lot of his father’s ending.” As a widow, Etta True left the farm and lived alone with her children south of Hiawatha in Mission Township. She


earned a living as a laundress. By 1885, Etta’s oldest son and daughter had moved on, and Commodore True, the eldest of five children still living at home, already carried the weight of the world’s injustices on his shoulders. “Thus were his early days poisoned with crime’s blasting power,” the family acquaintance recounted. Young True grew up angry and took to hanging out in Hiawatha’s streets with other teenagers, likely both black and white. He started drinking and quickly earned a reputation as a troublemaker and a “tough.” In 1892, True was twenty-one years old.10

It had been a trying year for the people of Hiawatha. Agricultural prices had been declining statewide since the 1860s, which contributed to enthusiasm for the Populist uprising that captured much of the state’s political machinery in 1892. Beyond the tumult of state politics, for Hiawatha in particular, difficult economic times led to increased unemployment, vice, and crime. Despite the force of law behind prohibition in Kansas, Hiawatha’s Oregon Street was home to open saloons both large and small, a gambling parlor, and what was colorfully termed “a bawdy house,” all of which elected and law enforcement officials knowingly tolerated. None of this makes Hiawatha significantly different than many other Kansas communities of the same time period. However, Brown County had also experienced a number of violent crimes, including several homicides, none of which had had a judicial outcome that satisfied a public sense of justice being served. At least two white criminals, one accused of murder and the other of attempted murder, were sitting in the Brown County jail. One was serving a light sentence, and the other was awaiting trial. A third

10. “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” Hiawatha Weekly Journal, December 8, 1892; Kansas State Census, 1885, Brown County. Commodore True’s age is based upon information found in the federal manuscript census of 1880 and the Kansas state manuscript censuses of 1875 and 1885, all of which recorded a birth date of 1871. Newspaper reports from 1892 estimated his age at eighteen, which would have given him a birth date of 1874.

L. H. Everts & Company, 1886, map of Hiawatha, Kansas.
murder suspect, a white woman charged with killing a child, had recently been acquitted. To make matters worse, many in Hiawatha were upset over a growing pattern of unrestrained street crime that allowed ruffians to have their way. Said one newspaper editorialist, “Drunkenness and disorder has been prevalent on our streets and a gang of thugs, of which True was one, has held full sway. Twice within the last month this gang has been seen to bluff out the city marshal when he attempted to make arrests.”

As the 1892 Thanksgiving holiday approached, many residents were riled up over what was increasingly seen as lenient law enforcement and a dysfunctional justice system. “The people are aroused,” warned the editor of the Horton Commercial immediately after the lynching, “and if the ‘law’ persists in clearing murderers they will probably execute a little law themselves.”

The Thanksgiving Day holiday of November 24, 1892, was largely quiet, and most Hiawatha citizens spent the day with their families and attending church services. The AME Church held Thanksgiving services, but Walthall and other church leaders also organized a special day of fellowship for all African American residents of Hiawatha and the surrounding area. The AME Church building was too small for such an inclusive event, so the congregation rented the second floor, which served as an open meeting hall, of the Kenigsburg Brothers’ Golden Eagle clothing store on Oregon Street for an evening community get-together consisting of a devotional service followed by an oyster-supper social. As the evening festivities unfolded, the celebration was ruined by a tragedy that no one in attendance would ever forget.

The AME Thanksgiving evening service was an open event, and Commodore True availed himself of the opportunity to enjoy a meal and the night’s entertainment. True was likely not the most welcome of guests, as he had disrupted AME revival meetings in the past and had an antagonistic relationship with Walthall and other AME leaders. True had allegedly been drinking beforehand, and he and a few other fellows began to get loud enough to interrupt the festivities. Walthall seemed to have no desire for a confrontation and pulled True aside. He spoke calmly with the younger man and apparently quieted him down. The respite was brief, and True reportedly began insulting some of the young women and threatening another man named Ed Payne. This was enough for Walthall. He asked True to leave, but True refused. Since reason proved unsuccessful, Walthall, with the assistance of a few other men, seized True and bodily threw him out the door and down the stairs.

