

Midnight Visitors: Part one in an examination of the short life and troubled times of Rogers Hamilton

John Fleming

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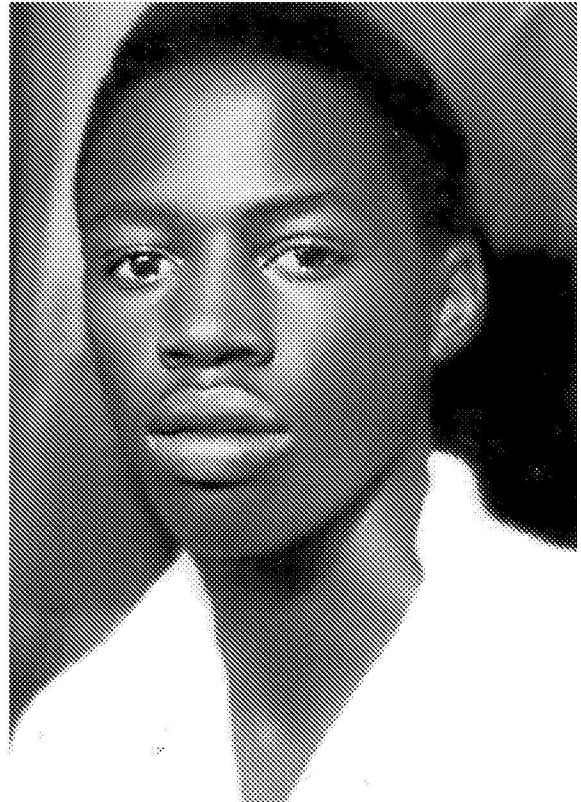
Beatrice Hamilton told Detective Oscar Coley the pickup truck was green, the license plate was yellow, the numbers on it were black and the man who took her son away the night he was killed was white.

Coley did not believe her.

Yet, a mama's recollection of events the night before seems as clear as the stars on an autumn night in rural Alabama. Mrs. Hamilton's words — captured more than half a century ago in the official report from Alabama Bureau of Investigation's Agent Coley — display a clear sense of what happened and a clear sense of the fear a mother felt for her child.

It was turning cold by late October 1957. The dozen-plus children under the roof of Beatrice Hamilton's sharecropper shack off Alabama 97 outside Hayneville in Lowndes County were crammed into big beds, piled high with blankets.

Most were deep asleep after midnight, when a pickup rambled down a long dirt lane, now called McCurdy Road, toward the shack, tucked in the edge of some woods beyond a field about a mile off the highway. The truck, carrying at least two men, traveled over the red clay, past the turnoff to the house of George McCurdy, the landlord. It passed through a cattle gate set between barbed wire fences and continued on up a few hundred yards to the shack.



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Rogers Hamilton, who was killed in 1957
(Photo special to The Star)

Mrs. Hamilton said she heard the truck come toward the house, that it drove into the yard and turned around. Then, she said, she heard a man call out for Rogers, twice.

Rogers Hamilton was the 18-year-old man of the house. Since Rogers' father died three years before, George McCurdy had relied on Rogers to do a lot of the work around the farm. So it stood to reason, at least in Beatrice Hamilton's mind, that it was McCurdy who had come calling after Rogers for some late-night chore, not men out to murder him.

So she roused her child from his slumber, telling him Mr. George needed him, and sent him out into the yard before realizing it was not McCurdy waiting beside that green pickup, but another man.

It was something in the muffled conversation she heard, or the body language she saw, or the mother's intuition she felt that caused her to order one of her charges nearby to go and fetch her coat. She was going after Rogers.

By the time she was out the door, the truck was lumbering down the lane with Rogers inside. So she ran, she told Agent Coley, through the yard, across the cattle gate and down the dirt lane, with the moon and stars to light her way, though she had a flashlight.

Then, in the distance, she saw the pickup stopped in the road. Rogers was standing there, the other man beside him. As the man reached into his pocket and pulled out a handgun, she only had time to shout, "Lord, don't shoot my boy," before a blast rang out and her child fell to the ground.

