

## The Horror of the East St. Louis Massacre - featuring 1<sup>st</sup> hand accounts of the riot as recorded by journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett

By James Patrick

<http://www.exodusnews.com/HISTORY/History010.htm>

The horror of the East St. Louis massacre of July 2, 1917 is told in the eyewitness accounts of over fifty people interviewed by Mrs. Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the eyewitness accounts of white news reporters. What follows is a brief synopsis of a report entitled "History of the East St. Louis, Illinois, Riot" written by Mrs. Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

This report was held under seal by the U.S. Government as "classified information" and the U.S. Government did not de-classify this report until 1986. The first three stories were told to Mrs. Wells-Barnett as she traveled back and forth from East St. Louis to St. Louis. Taking women with trunks of their wearing apparel, which they were able to salvage from their ransacked and burned out homes in East St. Louis, Illinois. Mrs. Emma Ballard said, men and boys were in the street hollering "come out, n\_\_\_\_s" as they roamed up and down in the African American district. They shot and beat every African American found on the streets Monday night. She saw fourteen men beaten and two killed.

Mrs. Mary Howard said, that during the riot a young fellow whom she had sent to the grocery to get a chicken, was knocked off his wheel by the mob. Then the mob took his wheel and struck him on the side of his head with a brick and knocked a hole in it. His name was Jimmie Eckford, eighteen years old and he roomed at her house. He ran into the nearest yard which happened to be that of white people. When the mob said they would burn this house down if they didn't make Mr. Eckford come out, the tenants picked him up and threw him out in the street to the mob.

Where he was kicked and stamped on and beaten till they knocked his teeth from his head and killed him. The street cars ran right along in front of Mrs. Howard's house, and she saw white women stop the street cars and pull African American women off and beat them. One woman's clothes they tore off entirely, and then took off their shoes and beat her over the face and head with their shoe heels. Another woman who got away, ran down the street, with every stitch of clothes torn off her back, leaving her with only her shoes and stocking on. Mrs. Howard saw two men beaten to death.

She had escaped all excepting having rocks thrown at the house, until this soldier humiliated her by coming into her house and arresting her and the other women there, because they couldn't find any guns concealed. In the Chicago Herald, July 4, 1917, a white reporter wrote that the National Guards were lax and cruelly good-natured. In one instance a corpulent African American woman brought up the rear of procession and for several blocks a white boy, one of the gang of stone-throwing mischief-makers, who followed every squad, was beating her with an iron bar at intervals of a few yards.

She did not dare to protest or to resist. She was even too frightened to scream. At last a white man, probably a nonresident of East St. Louis, called the attention of a guardsman to the outrage, and he laughingly drove the boy off. The square block from Broadway and Eighth streets was burned to an ash heap. On that corner stood an African American commercial building containing a grocery and barber shop. The vanguard of the rioters invaded these stores and found an African American crouching timorously in each.

The armed invaders drove the two African Americans out through the back doors and there they were shot down and left to be burned alive. The shots were fired from militia rifles by khaki-uniformed men.

Dozens of men who saw it done today loudly proclaimed it so, slapped their thighs and said the Illinois National Guard was alright. Another white newspaper said, boys 13,14,15 and 16 were in the forefront of every felonious butchery. Girls and women, wielding bloody knives and clawing at the eyes of dying victims, sprang from the ranks of the mad thousands. Another eyewitness, Mr. Carlos F. Hurd of St. Louis, Mo., a white staff reporter, wrote and published a part of what he saw in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch on July 3, 1917.

For an hour and a half on July 2,1917, Mr. Hurd saw the massacre of helpless African Americans at Broadway and Fourth street, in downtown East St. Louis, where a black skin was a death warrant. Mr. Hurd saw man after man, with hands raised, pleading for his life, surrounded by groups of men; men who had never seen him before and knew nothing about him except that he was African American; and saw them administer the historic sentence of intolerance, death by stoning.

Mr. Hurd saw one of these men, almost dead from a savage shower of stones, hanged with a clothes line, and when it broke, hanged with a rope which held. Within a few spaces of the pole from which he was suspended, four other African Americans lay dead or dying, another had been removed dead, a short time before. Mr. Hurd saw the pockets of two of these African Americans searched, without the finding of any weapon. Mr. Hurd saw one of these men, covered with blood and half conscious, raise himself on his elbow, and look feebly about, when a young man, standing directly behind, lifted a flat stone and hurled it directly upon his neck. This young man was much better dressed than most of the others. He walked away unmolested.

Mr. Hurd saw African American women begging for mercy and pleading that they had harmed no one, set upon by white women of the baser sort, who laughed and answered the cource sallies of men as they beat the women faces and breasts with fists, stones and sticks. "Get a n\_\_\_\_r," was the slogan, and it was varied by the recurrent cry, "Get another." It was nothing so much as the holiday crowd, with thumbs turned down, in the Roman Coliseum, except that here the shouters were their own gladiators, and their own wild beasts.

The sheds in the rear of African American houses, which were themselves in the rear of the main buildings on Fourth Street, had been ignited to drive out the African American occupants of the houses. And the slayers were waiting for them to come out. It was stay in and be roasted, or come out and be slaughtered. A moment before Mr. Hurd arrived, one African American had taken the desperate chance of coming out and the rattle of revolver shots, which Mr. Hurd heard as he approached the corner, was followed by the cry, "they've got him," and they had. He laid on the pavement, a bullet wound in his head and his skull bare in two places. At every movement of pain which showed that life still remained, there came a terrific kick in the jaw or the nose, or a crashing stone, from some of the men who stood over him.