One can only speculate as to where True went or what he did after picking himself up off the ground, but at least one reporter presumed that he proceeded to fuel his anger at Walthall with a fresh supply of drugstore whiskey. Whether or not he was able to patronize a local pharmacy, True returned within a short time, only to find an elderly African American man named George Barnes installed as doorkeeper. Since Barnes was the only witness to later give sworn testimony in court, what he observed was important. True asked to be readmitted to the hall, but Barnes refused. A few journalists claimed that True brandished a knife and threatened Barnes, but Barnes later testified that True slipped back in when Barnes’s attention was called elsewhere. Regardless, True had a knife and was prepared to use it. As he stepped through the door and pulled the weapon out of his pocket, he reportedly shouted, “Where is the s— of a b— that put me out?” Walthall and others turned at the sound of True’s voice, but before Walthall could do anything, True lunged with his knife and stabbed him in the chest.

It is possible that True had intended only to injure or humiliate Walthall; nevertheless, the attack proved to be lethal. The blade entered Walthall’s right breast between the second and third ribs and ranged downward until the point of the weapon entered his heart. Walthall slumped to the floor as blood from the cut seeped across the front of his shirt. Matt Olden, a young man who had grown up with True, immediately hustled True out of the building and back to his home.

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11. “Lynch Law in Hiawatha,” Kansas Democrat (Hiawatha), December 1, 1892.
12. “Murder and Lynching,” Horton Commercial, December 1, 1892; see also “Lynch Law in Hiawatha,” Kansas Democrat (Hiawatha), December 1, 1892.
14. Ibid.
15. “Murder and Lynching,” Hiawatha Weekly Journal, December 1, 1892.
visible.” Walthall remained conscious only for a few moments. As he felt his life slipping away, the last words he reportedly uttered were “I’m smothering.” He lost consciousness and died within minutes. It was shortly after eight o’clock in the evening.

Sheriff Samuel E. Brown and County Attorney William F. Means were immediately notified and, after viewing the scene, allowed Walthall’s body to be carried home. Brown proceeded to True’s residence and placed the accused man under arrest. Reports later circulated that as the sheriff took True to the Brown County jail, True allegedly boasted that he had “got his man that time and was glad of it.” True was secured in a cell next to James Noonan and another man identified only as Page, both white men from Horton. Noonan was awaiting trial on charges of attempted murder, and Page was suspected of homicide.

By daybreak, the whole town had learned of Walthall’s violent demise, and indignant discussions about lynching True before a spineless court could hand out another light sentence were already circulating. Many people in the town were furious, and the anger directed toward the accused murderer was palpable. Consequently, Judge Lynn S. Herbert cleared his docket and convened a court hearing for True first thing on Friday morning. However, legal representatives for the case had only learned of the crime along with the rest of the town, and the defense attorney was unable to appear in court on such short notice. Therefore, the judge allowed the weekend to prepare and granted a continuance until the following Monday morning.

How seriously Sheriff Brown viewed the rumors of vigilante justice and lynching is unknown. A reporter from Horton alleged that Brown took the precaution of removing True from the jail and securing him in an undisclosed location over the weekend. If accurate, it was a wise move on Brown’s part because many in the town were seething, and loose talk of lynching only intensified over the weekend. Walthall’s funeral service was held on Saturday afternoon, and newsmen testified that it “was one of the largest ever held in Hiawatha.” The interment reflected Walthall’s standing in the community, as both whites and blacks were in attendance. Unrestrained calls for lynching persisted even as Walthall’s family and friends mourned at the cemetery. One reporter made the shocking allegation that “Rev. Anderson Ramsey the A.M.E. pastor who conducted the funeral services created a sensation by openly advocating

To County Attorney William F. Means fell the task of prosecuting Commodore True for the murder of William Walthall. After “Judge Lynch” rendered that proceeding mute, Means and Sheriff Samuel E. Brown focused their attention on a more problematic victim and crime. A native of Missouri who moved to Brown County to practice law in 1887, Means was elected county attorney in 1890 and held that office for four years.

17. “A Killing and Hanging,” Brown County World, December 2, 1892.

18. “Murder and Mob Law,” Kansas Democrat, December 1, 1892.


20. “Murder and Lynching,” Horton Commercial, December 1, 1892.
Whether or not any minister made such an inflammatory statement, tensions remained high through the weekend. However, as Saturday became Sunday, people settled in and waited to see what the court would decide on Monday morning.