The man got into the truck and drove away as Beatrice Hamilton continued running toward her fallen son.

When she finally switched on the flashlight, it was to illuminate the face of her dead son, a bullet hole in his forehead.

She turned then and made her way to the nearby McCurdy residence.

The next day, Agent Coley arrived with a deputy sheriff named Joe Jackson in tow. Standing there at the Hamilton shack, she told Coley what happened, and he didn't believe her.

Coley was a stranger to Beatrice Hamilton. He was, current law-enforcement agents say, from the Mobile office, unfamiliar with the territory and surely, when he first came to town on the day after the murder, unfamiliar with where a certain sharecropper's dwelling might be. So Coley did what most out-of-county law enforcement officers would do then or now, he dropped by Sheriff Frank Ryals' office to ask for assistance in finding George McCurdy's place and the Hamilton shack that sat on it.

He was given Deputy Joe Jackson, a veteran law officer — someone Beatrice Hamilton would have been familiar with, someone the entire black community was familiar with.

Blacks and whites in and around Lowndes County make mention of Joe Jackson even now, but his brother, Lux, comes up more frequently, often in connection with his heavy drinking, and his tendency to beat up black people.

When Coley arrived, he conducted a number of interviews. He spoke to George McCurdy, who told him Rogers had worked for him all his life and never given anyone any trouble. He talked to Preston Field, a cousin of Rogers, who offered few clues.

Coley also interviewed two girls Rogers was thought to be sweet on, Hattie Mae Edwards and Hattie Lewis.

Edwards told Coley she had stopped seeing him two months before. Lewis said she had recently been seeing him and that “she had been going with no one else since that time, that she turned down all the boys for Roger(s)”.

And he talked with Rogers’ mama, Beatrice.

She told him, in great detail, what she saw and heard that night, the color of the truck, the license plate — though she was not able to read the numbers on it — and the man who talked to her son, the muffled voices, the clatter of the truck as it left the yard with Rogers inside.

She told Coley plenty, but she did not volunteer, nor does he appear to have asked, who took her boy away and put a bullet in his head.

She also didn’t offer any other thoughts, including that Lux Jackson had, to say the least, a certain reputation for violence. That was something Beatrice Hamilton wasn’t likely to share with an out-of-town detective, especially when she was standing next to the man’s brother.

At the end of his report — a four-page document that contains the only substance in the FBI file on the case — Coley wrote, “since it was 1:30 in the morning, it is doubtful that Beatrice Hamilton could have determined the color of the truck or the color of the men who carried him away.”

He concluded the report by writing, “It is the opinion of the writer that Beatrice Hamilton, although sincere in her belief that her statement is true, that due to emotional upset of her son being killed that in all probability she is mistaken in many respects to what she stated. At the present time, there is no clue as to what could have been the motive for this killing.”

On Monday, the story of Rogers Hamilton turns to a park in Cleveland, Ohio, followed by a visit with an old friend of his in Lowndes County and, finally, a love not forgotten.

The short life of Rogers Hamilton, part 2: Voices from a Cleveland park

John Fleming

Star Editor at large | Posted: Monday, December 13, 2010 3:00 am

Euclid Creek Park on the outskirts of Cleveland is a green place with a busy access road cutting through the middle of it. Sprinkled from one end of this stretched-out park to the other are pavilions over concrete pads, surrounded by grills and parking lots, restrooms and basketball courts.

It is a typical green space in an industrial northern U.S. city, about as far from the cotton fields and creek bottoms of Lowndes County as you can get without going into the next country.

But it is to this city, and Chicago and New York, that the Hamilton extended family fled in the days after 18-year-old Rogers Hamilton was shot and killed on a late October night in 1957.

The morning after Rogers was shot, the landlord, George McCurdy, came by the sharecroppers' shack the boy had lived in with his extended family.

He spoke to the matriarch, Beatrice Hamilton, but a good many of the dozen-plus children and teens were there, too. McCurdy expressed sorrow and frustration that Rogers had been taken in the middle of the night and driven up the road, where he was then shot within sight of his mother. But he also said there was little he could do.

