

"Unequivocal evidence of mass racial expulsions."

—*New York Times Book Review*

BURIED IN THE BITTER WATERS

THE HIDDEN
HISTORY OF
RACIAL CLEANSING
IN AMERICA

ELLIOT JASPIN

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

BURIED
IN THE
BITTER
WATERS

*The Hidden History of Racial
Cleansing in America*

ELLIOT JASPIN



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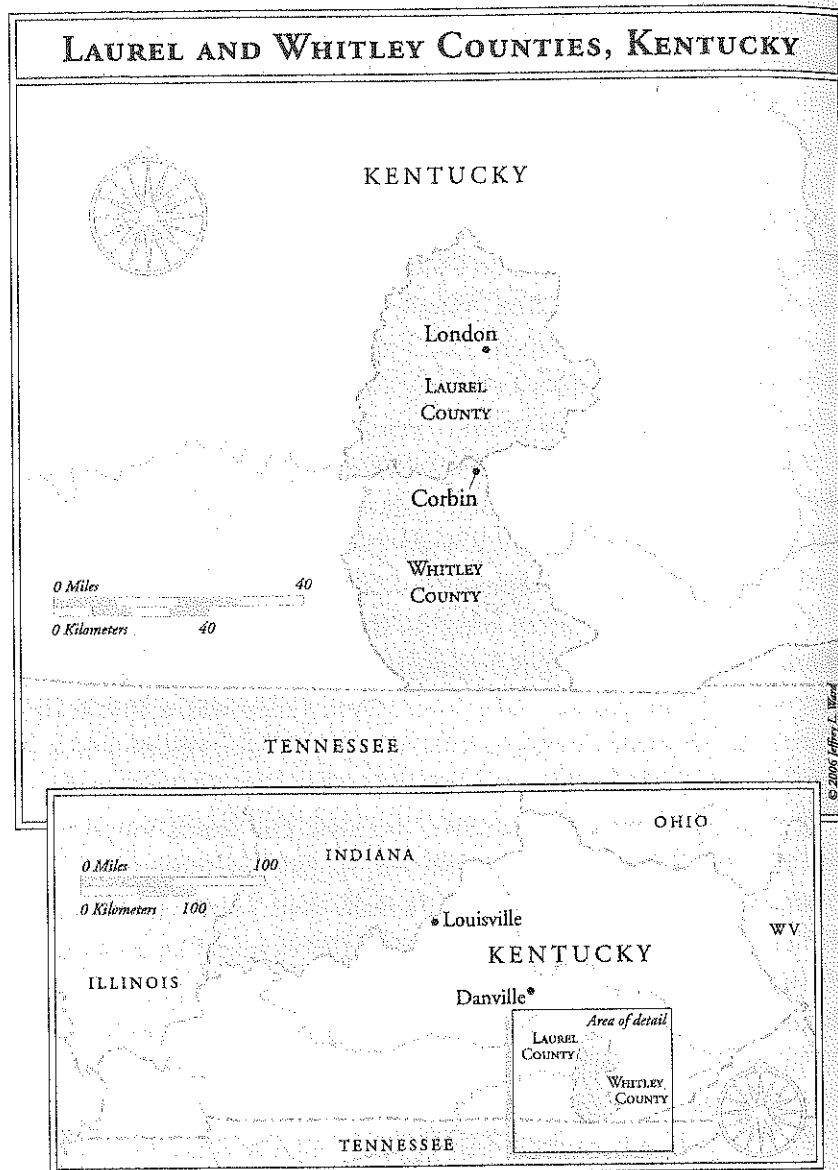
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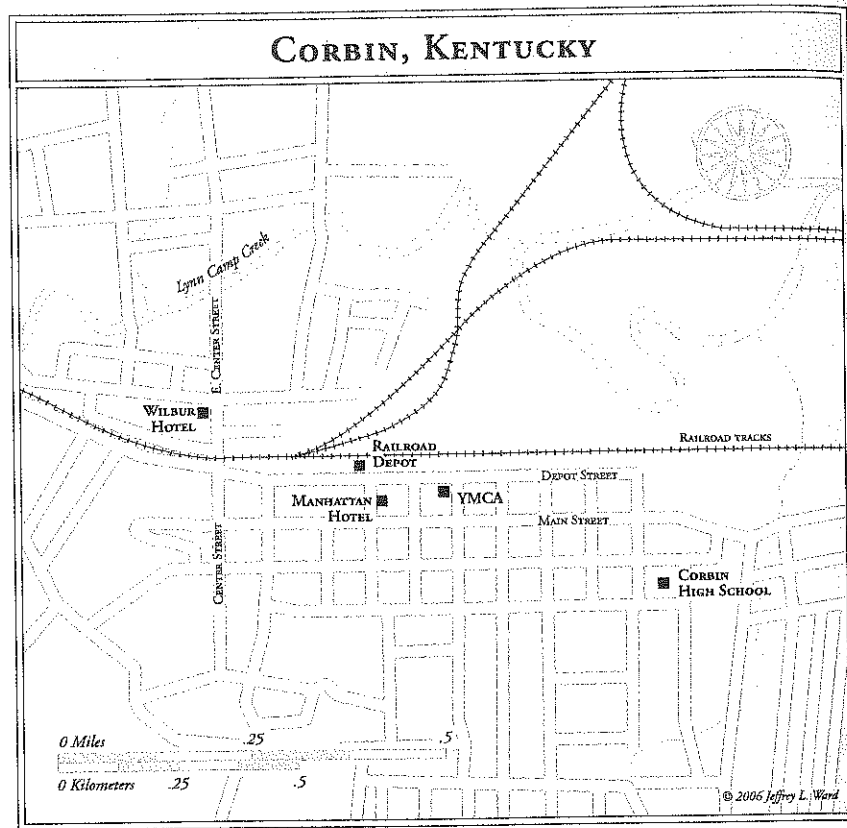
CHAPTER 9