Commodore True received his day in court on Monday, November 28, beginning at 9:00 a.m. True’s defense attorney was Sample F. Newton, a man whom the press lauded as “one of the best criminal lawyers in the state.” Although his legal qualifications may have been unimpeachable, Newton was a local trial lawyer who had prior service as the county prosecuting attorney. Means called George Barnes as the prosecution’s first witness, and Barnes related a straightforward story of what he had seen as doorman on the night Walthall was killed. His testimony took the better part of the morning, and by the time he was allowed to leave the witness stand, it was time to adjourn for the noon break. Barnes’s testimony was damning. When court reconvened for the afternoon session, Newton formally requested a week’s continuance. Herbert granted the postponement.

The court was packed with onlookers, and to those in attendance True appeared as a “foolish wretch” or someone who “seemed to feel his importance—actually seemed proud of his awful deed.” Consequently, it was an outraged crowd that filed out of Judge Herbert’s courtroom that afternoon. To the heated citizens certain of True’s guilt and infuriated over what they perceived as smugness, a second continuance was a mockery of justice and ironclad proof that the legal system was incapable of enforcing the law. One reporter later remarked that “quite a number of people thought the murderer would not get his just deserts because the administration of the law is getting to be so slack.” Many townsfolk were convinced that True had to answer for his crimes and would brook no more delay. The level of anger in the town had reached the boiling point, yet this time Sheriff Brown failed to take the precaution of hiding True in a secure location. After court adjourned for the day, Brown returned True to his cell in the county jail to wait out the week until his trial.

21. “Murder and Mob Law,” Kansas Democrat, December 1, 1892; “A Killing and Hanging,” Brown County World, December 2, 1892. The only Ramsey found in Hiawatha records was William A. Ramsey, a railroad laborer who was white. Anderson Ramsey was not the minister of record for the AME Church. In 1892, the AME Church pastor was George Griffith. Ruley’s Hiawatha City Directory and Reference Book (Hiawatha, Kans.: A. N. Ruley, 1892), 40.


24. Kansas Democrat, December 8, 1892.
This did not augur well for True. Judge Herbert’s court had adjourned, but as the pall of night cast its dark shroud over Hiawatha that evening, Judge Lynch’s dreadful court made preparations to convene.

That night, shortly after 1:00 a.m. on November 29, between twelve and fifteen men armed with revolvers emerged from the shadowy recesses of the Missouri Pacific freight yards west of the jailhouse. They wore masks, jersey caps pulled down over their hair and eyes, and long overcoats that nearly reached the ground. This was a vigilance committee, and its members fully intended to march on the jailhouse, take possession of True, and string him up on the courthouse lawn. Such vigilance committees took it upon themselves to act, as American Studies professor Lisa Arellano noted, “when the state would, or could, not.” The outfits lent them anonymity while simultaneously allowing them to justify their actions and lay claims to legitimacy. Nevertheless, there was nothing furtive or spontaneous about this gathering. The men had intentionally assembled earlier in the evening and lurked about the rail yards, “where they had spent the greater part of the night waiting until the town slept.” The conspirators steeled their nerves by sharing several bottles of liquor and may have been inebriated by the time they emerged from the gloom. They broke into the depot tool sheds and helped themselves to picks, sledges, and crowbars. After holding a brief consultation on the depot platform, the men began to advance toward the jailhouse.

The contention that the vigilantes delayed action until the townsfolk slept was nothing more than a journalistic prevarication because numerous people in Hiawatha knew what was happening and waited in eager anticipation. As the conspirators marched with impunity down Oregon Street and turned the corner at the courthouse square toward the jailhouse, an unspecified number of white men skulking about the storefronts stepped out to sidle up alongside the gang. Another group surfaced from the darkness of Haver’s nearby livery stable. Later the loiterers dissembled that they “had an idea of what was...”

27. “A Killing and Hanging,” Brown County World, December 2, 1892.

The World reporter gave an embellished estimation that the conspirators consumed up to eight gallons of whiskey while waiting at the depot. That would amount to over two quarts of whiskey per man. Unless watered down, it would have been enough to thoroughly incapacitate the men before they even started.
to take place” and concluded that they would “witness” the event. The ringleaders of what was rapidly becoming a mob knew the town and its practices well. As the group advanced toward its illicit objective, some momentarily stopped and cut the rope of the fire bell to prevent night watchman Dave Van Horn from ringing an alert for help.

