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Retropolis

George Hughes, left, in custody in Sherman, Tex., in 1930. He was lynched by a White mob that burned down the county courthouse and attacked the town's Black business district as well. (Dolph Briscoe Center for American History/University of Texas at Austin)

In Texas, a struggle to memorialize a brutal lynching as resistance grows to teaching historical racism

The battle to approve a historical marker in Sherman comes amid the state's efforts to limit the teaching of racism in schools

By Sydney Trent

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The lynching began as so many did, with a Black man accused of raping a White woman.

George Hughes, a farmhand in Sherman, Tex., was arrested for allegedly assaulting the wife of his boss after trying to collect $6 in payment for his labor.

Hughes was brought to the Grayson County courthouse for his trial on May 9, 1930 — a year during which the economic pain and resentments of the Great Depression spurred a threefold increase in lynchings across the nation.

A mob of White men — many of them tenant farmers — women and children surrounded the courthouse and jammed the corridors. Hughes, supposedly protected by Texas Rangers, including the legendary Capt. Francis A. Hamer, was locked inside a walk-in vault in the second story of the courthouse. The enraged mob lit the building on fire and Hughes, 41, suffocated.

[The devastation of the Tulsa Race Massacre]

Yet the crowd was not appeased; the rioters blasted the vault open, took Hughes's body, chained it to a car and dragged it to the town's Black business district, where they hung the body from a cottonwood tree, mutilated it and lit a fire beneath it before burning the commercial area down and warning Black residents to leave town.

The governor called in hundreds of Texas National Guard troops and declared martial law, making headlines around the world. "Troops fire on Texas mob, wounding two in battle after burning of Negro," the New York Times trumpeted. "Sherman goes on rampage. Courthouse burned down by frenzied rioters to kill prisoner."

Yet to this day there is no public memorial in Grayson County to commemorate the lynching of Hughes and what became known as the Sherman Riot. A plaque on the courthouse grounds simply mentions that the old court building burned down.

Then last spring, a White public historian and preacher's daughter, whose family has lived in the overwhelmingly White and Republican county for generations, set out to erect a historical marker near the courthouse entrance. Nearly a year later, Melissa Thiel's effort to commemorate Sherman's painful past has stalled — caught between resistance by some of the town's White leaders and a rising desire among residents to confront old racial wounds.

Although she has approached her project with a certain indomitability, "I picked a doozy," Thiel said. "I was naive, and I didn't think the pushback I'd get would get to this level."

The struggle in her rural North Texas community echoes the larger battle playing out across the country. Just as more Americans are coming to terms with past and present-day racism, conservative legislatures in more than a dozen states have proposed or enacted laws to limit teaching about the role of racism in American history.

One bill in Texas would limit how the state's teachers can discuss the ways that racism influenced the legal system in Texas and the nation. The legislation could have an outsize influence in U.S. classrooms because of the massive school textbook market in Texas.

[What is critical race theory, and why do Republicans want to ban it in schools?]

The clash over history represents dueling visions of an American future, said Monica Martinez, associate professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin and an expert on racial violence.

Whether lessons about racial violence take place in classrooms or on historical markers, Martinez said, “If you can teach people how to study how power worked 100 years ago, you are also teaching them how to study how power works today.”

And how to challenge it. Therein lies the perceived threat, she said.

“It’s not just the racist violence that some people don’t want to confront,” she said. “They also don’t want to confront the long calls for justice.”

‘I can’t stand by and watch’

Melissa Thiel grew up in Tom Bean, a tiny town about 11 miles southeast of Sherman. Thiel recalls people saying that the once-grand county courthouse had been burned down by a mob, by way of explaining why some documents couldn’t be found.

Thiel wondered how it happened.

Her curiosity about history was further piqued by lessons about the Holocaust when she was in fifth grade. “The idea that a group of people could turn on another group of people because of race or religion, it just stood out. … I wanted to know more and I wanted to know why.”

During an internship for her master’s degree in history at the Eisenhower Birthplace State Historic Site in Denison, Tex., in 2018, her mentor encouraged Thiel to think about pursuing a public project. The fire immediately came to mind. That’s how she first learned about the riot and the lynching of George Hughes. Yet two years passed before the murder of George Floyd prompted Thiel to act.

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“I watched the video and thought, ‘I can’t stand by and watch. … I have these skills. This is a whole part of history that has been left out on purpose here,’” said Thiel, 39.

“I’m going to go for it.”

A murderous mob

In the 19th century, Sherman enjoyed a reputation in some quarters as the “Athens of Texas” — a center of education with a half-dozen private academies and small colleges and dozens of industrial plants.