At the corner, a few steps away, were a Sergeant and several guard men, the Sergeant approached the ring of men around the prostrate African American. "This man is done for," he said. "You're better get him away from here." No one made a move to lift the blood-covered form, and the Sergeant walked away, remarking, when Mr. Hurd questioned him about an ambulance, he said, "that the ambulances had quit coming." However, an undertaker's ambulance did come 15 minutes later, and took away the lifeless African American, who had in the meantime been further kicked and stoned.

The mob then turned to see a lynching. An African American who had his head laid open by a great stone-cut had been dragged to the mouth of the alley on Fourth Street and a small rope was being tied about his neck. It broke when it was pulled over a projecting cable, letting the African American fall. A stouter rope was secured. Right there Mr. Hurd his most sickening sight of the evening. To put the rope around the African American's neck, one of the lynch men stuck his fingers inside the gaping scalp and lifted the African American's head by it. "Get hold and pull for East St. Louis," called a man with a black coat and a new straw hat on as he seized the other end of the rope, and lifted the body seven feet from the ground, and left it hanging there.

A mob of white men formed and burned all the African American houses on Bond Avenue between Tenth and Twelfth Streets, 43 houses being destroyed. In the fire zone at Sixth and Broadway two African Americans are reported to have burned to death. At Fifth and Railroad, another death by fire was reported. One of the mid-afternoon killings was at 4 o'clock, at Broadway and Main Street. An African American was shot down.

One of those firing on him being a boy in short trousers. The driver of the first ambulance that came was not permitted to remove this body, and it layed for an hour beside the street car tracks seen by the passengers in every passing car. At 9:30 that morning an African American still living, but in critical condition, was found in a sewer manhole at Sixth Street and Broadway. He was beaten by the mob with paving bricks 13 hours before and thrown in. The two-year old African American child who was killed was the daughter of William Forest of 1118 Division Ave..

A bullet fired into the house entered the body near the heart. The following stories were told to Mrs. Ida B. Wells-Barnett after she met with Illinois Governor Lowden on July 9, 1917. He told her to return to St. Louis to get him the names of people who would testify. John Avant said, he worked at the C.B.&Q.. He was with about twenty-five other African Americans who got off of work on Tuesday mourning. They were sitting or standing around the restaurant where they usually ate, when six soldiers and four or five policemen came upon them suddenly and shot into the crowd, wounding six. One of the number has since died.

They also were searched and even had their pocket knives taken from them. One of the shots fired took off an arm of a woman who was working in this restaurant. One of the half dozen men standing around, told Mrs. Well-Barnett that he saw a woman and two children killed, also her husband. That they were going across the bridge and the mob seized the baby out of her arms and threw it into the river. Frank Brown said, he saw a man hit an African American with a piece of iron and shoot him four times in the stomach.

Mrs. Mary Lewis said, she saw the mob kill a man a few doors away. The mob had broken windows in her house and set it on fire, shooting into it. Her sister was in the house, but escaped, being shot, and was badly stoned. Her husband, though shot, got up and ran about 40 feet before they finished him. William Lues, an employee of the Wabash R.R.CO., was on his way home from work, sitting between his employer and his employer's son in the street car, when the mob grabbed him, shot him to pieces and then put a rope around his neck and dragged him in the streets.

James Taylor said, the mob started at 2:30. At 4:15 they hanged two African Americans who were coming from work, to a telegraph pole and shot them to pieces. He saw them rush to cars and pull women off and beat them to death, and before they were quite dead. Stalwart men jumped on their stomachs and finished them by trampling them to death. This was at the corner of Broadway and Collinville. The cars were crowded and moving, yet they jumped on and pulled them off.

Others they stuck to death with hat pins, sometimes picking out their eyes with them before they were quite dead. An old African American woman between 70 and 80 years old who had returned to her house to get some things, was struck almost to death by women, then men stamped her to death. An African American store keeper at Eighth and Broadway with his family was shot and wounded. The store was set on fire and they burned to death. George Launders and Robert Mosely were burned to death at the Library Flats at Eighth and Walnut.

African American men had their fingers cut off by the mob and their heads split open with axes. Will Morgan, employed at the B.&O. Roundhouse, saw the mob make the African Americans swim into the Cahokia River, then shoot them, one being killed instantly. The others managed to struggle back to shore, only to be stoned to death by children. Mr. Buchanan said, he saw them beat men down with revolvers and

clubs; white men knocked African American women down, and then the white women would finish by beating them to death or nearly so.

Every African American man that he saw get out of Black Valley alive, the soldiers would march them to the police station, badly beaten though they were, and scarcely able to walk, with their hands raised in front of them and afraid to turn their heads. The mob threw bricks at their heads and bodies, because the soldiers had their bayonets pointed at either side of them. They did the women the same way, excepting their hands were not raised in front of them.

They were dodging around the soldiers to keep the mob from hitting them with bricks, stones and sticks. Their clothing badly torn. An Associated Press dispatch of July 10, 1917, from East St. Louis had the following: "A man arrested by Capt. O.C. Smith, F Company, police, ostensibly "on order of the state's attorney." Captain Smith asserted that he heard the man say, "I've killed my share of Negroes today. I have killed so many I am tired and somebody else can finish them."

When Capt. Smith went to the police station yesterday to prefer a formal charge he found that the prisoner had been released." This was just a small part of the horror of the racial massacre which occurred on July 2, 1917 in East St. Louis, Illinois. It's estimated that from 40 to 150 African Americans were killed and that 6,000 African Americans were driven from their homes, that were indiscriminately burned. All the impartial witnesses agree that the police were indifferent or encouraged the barbarities, and that the major part of the Illinois National Guard was indifferent or inactive. No organized effort was made to protect the African Americans or disperse the murdering groups.