The lynching mob, armed with tools purloined from the rail yard, no longer made any pretense of secrecy or quiet. It was approximately 1:30 a.m. when they stormed the jailhouse. With a cacophony of yells and cries of “break in the door,” they began battering the entryway. Roused by the calamitous noise, Sheriff Brown appeared at a second-floor window and credulously inquired, “Men, what do you want?” A leader of the mob shouted, “We want the colored gentleman.” Allegedly, the sheriff begged the people to leave the premises, but the enraged crowd was uncontrollable and resumed hammering the door to splinters. At this point the sheriff fired a shotgun blast while Van Horn managed to climb up the bell tower and tap the fire bell before being forced at gunpoint to stop. Both signals were intended to alert a few citizens who had earlier agreed to come and assist in case of trouble. No one came to defend the jail. Instead the alarms only increased the size of the mob as roughly 300 more people came out and added their voices to those already urging on the lynchers. Sheriff Brown and Deputy John Cashman made an ineffectual defense and exchanged gunfire with the mob. However, from their second-floor window Brown and Cashman shot harmlessly into the air, while the mob fired their weapons into the jailhouse door and hit Brown’s empty overcoat that was hanging in the hall behind it. Emboldened by the feeble resistance, the rabble-rousers used their stolen tools to beat the door off its hinges and gained access to the jailhouse.

An agitated throng of people pushed into the building. Brown and Cashman hurried down the stairs to meet them but found themselves covered by the men’s pistols. The sheriff made one final plea for the vigilantes to put down their weapons, but the only response he received was laughter. Brown and Cashman put forward no more resistance and submissively relinquished their own arms. The sheriff later maintained that in order to save his life, he “handed over the keys, and was forced to get a light and lead the way to the cell of the negro, Commodore True.” In the inquest that followed, Brown insinuated that his wife upstairs was pleading with him to save his life and “give up the keys.”

Six of the ringleaders moved forward into the smaller holding area and, upon reaching True’s cell, found their victim fully dressed and sitting upright. Only his shoes remained untied. True had heard the commotion from the front of the jail and had been trying to ready himself for the horror waiting outside. The lynching mob was beyond reason, and there was little True could do as the vigilantes secured a noose around his neck and gave a terrible jerk that yanked him forward and out the cell gate. The mob forcibly dragged him out of the jailhouse and into the street. With untied shoes, a noose violently tugging at his neck, and murderous men yelling profanities in his ear, True was understandably shaken and had difficulty keeping up. As the mob wrenched him outside, True stumbled and fell. At once three or four men pounced and began pummeling True mercilessly. The beating was so severe that one of the mob ringleaders felt compelled to use his revolver to stand the ruffians off of True.

Dragging a beaten and bleeding True, the mob began scouring the courthouse lawn for a tree tall and sturdy enough for a lynching. In what was likely an intentional display of contempt for what the lynchers viewed as an ineffective justice system, they selected a gallows near the center of the park, within a dozen steps and in clear view of the courthouse. Realizing that the final death stroke was at hand, True begged his tormenters for a moment to kneel and pray. One person in the crowd allegedly yelled, “Let the son of a gun pray, and see what he will say!” However, a burning hatred had metastasized throughout the mass of people, and True received no quarter or chance to pray. This caused one witness from the town of Troy to write that the mob “did not seem to have a single praying Christian among them. When True asked for time to pray, it was not granted him.” At this point True looked his executioners in the face and, finding a moment of peace, said, “I hope you will

all live long and happy and I’ll meet you in heaven.” A number of the crowd howled back, “Meet you in hell!”

The lynchers tossed the rope over a limb of the tree, the motion of which led True to lose his composure and shudder. This slight movement agitated the mob, and one of the ringleaders ordered True not to stir or he would shoot him. True protested, “I didn’t budge.” No one cared because the moment True spoke, one of the members of the lynch mob heaved on the end of the rope to pull it taut. The crowd fell into a deathly silence of anticipation as the executioners gave a second pull that momentarily jerked True off the ground. “Let me pray,” True desperately rasped as he fell back to the earth, but the crowd was so overcome with rage that his final plea fell on deaf ears. The gang leaders “grasped the rope and pulled until his body dangled above them.”

Simply watching True writhe in suffocating agony was not good enough to slake the bloodlust of the lynch mob. As soon as the rope was secure, one of the vigilantes pulled a gun and fired a round into True’s body. Others immediately followed, and the crowd unleashed a volley of bullets at True. Low estimates said that only three shots were fired, while high estimates said that the crowd let loose with at least fifty gunshots. The mob was shooting blind. Although few of the slugs actually struck True, it is quite likely that the higher estimate of shots fired is closer to the fact because the “fusillade of bullets was so wild that a window in Allendorf’s bakery was broken and the trees were clipped with the flying lead.” When True’s corpse was later examined for the inquest, members of the committee, “after a most searching investigation lasting four days, returns a verdict to this effect: Commodore True came to his death by gunshot wounds and strangulation, feloniously, by persons unknown to the jury.”