More than half a century later standing in that Cleveland park, Lexi Fields, one of Rogers' cousins, recounted what happened the morning after.

“‘Jute,’” McCurdy said, calling Beatrice Hamilton by her nickname, “I sure hope they catch those people who did this,” said Fields, who was 14 at the time of Rogers' death. “But then he said, ‘You know I can't do anything for y'all, I can't protect you. Y'all better get on away from here.’”

And so they did, streaming first to Birmingham, then Cleveland, New York and Chicago.



The short life of Rogers Hamilton, part 2: Voices from a Cleveland park

Margaret Goodwin, a cousin of Rogers Hamilton, left, Elizabeth Welch, his niece, and Beatrice Christian, his sister, discuss the death of Hamilton recently in Atlanta. (Photo for The Anniston Star by John Fleming)

Cousin Ella Cannon can't remember that exodus; neither can her brother, John. She was 3 and he was 4. Relatives put them on a train bound for Chicago, alone, with a note attached containing their names and the names of relatives.

To understand the horrors of a night half a century ago, it helps to read the words of Beatrice Hamilton, laid down by Agent Oscar Coley of the Alabama Bureau of Investigation in his report on the day after her son was murdered.

They have the power of the moment still fresh at hand yet are couched in the language of a bureaucrat.

That is not the case with the present. Words from the family today give one a sense of terror reaching out of the past.

Beatrice Christian, Rogers' sister, who was 14 at the time of the shooting, tells a remarkably similar story to the one their mother told to Agent Coley so many years ago, as do the other surviving members of the family who were there and remember what happened the night of Oct. 22, 1957.

None of them have ever read Coley's report.

A pickup carrying at least two men came to the house in the middle of the night. They called to Rogers and he went outside. After a brief conversation, they put him in the truck, drove up the road a piece and shot him in the head.

Keeping the story alive

An incident more than 50 years ago may have split the family, but it also brings them together.

Once every two years, the extended family meets at Euclid Park. On a day late this past summer, some drove from New York, others came from across town. A chartered Greyhound came over from Chicago.

There were many. The family estimated the gathering draws 200 to 300, and it rings true.

Conversation ranges from the quality of today's beef ribs vs. last night's fried fish to the anemic Cleveland Indians to the upcoming professional football season. It's the simple, sweet fare of family reunions. Still, the quiet bind that holds this huge family together is the teenager shot so long ago — his image printed on the reunion T-shirt and his name mentioned frequently, especially in the presence of children.

Rogers' sisters and cousins seem to take it as a mission to tell this story, to drill it into the psyche of the young so it won't be forgotten by this generation or the next.

Elizabeth Welch, who was 9 at the time, remembers the incident vividly and tells it in much the same way as everyone else. Today, though, she tells it in front of a clutch of children, ranging from grade-school age up through young adults.

She has no trouble holding their attention.

Stories of that night are told with frequency, but there are also the stories of what a fine boy Rogers was and of his personality.

“He was my favorite uncle,” Elizabeth Welch added. “He carried a comb and he had this broken mirror in his back pocket. I used to jump up on his back all the time when I would see him. Once, I went to jump on him and started to slide down his back, and he had his hands full or something so he couldn’t hold me up and I slid down and I cut my leg on that broken mirror in his pocket. I still have that scar, right here on the inside of my leg.”

He was, his cousins and some of his friends who still live in Lowndes County say, handsome, sweet and popular with the girls.

It is that side of him, many have grown to suspect through the years, that may have led him to run afoul of a certain group of men in Hayneville, the county seat.

Part of that speculation has arisen because of a newspaper article in the Pittsburgh (Pa.) Courier written at the time. It contains accusations, without any attribution, that Rogers was killed because of his interest in the “wrong” colored girl.

The family repeats this frequently — as do others including Bob Mants, a long-time civil rights leader in Lowndes County — as a way of suggesting he may have been killed because the girl was also the object of interest of a white man.

Another story, parts of which are mentioned in the same newspaper article, says Rogers made the mistake of thumbing a ride with a white woman, and that this woman returned with a group of white men who beat him for this apartheid-era transgression.