A Dog Named Nigger

Laurel and Whitley Counties, Kentucky 1919

Some things are just meant to be. How else to explain the fact that, when a mob was rampaging through Corbin, Kentucky on the evening of October 30, 1919, it stumbled across the municipal band marching through town? The result was the first racial cleansing with musical accompaniment.¹

The band's fifteen unsuspecting members, who had just finished playing at a political rally in the high school, had decided to end the night with a brisk march through town. But moments after they struck up the unwittingly prescient "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight," they were overtaken somewhere between Main and Depot streets by a crowd of 125 gun-toting men. "This man, right out of a clear sky . . . here he come with this gang, with his six shooter," said Blake Killenger, one of the band members. "They were just, was just ablazing on all sides and stopped us and told us they're running the blacks out of town." The bandsmen were ordered to serenade the gunmen as they rounded up the town's blacks and marched them to the railroad depot.²



In addition to being the first musical racial cleansing, through a series of coincidences, it would also be one of the best documented. Kil-lenger's account of the band marching through Corbin is one of several oral histories collected in Corbin during the 1970s as part of the country's bicentennial celebration. These interviews are supplemented by an unusually large number of documents at the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives. For example, after Steve Rogers, one of the ringleaders of the mob, went to prison, he twice petitioned the governor—once for a pardon and once to have his sentence commuted. In his petition for a pardon, which is now in the state archives, he explains what he did and tries to justify his role. Filed with it are the petitions of others who supported or opposed Rogers; the petitioners also describe what they saw the night of the cleansing.

The most unusual documents are a series of sworn affidavits collected by the railroad police. In 1920, J. B. Snyder, the commonwealth's attorney, asked the Louisville and Nashville Railroad (L&N) for help investigating what he called "The Corbin Mob." Snyder, who didn't have his own detective, wanted the railroad police to collect notarized statements from ten people he said had been in Corbin the night the blacks were driven out. The railroad lent Snyder its "Inspector of Police," who spent several weeks traveling the state locating witnesses and getting their affidavits. Those notarized statements of both blacks and whites, which were used before a grand jury in 1920, eventually made their way into the state archives.³

That the prosecuting attorney would have turned to the railroad for help is not surprising. The railroad was Corbin's lifeblood. When the L&N Railroad pushed its tracks through southeast Kentucky in 1883, a trio of land developers carved Corbin out of what had been called the Big Swamp. The developers also had little interest in political geography. When Corbin was incorporated in 1895, it straddled Laurel, Whitely, and Knox counties. What really mattered were the railroads and the lucrative freight business as long lines of hopper cars from the Kentucky coal mines rattled south to Knoxville or Atlanta and north to Cincinnati. Crews rested in Corbin, and trains were repaired in its sprawling yards. When the YMCA was built in 1902 across the street from the freight depot, it became an overnight stop for railroad men on their runs. There were saloons and whorehouses, and the local hotels hosted the parties of railroad fraternities.⁴