Commodore True’s suffering was over. With their gruesome night’s undertaking complete, the committee members crept away to the comforts of their respective homes. The whole affair lasted barely thirty minutes as “the clock struck two as the crowd was dispersing.” There seems to have been no bodily mutilation and almost no attempt to collect souvenirs, as was common in many spectacle lynchings; the only instance recounted was that someone sneaked back after the crowd left in a failed attempt to take True’s shoes. The vigilantes left the body for the authorities to deal with, and it remained hanging in the town’s central square until daylight.

At 7:30 a.m., Sheriff Brown reemerged with County Attorney Means in tow to view the crime scene. Meanwhile, Judge Herbert went through the formality of declaring True dead. A small crowd of whites gathered for photographer Shepard Willis as he took a picture of the corpse hanging before the courthouse. They were white. Brown County World, December 1, 1892. In addition to Herbert, the inquest members included John Walters, N. B. Moore, M. L. Guelich, Thurston Chase, J. V. Rollins, and Ed Turner. All were white.

On Tuesday afternoon, Herbert convened a coroner’s inquest to determine the cause of death and the identities of those responsible for the circumvention of justice. The inquest accomplished very little. The press related that the committee members, “after a most searching investigation lasting four days, returns a verdict to this effect: Commodore True came to his death by gunshot wounds and strangulation, feloniously, by persons unknown to the jury.”

The coroner’s inquest reflected the general sentiment of the town, and most people held, as a reporter for the Hiawatha Weekly Journal wrote, that “the act of the mob on that occasion was probably justifiable—only on the ground of uncertainty of conviction. The man who paid the penalty with his life did commit murder without a shadow of a doubt. The public is satisfied and the law has been vindicated.” The entire town shared a collective guilt, but the apologetic justification put forward matched the narrative of “ideal vigilantism” that Arellano found to be common among lynchings. “An ideal vigilance committee convened and acted in an organized and evenhanded manner in response to lynchings. “An ideal vigilance committee convened and acted in an organized and evenhanded manner in response to lynchings.”

35. “Murder and Mob Law,” Kansas Democrat, December 1, 1892; “A Killing and Hanging,” Brown County World, December 2, 1892.
37. “Murder and Mob Law,” Kansas Democrat, December 1, 1892; “fusillade of bullets” quoted in “A Killing and Hanging,” Brown County World, December 2, 1892.
38. “Murder and Mob Law,” Kansas Democrat, December 1, 1892; “A Killing and Hanging,” Brown County World, December 2, 1892.
40. “The Jury’s Verdict,” Brown County World, December 9, 1892; “Murder and Lynching,” Hiawatha Weekly Journal, December 1, 1892. In addition to Herbert, the inquest members included John Walters, N. B. Moore, M. L. Guelich, Thurston Chase, J. V. Rollins, and Ed Turner. All were white.
The original group of twelve to fifteen men who had gathered in the rail yard constituted Hiawatha’s vigilance committee and, therefore, the instigators most responsible for the lynching. The inquest committee declared the remaining crowd members who gathered for the hanging to be innocent observers and, consequently, nonparticipants in the atrocity. Despite the fact that there were hundreds of witnesses and everyone had heard the ringleaders speak, no one stepped forward to identify a single perpetrator. Harry Guelich told the coroner’s inquest that he found one of the lyncher’s “masks in front of Capt. Lacock’s house” the morning after the crime. Ira Lacock was a trial lawyer and former county prosecuting attorney, and Guelich was his clerk. Dennis Dillingham and Fred Schilling, the only men who claimed to have “looked down the revolvers of two of the lynchers,” testified before the inquest that the men they had seen that night were unidentifiable. Dillingham and Schilling were the sons of prominent businessmen and had no employment listed for 1892. A fourth man, Fred Rogers, told the inquest that he had been in the jail cell when the lynchers placed a noose around True’s neck but could not identify a single one of them. Rogers was an employee of E. A. Schilling and Company Dry Goods Store. Guelich, Dillingham, Schilling, and Rogers were all white men in their early twenties. The press was adamant that no one had lifted a finger to help defend the jail, yet not one member of the inquest seemed to question how Rogers had happened to be in True’s cell at the moment the noose was placed around True’s neck or why Dillingham and Schilling felt they needed the alibi of staring down the revolvers of the lynchers when the only people threatened with pistols had been the men who pummeled True.

