

Scottsboro: An American Tragedy

Maria C. Witherspoon

Scottsboro was undoubtedly a tragedy. This episode in American history proves how many people in the South were not concerned with how their fellow Americans were treated. Because the Scottsboro Boys were young African-American men, they were treated unfairly by the southern whites and were placed at a disadvantage because of the color of their skin. Class, gender, and Southern culture were also contributing factors.

Racism was an immense problem in the American South during the 1930s. The nine African-American boys involved in the case were placed at a disadvantage because of their race, as soon as they decided to get on the train. The train ride proved that an African-American in the American South could not innocently ride a train without being harassed with statements such as, “Nigger bastard, this is a white man’s train. You better get off. All you black bastards better get off!” (Carson, 378). By being an African-American living or travelling in the South during this period, one could be falsely accused of a crime and convicted with little proof, just as the Scottsboro Boys were. Two young white women, Victoria Price and Ruby Bates, chose to accuse all nine of the African-American boys of raping them after authorities discovered them travelling in their company. These women had very little proof, but since these boys were black, they were aware that the majority of other whites would support them.

Class was also a factor in determining how African-Americans were treated in the American South, and it was a significant factor in the Scottsboro case. The Scottsboro Boys were poor, raised in financially disadvantaged families, and who utilized trains to find work. Victoria Price, Ruby Bates, and the other whites on that train were also looking for work. Even though Price and Bates were not supposed to be on the train travelling in the company of black men, they knew they could take attention off themselves and place it on the black Scottsboro Boys if they accused them of rape.

Maria C. Witherspoon

During the period of the Scottsboro Boys, Southern whites frequently disrespected and belittled black men. Race, gender, and class also placed black men at a disadvantage. Unwritten Southern customs dictated that black men were not allowed to make any kind of comments of a sexual nature towards white women. Even if a white woman felt as if she had been harassed or threatened by a black man, a mere accusation was sufficient to have him arrested. The case of the Scottsboro Boys proved how easily a white female could accuse a black male of rape or sexual harassment. The Scottsboro Boys were taking an innocent train ride and Price and Bates accused them of rape. If their plan was to make false accusations they could have chosen any other man on the train including the white men, but by accusing all nine of the black men on the train, the ladies knew that the black men would be convicted with little or no evidence.

The Negro prisoners and their white accusers were taken to Scottsboro where the Negroes were formally charged with criminal assault on a woman, a capital offense in Alabama. The white men who had been in the box car were held as material witnesses (*New York Times*).

With regard to culture, life in the American South was always different than other regions. A large portion of the Southern culture involved discrimination against blacks including belittling them and segregation. Majority of the racism against blacks stemmed from slavery which was heavy in the American South. Many of the effects from slavery remained in the Southern culture. Blacks were limited in where they could travel during segregation, and even if they decided to go certain places, they were tormented by whites. As soon as the Scottsboro Boys got on the train they were immediately confronted by a white teen, which proved that blacks were constantly harassed. "Then one of them said to me, "You know, nigger, we don't let no darkies hang around here, and if we catch you anywhere near here after dark we'll shoot you. Now get going." ("Primary Sources: The First Days" <PBS.org>). It seemed as though if blacks went to a location where they were being tormented and they still decided to stay, whites would become angry and find ways to get them in serious trouble. "He had paid little attention when he had seen them in Paint Rock standing with the white hobos and wearing men's clothes," (Carson, 380). When one of the Scottsboro Boys saw

Victoria and Ruby standing with some white hobos, they were more than likely making a plan against the boys.

Organizations such as the NAACP and the Communist Party sent attorneys to Alabama to represent the boys.. “The Scottsboro trials in 1931 gave the Communist Party an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to black rights,” (Carson, 384). “The NAACP also sent lawyers to Alabama,” (Carson, 385). The external opinions of these organizations and parties challenged the horrific treatment of blacks by providing a stronger voice for the underrepresented individuals. There were also voices from literary figures such as Langston Hughes.

Scottsboro's just a little place:

No shame is write across its face --

Its courts too weak to stand against a mob,

Its people's heart, too small to hold a sob.

(Hughes, Langston “Primary Sources: Langston Hughes on Scottsboro” <PBS.org>).

The Scottsboro incident was a phenomenon that contributes to the understanding of social change. The incident showed how people from all over the nation pulled together to help ensure justice for the Scottsboro Boys. Even some whites decided to take the side of the black young men. This incident opened the eyes of people, mainly Southern Americans, to inform them of the horrific treatment blacks encountered on a daily basis and in return caused them to change their racist ways against blacks. However, this incident still did not change the way some whites viewed blacks, but that is to be expected since some people just refuse to change. As long as majority of the region and the nation as a whole agreed to begin a transformation, this is one of the incidents that would begin a slow but powerful transformation in the American South.

Works Cited

"Primary Sources: Excerpts from the Transcript of Haywood Patterson's Second Trial." PBS. PBS. Web. 08 Apr. 2012.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/scottsboro/filmmore/ps_horton.html>.

Article in *New York Times*, UMKC School of Law. Web. 08 Apr. 2012.

<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/FTrials/scottsboro/SB_NYT31.html>

Maria C. Witherspoon

PBS. PBS. Web. 08 Apr. 2012.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/scottsboro/filmmore/ps_wright.html>.

PBS. PBS. Web. 08 Apr. 2012.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/scottsboro/filmmore/ps_hughes.html>.

Xxxxxx, Carson. *The American People and the Struggle for Freedom*. vol. 2. Prentice Hall, 2011. Print.