The railroad also brought blacks to Corbin. Although Corbin had some sixty long-time black residents according to the 1910 census, in 1919 the railroad had brought in a black work crew estimated at between 200 and 400 men. For a town of 2,800 people, this was a substantial increase. These laborers ate and slept on trains parked in the rail yard only a short distance from where they were building new facilities. In addition a paving contractor, hired to upgrade the town's dirt streets, had imported his own black work crew. The world had suddenly changed for a town accustomed to seeing only an occasional black face.⁵

Townspeople, unnerved by the sudden appearance of so many strange blacks in town, complained that the Negro workmen were responsible for a crime wave. After the cleansing, townspeople spoke of a "colored element . . . living in temporary abodes, rail road cars, and makeshift tenements." As one of the town's lawyers described it, the black population "was a menacing and floating one, very gregarious in habits, and lawless in acts."⁶

Fifty years later, in the 1970s oral histories, the same anxieties emerge. W. R. Stansberry, a lifelong resident, recalled that there was "a terrible lot of meanness going around." He said there was "robbing and so forth in town. I just heard about it. I was never concerned with it." Another resident, John Garrett, said, "The event that led up to it was hold-ups, breaking-ins, and what have you. They accused these colored people of being the principal offenders of these acts." There was also the sense that the blacks were intruders who were bent on changing the town. Oscar Little said the expulsion occurred because "colored folks was trying to force themselves on the white people here and they just wouldn't stand for it."⁷

Whether it was true or not, band member Blake Killenger had heard another and more immediate reason for the expulsion.

I understand that what led up to this, these colored fellers over there, they liked to gamble. They'd shoot dice and play poker. And I understand that some of the switchmen and railroaders went over to their camp to gamble with 'em. I don't know why but a fight ensued. Whether they lost their money or what, a fight took place and this gang of switchmen led by Pistol Pete didn't like the situation so they just ganged up and a whole gang went down to the railroad station and told 'em to get out of town.⁸

Others claimed in their oral histories that a robbery the day before sparked the cleansing. In these versions a thirty-four-year-old railway switchman named A. F. Thompson was heading home from work around eleven P.M. on October 29 when he noticed that he was being followed by two men. After he crossed a bridge near his home and

headed down an embankment, the pair attacked him. In the brief fight that followed they stabbed Thompson in the side and left a gash on his hand. Thompson said one of the men held the knife to his throat and told him to be quiet or they would cut his head off. After grabbing his money, the pair ran off.⁹

It would have been little more than a routine mugging except that Thompson claimed the robbers were black. As Stansberry put it in his oral history, "After they found Thompson cut up over there in the yard and he said the Negroes did it, tension began to build."¹⁰

Whatever the cause, it is clear from the affidavits that on the morning of October 30 there was a sense that something was going to happen. William Fugate, a railroad construction foreman, said that he had "heard rumors prior to this time that an attempt would be made to run the Negroes out of Corbin as soon as the construction work was completed." His first inkling that something might be imminent was when Steve Rogers, a flagman on the L&N, appeared at Fugate's railroad car with a crowd and began asking him about a black who had left the night before. Rogers said a trunk was missing from a carnival that had come to town and a black was suspected. What Fugate faced was not yet a mob, but in that moment Fugate could see its outlines. How else to explain Rogers, a railroad worker, and his crowd of men questioning people about an alleged robbery?