This case, however, goes beyond an abjuration of personal responsibility and denying True due process under the law. Newspaper editorialists attempted to apologize for the lynching by deflecting blame away from the white citizens of Hiawatha and attaching it firmly to African Americans in the city and surrounding region. Hiawatha had three newspapers in 1892. The Republican and Democratic papers were both insistent that the ringleaders were black while at the same time admitting that “all were masked and identification was impossible.” The Alliance paper, the Hiawatha Weekly Journal, made no comment on the vigilance committee’s racial makeup but insinuated that “gangs of excited colored men could be seen together talking over the matter” on the weekend prior to the lynching. The Kansas Democrat wanted to exonerate the entire town and reported, “It is believed that some of the mob came from other neighboring cities and that there were but few Hiawatha men connected to the affair.” The Republican Brown County World agreed, and the editor was resolute in insisting that it was “fifteen colored men” who came out from the shadows of the rail

42. “A Killing and Hanging,” Brown County World, December 2, 1892.
yard that fateful night. Newspaper editors claimed to know for a fact that the leader of the lynch mob was an African American man from Atchison, though they never bothered to share this seemingly vital information with the coroner’s inquest. Nevertheless, the charge stuck, and both the Atchison Daily Globe and the Atchison Blade, an African American newspaper, printed the wire reports and repeated the allegations without question.44


45. “Murder and Lynching,” Horton Commercial, December 1, 1892; “Mobbed in Hiawatha,” Horton Headlight, December 1, 1892.

Horton was the second-largest town in Brown County, had a competitive relationship with the county seat, and had some of the few newspaper articles of the lynching that were independent of the wire reports coming out of Hiawatha. Newspaper editors in Horton were not about to apologize for any incidents taking place in Hiawatha and sometimes took undisguised glee in the county seat’s problems. As the editor for the Horton Commercial reported: “Hiawatha, our county seat, don’t propose to be outdone by other portions of the county, and accordingly, on Thanksgiving night, dished up a first-class murder.” The Horton reporter likewise had no incentive to protect elected officials, commerce, or business interests in Hiawatha. Thus, his account of the vigilance committee honestly stated that “more than a score of dark forms appeared in the court house square, but none could tell whether they were white or black, or both.” Because there was communitywide anger at True over Walthall’s death, the editor wrote that “the presumption is that men of both races were connected with the affair.” The editor of the Horton Headlight also gave a candid and nonjudgmental assessment when he wrote that “a body of men, presumably a vigilance committee, surrounded the jail and with sledges battered in the door of the cell where the terrified black wretch was crouching.”

There was only the muted presumption in the Commercial that blacks may have participated in an integrated lynching, but more important, there was nothing in either paper about itinerant gangs or mysterious black men from Atchison leading a bizarre lynching road show.

To accept that a gang of aggressive African Americans from as far away as Atchison stormed into Hiawatha to steal railroad property, assault a white sheriff, shoot up the town, and lynch an individual with whom they

Hiawatha resident Harry Guelich told the coroner’s inquest that he found one of the lycner’s “masks in front of Capt. Lacock’s house” the morning after the crime. A local attorney and former state legislator, Ira J. Lacock, one of Hiawatha’s founders, had practiced law in Brown County for more than thirty years and had served its residents as county attorney in the early 1870s.
had no quarrel requires a significant level of credulity. Therefore, were the persons responsible Walthall’s friends from the local population? Such an occurrence was not unheard-of, and in A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930, Stewart Emory Tolnay and E. M. Beck cited murder as the leading cause underlining documented cases of blacks lynching other blacks. However, the handful of examples they relate resembles what the authors call “popular justice,” or the exercise of extralegal punishment by a local community rather than through the courts. Popular justice fits with the lynching of Charles Williams by an African American mob in Galena in 1899. The theory would fit what happened in Hiawatha except for the fact that, like Williams’s lynching, the instances of black-on-black lynching that Tolnay and Beck related did not involve a spectacle lynching with a throng of enraged whites participating as spectators. Nonetheless, the idea of an integrated lynching cannot be discounted, and Walthall had numerous white friends who worked alongside him in the flouring mill. Waldrep’s research showed that one “crucial variable was the state of the criminal justice system. Ineffective or ‘lax’ courts made it more reasonable for a united population to rise up and hang without trial suspected criminals.” Such was the case in Hiawatha, and reports indicated that the “indignation of Walthall’s friends against the brutal murderer was intense.”