Rogers and his friends did indeed walk and hitchhike along the road that leads into Hayneville, and they, collectively, had interests in girls who were there, his friends say.

Lucius Evans, a retired mill worker who lives near his boyhood home in Lowndesboro, just a few miles from where Rogers lived, said the boys often traveled to Hayneville to visit the home of a woman they called “the white girl.”

“She wasn’t white,” said Evans, “she was real light-complected, and she had these three beautiful daughters,” he said on a recent fall day in Lowndesboro.

Evans recounted how he and Rogers and others would make their way to the woman’s house in Hayneville because it was a gathering place for black teens and they played music.

“She had this Rock-Ola juke box,” said Evans, “and she sold Cokes and hotdogs, and we would go there and talk to the girls and just have a nice innocent time.”

And, he added later, she sold corn whiskey out the back door, confiscated whiskey brought to her by deputies, including Lux Jackson, who was known around Lowndes County for his tendency to beat up black people.

But, Evans said, “Rogers didn’t always go to the ‘white girl’s’ house, but kept going up the road (south on Alabama 97) on up the way there and back in a neighborhood on the far side of the road. I don’t know who he was going to see. But he was going to visit someone else.”

A house trailer beside the road

She lives in the same neighborhood, to the east of Alabama 97, off a road called Letohatchee.

Her yard is untidy and the facade of the mobile home is worn and faded under the searing sun of the Black Belt. The little porch is rickety and the storm door off-center, ajar so the blare of daytime television seeps into the outdoors.

Inside, Hattie Cannon’s home is a monument to tidiness, where clutter and decay are kept at bay, where everything has its place, including the concrete remembrances of things past, the photos of family and friends.

She is not Hattie Lewis, she tells a visitor. Hattie Lewis is a name she has not been called in decades, not since she was married to her late husband.

“But, yes, I am the Hattie Lewis who used to know that boy (Rogers Hamilton),” she answers to the specific question.

And in the span of a few minutes, she says many of the same things she told Agent Coley more than half a century ago.

“We had been going together for a few weeks before he was killed,” she said sitting in her living room. “And he’s the only boy I was dating.”

It is certainly close to Coley’s paraphrasing of her statement in 1957: “She turned down all the boys for Roger(s).”

But she adds, in the present, that she had not seen Rogers in the days before he was killed.

“I only found out about it at school the next day,” she says, “when my friends told me. I was shocked. It was awful to find out about it like that.

“Yes, I’ve always wondered why he was killed and who did it. But I have no idea; I didn’t then and I don’t now. To me it has always been a mystery, and it would certainly be a good thing if someone could find out, but it’s been so long ago I don’t see how,” she says.

She says she doesn't know anything about white men telling Rogers to stay away from girls in Hayneville, as the Hamilton family claims, and she certainly never talked to any white men about Rogers before or after he was killed.

There is a lot of collective haze about Rogers Hamilton in Lowndes County. A lot of white people and black people say they have a vague recollection of the incident but can't recall the specifics.

One thing is crystal clear, at least for Hattie Cannon. She had strong feelings for Rogers Hamilton.

It was there, in the pause, before she simply nodded yes, she would like to see a photograph of the boy she last set eyes upon 53 years ago.

Holding the photo gently, on the edges so as not to smudge it, she gazes at it for a crystallized moment, a faint smile spreading across her face, her eyes scanning the image as if to lock it there, like a schoolgirl who stops thumbing through a high school yearbook to linger forever on a certain lad.

Across all those years, Rogers Hamilton was there, bringing back memories.

Coming Tuesday, a passing reference in a detective's report from half a century ago offers a clue in the murder of Rogers Hamilton.

Editor's Note

The Star's editor at large, John Fleming, is a founding member of the Civil Rights Cold Case Project, which brings together investigative reporters and documentary filmmakers to uncover the stories behind unsolved civil rights murders in the South.

The project is affiliated with the Center for Investigative Reporting, the nation's oldest nonprofit investigative news organization, and Paperny Films, a documentary film company in Vancouver, British Columbia.