We know little about Rogers beyond the facts that he grew up in Corbin and was nicknamed "Pistol Pete" because of the gun he liked to wave around. But in the hours that followed, he would become the most powerful man in Corbin: He would decide who could stay and who had to go. For now, though, he and his men contented themselves with quizzing Fugate. As Fugate and Rogers talked, Police Chief Boggs shouldered his way through the crowd and began his own round of interviews. Only this time the chief grilled Fugate's black work crew both about the trunk and the Thompson robbery.¹¹

The questioning apparently went nowhere, and, although Boggs told the black laborers to go back to work, Fugate was uneasy. He asked the chief and then members of the crowd of whites if they were planning

"to molest the negroes that were working for me." If the blacks were going to be run out, Fugate said he wanted to arrange to evacuate them. Fugate does not say what he was told, but he was apparently satisfied because he said he dropped the idea of moving his men.¹²

Still the rumors persisted. Alex Tye, a black janitor in the master mechanic's office, said he became so alarmed by the rumors during the day that he hurried home and with his wife and stepson tried to figure out what they could do. Whatever plans they made are not described, but they were inadequate. In a matter of hours he and his family would be trapped in their home by a mob.¹³

As the day wore on, Fugate noticed that his work crew was growing increasingly uneasy. To calm them and allay his own fears, Fugate went looking for the chief again. This time he found a police officer named Barker who said that "nothing would be done to the Negroes." Reassured, Fugate returned to the railroad car that doubled as his office.¹⁴

But already the situation was beginning to worsen. John Turner, who had gone to the carnival with two friends, found they were running a gauntlet as they walked back to town that evening. Twice they were stopped by whites who cursed them and told them they would be run out of Corbin that night. Terrified, Turner raced home and locked himself in his house. Under his bed he had stashed his gun.¹⁵

Meanwhile Fugate, who was finishing up paperwork in his railroad car, was interrupted by a worker from one of the other crews. Fugate said the man "informed me that trouble had begun and white folks were shooting all the Negroes down there." He was only partly correct. No blacks had been shot, but the cleansing had begun.¹⁶

For John Turner, the cleansing began when a mob kicked in his front door. Turner grabbed for his gun but was not quick enough. "Bob Smith held a gun to the back of my head. Steve Rogers had me covered with a gun and Bryant had a gun in his hand, which he kept in his pocket while standing in front of me," Turner said. Even if he had fought back, it would have been suicidal. While five or six men ransacked his home, Turner could see a large mob outside. The mob was armed, and they were firing wildly as if celebrating.¹⁷

In a ritual that would be repeated throughout the night, Turner was marched at gunpoint to the train station while the mob went through his home stealing or destroying what they pleased. At the station Turner and others who had been rounded up were guarded in the Colored Waiting Room. As different trains pulled in, some of the unlucky captives would be hustled aboard. Where each one was sent was a matter of chance.¹⁸

At the YMCA, where train crews normally stayed, a white railroad worker named Alfred Walker was collecting a maintenance crew when the mob arrived. "There was a black man working there at the YMCA," Walker said in his 1977 oral history. "When they came up in front of the YMCA, there was a shot fired. They began piling in, looking for this black man that worked there." Walker said the mob was eventually faced down by one of the maids. "When the crowd came in the YMCA door, they started upstairs and there was a lady there by the name of Mrs. Putnam. She worked upstairs and she made up beds. So Mrs. Putnam, she wouldn't let them upstairs. Then they left the YMCA."¹⁹

The black man Walker was referring to was a janitor named Tom Good, and the mob's next stop was his house. At sometime between 10 and 10:30 P.M., "the mob began by throwing rocks at the house and broke out most of the window lights," said Good in his sworn statement. When the mob started trying to break down his front door, Good opened it and was confronted by Rogers. "We are driving all you damn Negroes out of this town tonight," was how Rogers greeted the janitor. He then ordered Good and his wife to the train station.

Thanks in part to Good's white neighbors, this particular expulsion didn't go as smoothly as the others. When they saw what was happening, three of Good's neighbors rushed to the house to help Good's wife, who had been bedridden for the past two weeks. Rogers suddenly found himself confronted with whites as well as Good who were all pleading that Good's wife could not be moved. Rogers made a small concession. They still had to go to the depot, but he would not force them to leave immediately as long as the white neighbors promised it would be "as soon as possible." With that Rogers and his mob left in search of their next victims.²⁰

It was during this hunt that the mob fell upon the band. "I soon observed that a crowd was falling in behind the band and was making a great deal of noise and firing guns and pistol," said T. D. Thomas, one of Blake Killenger's fellow band members. Although they didn't realize it immediately, they had fallen into the mob's grip. When the band tried to turn toward Sutherland's drugstore, Thomas said that they were instead ordered by Rogers to head in the direction of the Wilbur Hotel. "Fearing personal violence," Thomas said, "we complied with the orders." The route to the hotel took the band past the depot, where Killenger saw a strange sight. It was "full of colored people," Killenger recalled. "I don't know where they had come from. They were from everywhere, some of them even in night clothes."²¹