Nevertheless, to accuse African Americans of being either the sole perpetrators or participating in an integrated lynching also requires an explanation of the white Lynch mob. Ever since Ida B. Wells’s 1892 publication of Southern Horrors, scholars have recognized that lynching, particularly spectacle lynching, in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America was used as a means of maintaining strict racial caste boundaries. Furthermore, with rare exceptions, African Americans were highly motivated to be someplace else when a spectacle lynching occurred. As the historian Philip Dray argued, it was “best to allow the lynch mob’s fury to end with its original victim than spread to the whole black community, as too often happened.” While Dray’s interpretation is correct, his analysis focused on the actions of black elites after Southern Horrors had made an impact. It may not apply in Hiawatha because the anger directed at True crossed racial boundaries. Whereas newspapermen made no reference to any African American spectators at the lynching, they did accuse the vigilance committee members of being black. The difficulty is that Walthall was a deacon in the church and a man whom the press described as “sober and industrious, gentlemanly and obliging.” He was an individual who “had always lived so as to gain the confidence and esteem of our people.” In addition, his employers at Raff and Bechtel spoke of him “in highest terms.” Although not formally educated, Walthall had attained the status of lower middle class. It is possible that the class of people that Walthall would have counted as his friends, whether black or white, could have become enraged enough to participate in a lynching. However, it remains in question that Walthall’s friends would be the same individuals as the coarse ruffians who consumed “gallons” of whiskey in the Missouri Pacific rail yard before heading out to lynch a man.

The lynchers were fully covered, to the point where “nobody could tell whether they were white or black, or both,” which harkens back to older forms of frontier violence. Nevertheless, Wood argues that spectacle lynchings increased in intensity in the 1890s because the process of modernization and urbanization was transforming formerly isolated regions in ways that frightened many people. Ideas of modernization and urbanization raise the question of whether the vigilantes may have been a group of troubled whites taking advantage of an opportunity to rid the town of what the press called a “worthless, drunken negro.” True was a young man who allegedly flouted the precepts set by white society, which offended many people. One journalist wrote, “A favorite pastime with him was to load up on bad whisky and flourish a razor among citizens who might be in his way.” Another reporter stated that a few nights before Walthall’s death, True had been seen “on the street flourishing his razor and telling the boys they did not have any nerve.” It was no secret that the people of Hiawatha were upset about

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48. In the 1890s, blacks constituted only 2 percent of the population of Brown County, or 422 blacks to 19,894 whites. If African Americans made up the larger lynching mob, then nearly every single black person in the county would have had to come out. See “Table 2: Black Lynchings in Kansas by Counties” in Christopher C. Lovett, “A Public Burning: Race, Sex, and the Lynching of Fred Alexander,” Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains 33 (Summer 2010): 99.


the uptick in crime that the town was experiencing, and although it was True who paid the ultimate price, the anger was directed at both blacks and lower-class whites. There is evidence for such an assertion. One observer astutely pointed out that while the vigilance committee readily led True to the gallows, the two white men also in the jail and accused of murder were left unmolested in their cells. Nevertheless, when the Lynchers pulled True out of the jailhouse, someone from the larger mob reportedly yelled, “Now put Page on the other end of the rope.” Because Page was from Horton, a newsmen snidely remarked, “Now if Horton would hang some of its criminals the cleaning up would be complete and Brown-co. could begin anew.”

Beyond Page’s case, the social class conflict in Hiawatha was very real. One reporter observed that there were “others in Hiawatha, both negro and white boys, who need reform of the strictest sort to save them from making such a terrible blunder as True made.” The blind eye that elected officials and law enforcement officers turned toward illegal saloons, brothels, and gambling dens on Oregon Street did not escape notice and received much of the blame. The prohibition “law has been openly defied in Hiawatha,” remarked an editorialist. “Men who stand to the front in Hiawatha society have presumed upon their standing to violate the law. The county and city officials have lacked the backbone to prosecute them.” Because “respectable” men could openly defy the law, lower-class offenders saw this as permission to do the same. These individuals “have said to the authorities you must not interfere. We have as much right to run as the big bugs. And the authorities have not interfered. The license given the privileged classes made cowards of our officers.” This regrettable state of affairs led the editor to conclude that “True had not been taught that the law must be respected and it had no terrors for him when he made his murderous assault upon Walthall.” If what the editor wrote was sincere, then True’s lynching may have been an unsubtle warning to other scofflaws in Hiawatha as much as it was retaliation for the murder of Walthall.