Once past the depot, the mob and its captive band marched north alongside the railroad tracks for a short distance and then crossed the rail line to head east up Center Street to the Wilbur Hotel. J. A. Walker, the white foreman for the black work crew that was paving Corbin's street, was in bed at the hotel when the mob arrived. His first inkling that something was wrong was a call from the night clerk. When he went downstairs he found pandemonium. Outside there were ten or fifteen heavily armed men "shouting, shooting and using very profane language, the purport of which was to the effect that 'the black sons of bitches' all had to leave town." From time to time some in the mob would make forays from the hotel to hunt down blacks. Inside the hotel, mob members were holding two of his work crew. Walker said his men told him, "They were being run out of town and wanted sufficient money to pay their railroad fares." Walker advanced the two men money for tickets. Later that night, he would hunt down the rest of his crew at the depot to give them money as well.²²

While Walker was inside the hotel trying to help his work crew, Killenger and the rest of the band were outside trying to figure out how they were going to get away. Killenger had hoped that he could slip off in the confusion of the search, but he said Rogers made it too dangerous. Rogers and his fellow mob members were, in Killenger's words, "just blazing away." A newspaper account the following day estimated the mob fired at least 500 shots as they roamed the town.²³

Once they were finished at the hotel, the mob, with its fifteen-piece band in tow, struck out in search of more black victims. This time they headed to the home of Fanny and Alex Tye at the north end of town. Tye, who had left work early when he heard rumors that the blacks would be driven out, lived near the hotel with his wife and stepson, Cearney Parks. At around eleven P.M. Fanny called her husband to the window. Outside the mob was moving down the street hitting home after home. The first to fall was the Turner house. Then they moved to the Lyttle home next door to the Tyes. Rogers began banging on the Lyttles' front door ordering them to open up. He alternated between threatening to lynch those inside if they did not open the door and ordering the mob to break it down. As Alex Tye watched, it dawned on him that Rogers thought he was actually besieging the Tye house. But Tye realized that once Rogers discovered his mistake, it would be only a matter of time before the mob would come crashing through the Tyes' front door. Their only hope was to escape. But as they ran out the back, they were spotted by some mob members. "As we were leaving the house some one guarding the front door of our house fired two shots and called to the rest of the mob to follow us," Tye said. Although no one was wounded, somewhere during the frightening escape Fanny became separated from Alex and Cearney. In the dark of night Alex tried to find his wife. Mob members were everywhere. After giving up the search, Alex and his stepson worked their way across town to the Manhattan Hotel. It was dangerously close to the depot, but they knew the owner because Fanny Tye worked there as a cook.²⁴

Years later Bill Early, son of the hotel owner, recalled in his oral history the night Alex Tye and his stepson suddenly appeared. "My father had a restaurant right there across from the depot. We had a colored woman cook and she and her husband lived up on Railroad Street. And they had a son. The son was about my age. The night they run the colored people out, her husband and her son came to the hotel and my father put them upstairs in one of the rooms. They stayed there all night and the next day."²⁵

The Earlys were not the only whites to hide the mob's prey. The company that had the contract for paving Corbin's streets had set up seven tents to house its black workers, among them Will Jones. Jones,

who was sleeping in his tent when the mob descended on their encampment, was able to slip away in the confusion. For reasons that are not clear, he ran to the home of O. A. Miles, who owned a garage in town. In his affidavit Miles said, "As I returned to my residence, a Negro came to my front door, pleading for protection. I took the Negro over to the jail and asked that he be allowed in the jail for protection." It proved to be only a brief respite. Later that night the jailer appeared with one of the mob members, and, despite his protests, Jones was escorted to the depot.²⁶

At the depot raucous whites surrounded an ever growing crowd of blacks in the colored waiting room. While they waited, small dramas played out around the station. When the night baggage agent found some of his black employees being detained, he spirited them into the baggage room to hide. It took the mob only a few minutes to discover what was happening and storm the baggage room.

Sometime during the evening, after gathering together a few possessions, the janitor Tom Good brought his sick wife into the depot. They had kept the promise made by their white neighbors to the mob. At around ten P.M., a physician, B. J. Edwards, outraged by what was happening, stormed in and "protested as vigorously as circumstances permitted." When he warned the rioters that they could be arrested, he was hooted down by a mob member who said the doctor should go to Richmond, Kentucky where "there were plenty of Negroes to live with." When the doctor continued to argue with the mob, Police Chief Boggs told him to keep quiet because, "I would not be able to accomplish anything." The chief was certainly living proof of that. A number of people mentioned in their affidavits that Boggs spent most of the night wandering around town saying there was nothing he could do. His attitude, according to one witness, was that "he did not mind the Negroes being run off, but that the shooting would be dangerous and that some white person might be hurt."²⁷

Outside the depot, the hunt continued. "We were just marching in different places in town," Killenger said. "They's trying to get all the colored people together to get out of town. He didn't let us loose until well after dark." When the mob finally allowed the band to stop playing, Killenger said, "The railroad station was full of colored people—chil-

dren, women and everybody else. They were making efforts then, making plans to get 'em out of town. The railroad company sent two or three passenger coaches out to the station and they were to hook those on train number 24."²⁸

The blacks were loaded on to at least two different trains. According to a newspaper account, one group went on a train headed for Knoxville that left at about two A.M. But a railroad worker who passed the depot that morning recalled "seeing them all lined up on the railroad to get out of here as I went to work." Blake Killenger said he thought this second trainload that left in the morning was sent to Louisville. "What they did in Louisville, I don't know."²⁹

While the last of the blacks at the depot were waiting to be loaded on a train, Alex Tye and his stepson decided to leave the safety of the hotel and try to make their way back home. Once again they were able to evade any marauding whites, but when they arrived home they found it ransacked. Their white fellow citizens had stolen everything from opera glasses to a shotgun and what they had not taken lay smashed on the floor. As they poked through the rubble, Ben Egner, a white neighbor, came by with good news. Fanny, who had disappeared while they were being chased by the mob, had found shelter at the Egner house.³⁰

The Tyes escaped the mob's dragnet, but as they stood in the rubble of their home, it was clear they could no longer live in Corbin. The fate of a few other blacks was not as certain. "Some members of the mob advocated allowing the family of John Barry, who has been a resident of Corbin for thirty-two years, to remain saying he was a 'good nigger,'" the *Lexington Herald* reported. "Others favored ridding the place of all Negroes." In the end some blacks were allowed to stay. "There were two old Negroes that stayed," recalled W. R. Stansberry. "One of them was, we called him 'Nigger' Dennis. He was old at the time. He had lived here all of his life and they told him to just to go to his room and stay there. He wouldn't be bothered. And another old lady by the name of Emma Woods."³¹

In fact, census records show that the black population in Corbin, which had been sixty in 1910, was exactly three in 1920: Emma Woods and her sixty-five-year-old boarder Steve Stansbury and the affectionately nicknamed "Nigger" Dennis. Beyond the city limits, there was a

lesser but still substantial drop. Laurel County saw its black population cut in half from 657 to 333 between 1910 and 1920. Whitley County's black population went from 1,111 to 600. By 1930 it would be cut in half again, and after 1960 it would never again rise above 150.³²

In the first few weeks after the cleansing, a few blacks tried to return. For example, A. C. Martin, a white baggage agent in Corbin, talked some of his former black employees into returning to work. One of them, Pete Frakes, described what happened. "We worked one shift and saw from the demeanor of the crowd on the street that it would not be safe for us to remain. We left on the following evening."

There were, however, two small but significant changes in the way whites reacted to the cleansing. A year earlier the editor at the Knoxville paper had denounced the Unicoi County expulsion. Now, in the wake of Corbin's cleansing, the editor of the local paper also attacked the mob's handiwork. "Our name has gone out over the nation with a black spot that can never be removed," the editor said. "We are glad that the minister and other good people are openly expressing their condemnation of the mob spirit." It was not much, but it was better than the editorial silence or racist screeds after earlier cleansings in Lawrence County, Missouri and Forsyth County, Georgia.