Were there racial caste boundaries that whites wanted to enforce in Hiawatha? A Hiawatha resident remarked, “Mob violence is a fearful thing, but it will return to blacken our fair name as long as courts heed not the demands of justice, and sworn public servants keep not their oaths. If mobs must become our executioners, would it not be well to cross the color line and give unto the white that which you have meted out to the black.” Perhaps a Southerner verbalized Hiawath’a’s problems most succinctly. When news of True’s lynching in Kansas reached the South, an unnamed Texan immediately recognized it as racial caste control and ruminated that “lynching niggers doesn’t appear to be confined to the south.”

The year 1892 was the single worst year for lynchings in the United States. According to Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s A Red Record, Commodore True was one of 241 people who were lynched that year. Of that number, 160 were African Americans. Two black men, True in Hiawatha and Hugh Henry in Larned, were lynched in Kansas. All other African American victims, with the exception of one each in New York and Ohio, were lynched in the South. For many Kansans, the lynchings were acceptable, albeit regrettable, events. For example, editorialists in Newton remarked that “every American should decry the mob violence which was used in hanging the ruffian” while at the same time condemning a lax legal system that allowed murderers to escape punishment. “It is well known that the extreme penalty is never inflicted in this state and knowing that the murderer would not get his deserts the mob assumed the authority of judge, jury and executioner, to punish as it deemed best.” The lesson that Kansans took away from 

52. “A Killing and Hanging,” Brown County World, December 2, 1892; “Mobbed in Hiawatha,” Horton Headlight, December 1, 1892.
53. “A Killing and Hanging,” Brown County World, December 2, 1892.
54. “Lynch Law in Hiawatha,” Kansas Democrat, December 1, 1892.
55. There were accusations that whites in Hiawatha had lynched another black man three years earlier. Richard Fisher’s name appears on several modern lists of historical lynching victims; reportedly he was lynched in Hiawatha, Kansas, on September 9, 1889. This was Dick Fisher, also known as Dick Rhodes and Sam Dick Fish, who was accused of rape, murder, and horse stealing in Doniphan County. Stories of his lynching did circulate around the country; however, there is no direct evidence that Fisher was lynched in Hiawatha or Brown County. Local press reports at the time indicated that Fisher was arrested in Brown County and turned over to law enforcement officials in Doniphan County. Nevertheless, for extant accounts claiming he was lynched, see “A Villainous Negro Lynched,” Wichita Eagle, September 10, 1889; “Lynched by a Mob,” Western Kansas World (Wakeneey), September 14, 1889; for accounts claiming he was delivered safely to law enforcement in Doniphan County, see “He Was Not Lynched,” Wichita Eagle, September 12, 1889; Hiawatha Journal, September 12, 1889; White Cloud Review, September 13, 1889.
57. For an account of Hugh Henry’s lynching, see “Negro Lynched,” Saline County Journal, September 15, 1892.
this, said the editors, was that lynchings would continue unchecked until the law was fixed.  

Commodore True committed murder in front of witnesses, but even William Walthall, who lived his life believing in the strength of community, would likely have argued that True deserved his day in court. Too much time has passed to give names to any of the individual lynchers. However, if any justice remains for Walthall, True, and the African American community that suffered through that horrific five-day ordeal in November 1892, then it must come with the admission that many white citizens of Hiawatha, starting with the sheriff, were either complicit in the lynching or guilty by acquiescence. It requires no stretch of the imagination to realize that officials overseeing the legal and judicial system in Hiawatha abrogated their constitutional responsibilities by failing to provide adequate safeguards that would have prevented a single tragedy from escalating into a second. The warning signs were in place but—whether intentionally or not—were disregarded. After the lynching, a few members of the press sought to call out officials on this subject. “The mayor and city officers under him are directly responsible for the condition of lawlessness that has existed and still exists in this city and if they cannot stop it they ought to have the courage to resign and let a better class of men take their places.” Nevertheless, members of the press continued covering for the lynchers by obfuscating their identities.

When it was all finished, an unnamed individual who had known Commodore True excoriated the entire town for its shameful actions with a line from Genesis 4:10: “And He said, what hast thou done? The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground.”

59. “Lynch Law in Hiawatha,” Kansas Democrat, December 1, 1892.