More importantly, the state decided to prosecute the leader of the mob, Steve Rogers, aka Pistol Pete. A decade earlier Kentucky had arrested and convicted Dr. Emelius Champion, the leader of the Birmingham raid. But that was as much about stamping out an insurrection as it was about protecting black citizens. It is clear from the letters of commonwealth's attorney, Joseph B. Snyder, who handled the prosecution, that he wanted the people in Corbin to know that attacking innocent blacks was no longer acceptable. In a letter to the governor in December 1920, Snyder described the "antediluvian" racial attitudes in Corbin:

The opposition to the Negro in Corbin is something fierce. Negroes are not permitted to live in the town and are not permitted to pass through the town without being run, shot and whipped." Snyder said the government had to make it clear to whites that "the Negro is in this country to stay and that they will have to deal with him with the laws

instead of by force. This theory is not race equality but it is a later day theory of inter racial relations that will bring about a better feeling among the races and to keep each race in its place.

For his part, Snyder won a conviction against "Pistol Pete" in 1920 for his role in the riot. Rogers was sentenced to the state penitentiary for two years, but the punishment had little impact on the people in Corbin. A year after Rogers went to prison, Snyder told the governor that "the anti negro sentiment is as strong there as ever before." Rogers's conviction, in fact, became a cause célèbre. Three hundred townspeople signed a petition supporting his pardon saying Rogers was "an unfortunate victim of circumstance." The townspeople also explained to the governor that "hundreds of good citizens quietly and in a very orderly way assisted in driving out this lawless element, in putting them on trains, and sending them out of Whitley County, in a quiet and determined way, and it is evident that such action was at the time demanded and sanctioned and approved by the whole community of law abiding citizens."³³

The governor denied the pardon.

Glenda Livingston locked herself in her hotel room. It was admittedly an odd thing to do. The day she had spent in London, Kentucky was at worst uneventful. No one had threatened her or had even said anything that could be termed unkind. In fact, everyone at the local elementary school had been very solicitous. She had expected that. As leader of a school accreditation team, she had come to London in 1990 to inspect the Bush Elementary School. The last thing local school officials wanted to do was upset her. But that didn't matter. She was afraid.³⁴

Livingston was not easily frightened. As a young woman in the late 1950s she had gone from the small, all-black college of Kentucky State to the sprawling campus of the University of Kentucky at Lexington. This was before the March on Washington, voter registration drives, or the freedom rides, and she was the only black in all of her classes. No one was rude to her, but, then again, few were kind. She was simply ignored and spent a very lonely year at the university.

Glenda Livingston is a warm, engaging woman with a ready laugh; she says that she wanted her master's degree and, if that meant being lonely, so be it.³⁵

But London, Kentucky was different. "There were absolutely no blacks. I saw one teenager when we had the opening dinner but then the school that I was sent to with my team—Bush Elementary—there were no blacks on the faculty. No black students. Not nothing." She had grown up in Lexington, about an hour's drive from London. But it could have been the moon, because this was a county where blacks didn't go. The stories, stories that Glenda Livingston had heard, were a matter of legend among blacks. And all of those stories centered around one town, Corbin, just a few miles from London.

Livingston said she first heard about Corbin when she went to college at Kentucky State in Frankfort. "I went to college with kids who lived there and who talked about it. You didn't go inside the city limits of Corbin," Livingston said. "There were signs even posted that said you couldn't come in to the city limits. . . . I don't know if anything happened to cause that or not, but it was pretty well understood by all those guys from Eastern Kentucky that you just did not go into Corbin."³⁶

For Livingston, who rose from elementary schoolteacher to school administrator, and her husband, Joe, an electrician, Corbin had been a world away. They and their only son, Shawn, lived a comfortable, middle-class life in Lexington. One of their rituals was to have breakfast together every morning. "My husband has to be at work at seven. He always got it started," Mrs. Livingston recalled. "Saturday was the big breakfast because we weren't running to get places. We were a threesome. I mean we did everything together." It wasn't until Shawn turned sixteen that places like Corbin would loom large over their breakfast table.³⁷

Mrs. Livingston and her son remember the moment differently. She thinks they were watching television when a story sparked a conversation about dangerous places in Kentucky. Shawn says the conversation took place over breakfast.³⁸

"I was sixteen, and I had my license, and I was driving everywhere just so I could drive," said Shawn, who is now a reference librarian at

the University of Kentucky. "We did a lot of talking around the breakfast table before we went off to go to work. And this was I guess January. I got my license, we were still in the midst of school so I was spending my weekend driving and they set me down. I wouldn't say it was deathly serious but it was a very serious conversation."³⁹

Whether it was in front of the television or over breakfast, both Shawn and his mother agree on what was said. "You are never to drive to Corbin or Morehead. If we find out, you are in more trouble than you can get from the police."

Neither Shawn nor his mother are sure of why Morehead was included. Shawn said his father, who has since died, always warned his family about Morehead without saying exactly why. "We had talked earlier about stories that my dad and also his family told him about one night the blacks being run out of town in Morehead," Shawn said.

"Those places in eastern Kentucky didn't welcome blacks," Mrs. Livingston said. "And we told him that, you know, when you are driving around with friends and in particular because he had lots of friends that were white. They did things together and went places together and so that was the reason we kept emphasizing that you cannot go into those areas. You are not accepted like the others."

For whites, the idea that their town is considered dangerous can be galling. Mrs. Livingston said that when she was an administrator with the Lexington school system, two of the people she worked with were from Corbin. "They denied that there was ever a time when blacks were not welcome."⁴⁰

Allen Dizney, eighty, who grew up in Corbin, goes even further. He says the blacks were never run out of town. Dizney is a history buff and the man the public library recommends when a history question comes up. Dizney says the story about blacks being run out is an invention of the "damned media."⁴¹

The damned media in this case was Robby Henson, a documentary filmmaker, who came to Corbin in 1987. Henson, who grew up about fifty miles away in Danville, had heard about Corbin's reputation as a child and thought it would be interesting to do a film about the town. Unaware of the information in the state archives, Henson had to rely on a few old newspaper clips that gave sketchy descriptions of a "race

riot" in Corbin. Instead Henson spent much of the film chronicling the racial attitudes in all-white Corbin in 1987. The town was not pleased.⁴²

"Some reporter wrote that story without ever coming down and finding what was happening," Dizney says.

The truth to that is Corbin did not run the black people out of town. Now the truth is that there was a work crew that came in here that was about forty men and they were black with white bosses. Now we got a bad crew in here and they were drinking and they were carousing and some feller got his throat cut one night, a white man, and he claimed he was robbed and what not. But anyway they decided, since they were having so much trouble with this crew, that they would remove 'em from Corbin. There was no guns fired. It was all false. They just run this crew out. Black wasn't the situation. It just happened to be a black crew. It could've been a white crew but it wasn't.

According to Dizney, reporters invented the stories that were published about the riot in Corbin. "It was the damned media," he complains, "and I'm cussing you because it was the damned media that done all the bad stories that they didn't know the hell what they was talking about." And it is because of those stories, Dizney says, that Corbin is forced unfairly to live with the reputation of being racist.

When he worked in Cincinnati after World War II, Dizney says his black co-workers picked on him. "I wanted to know what the heck was going on so I cornered one of them one night and he told me. He said, 'Well, you're from Corbin. You all run all our people out of town back in the twenties and what not.' He said you can't go through there on the passenger train unless you duck down because people'll shoot at you and what not. I told him that was the biggest bunk I've ever heard and I told him what the deal was."

In Dizney's telling, his black co-workers eventually went to Corbin and found out there was racial harmony. "They come down here on their own and found out that all of that was a damn lie, that Corbin did not look down on black people."

"Makes me madder than hell," Dizney says. "You people in the media come up some time and you want to make a big fancy story so you make it sound like hell and that ain't the truth."

He also explains how, until the man's death, he was good friends with one of the blacks in town named Howard Nolan. It was Nolan, Dizney says, who told him what really happened in 1919. As he talks, Dizney's outrage grows. He rattles off the names of black people who lived in Corbin. He claims the trains were not segregated. His wife breaks in to say that Harry Nolan was well treated at the old age home. Dizney recalls how he was misunderstood by a filmmaker who was making a documentary about racism in Corbin. The memory still rankles. "He talked about me being a racist and that sort of thing." For some reason, Dizney says, the film even bothered with the name of his dog.

The dog was named Nigger.

The damned media.

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