Some Black residents succeeded, too, despite harsh racism. There was a well-regarded Black school, and a business district that boasted doctors, a dentist, the law offices of noted civil rights leader William J. Durham, a hotel, a drugstore, a hardware store and more.

[She sued her enslaver for reparations and won. Her descendants never knew.]

In April 1930, as the Great Depression descended, a White tenant farmer named Drew Farlow hired George Hughes to work his rented farm in Luella, about seven miles from Sherman.

According to reports in local White-owned newspapers, Hughes went to the Farlow house on May 3 to collect the wages that Farlow owed him. Pearl Farlow told Hughes her husband wasn’t there. Hughes allegedly returned, forced his way into the house and raped and bound her

before she was able to free herself and run to a neighbor's house and report the rape, she later told authorities. A county deputy apprehended Hughes in a nearby field.

The account in Black newspapers and among some Black residents at the time differed considerably, according to "The Tragedy of Lynching," a dissection of the lynchings of 1930 by Arthur F. Raper.

"The explanation … was that Hughes was lynched because he went to his employer's house asking for wages and the employer, being unwilling to pay him, had his wife to report that she had been assaulted," the account reads.

On May 5, a grand jury returned an indictment for criminal assault. On the day of the trial, Hughes allegedly pleaded guilty, although Martinez said such confessions were often coerced. "It's a corrupt archive," she said.

The wheels of justice — or injustice, as was usually the case for Black people at the time — appeared to be rolling speedily toward a familiar conclusion: a Black man sentenced to death for raping a White woman. But the trial would not decide Hughes's fate.

[His arrest sparked the Tulsa Race Massacre. Then Dick Rowland disappeared.]

In the days leading up to the trial date, White tenant farmers, idled by rain, and other residents filled the grounds of the courthouse. False rumors swirled that Hughes had mutilated Pearl Farlow's throat and breasts, sending the mob into a murderous rage. With testimony set to begin, Pearl Farlow made a dramatic entrance on a stretcher.

The judge secured several Texas Rangers, including Hamer (of later Bonnie and Clyde fame), to protect the courthouse and Hughes. But the Rangers, long mythologized for their fierceness, failed to control the rioters, who burst into the courtroom.

Before the two weeks of martial law had ended, a grand jury indicted 14 men in connection with the destruction — but not for the lynching of Hughes. Two men were convicted, one for rioting and the other for arson, receiving two-year sentences, according to the Texas State Historical Association Handbook, which leaves out the perpetrators' names. Other accounts mention only one conviction, of J.B. McCasland.

The Black business district never revived. It is now a parking lot.

The violence appeared to be contagious. By the end of May 1930, there were at least two more riots and lynchings close by in Texas and over the border in Oklahoma.

'I was in shock'

Last June, Thiel said she reached out to the then-chairwoman of the Grayson County Historical Commission, Teddie Ann Salmon, with her idea for the marker, and was given a green light.

Brian Hander, who managed the marker program, worked with Thiel to complete the necessary research. On Nov. 16, Hander sent an email to Judge Bill Magers, head of the Commissioners Court, telling him the marker had been approved. It was ready for the commissioners, the main county governing body, to consider as part of the state requirement that a marker receive permission from the landowner.

There came the hitch.

In early December, Thiel said she received a call from Magers telling her that contrary to Hander's understanding, the marker had not been approved by the historical commission. Shortly after, Hander resigned, in large part because of disagreement over the marker, he said.

Hander had trained as a pharmacist in Tulsa and admired how that city was openly grappling with its role in the 1921 massacre and burning of Black Wall Street. And this was not that, Hander said. Over a decade, he had approved one to two markers a year and the process was generally smooth. By contrast, Magers's assistant told Hander that a public hearing would be required — a first in Hander's tenure, he said.

"I got worried that the story wasn't going to be told, and I didn't want to be a part of the problem," said Hander, 31.

On Feb. 2, Thiel was invited to a private meeting by Salmon to discuss the marker.

"I have some problems with your research," Thiel recalled Salmon saying, and then Thiel asked for specifics.

"I have a problem with the word 'lynching,'" Salmon said, arguing it did not apply because Hughes was already dead when he was pulled from the vault. Thiel said she explained the definition of lynching — an extralegal killing by a mob that often, but not always, involves a hanging.

"We don't know the character of George Hughes," Thiel recalled Salmon saying.

"She said this was all caused by the actions of one man, meaning George Hughes was responsible," Thiel said. "I was in shock."

In an interview with The Washington Post, Salmon, 80, said she was not implying that the events of May 9, 1930, were Hughes's fault: "I'm saying that every person's actions cause a reaction, and it was his action that caused the reaction."

Does she believe Hughes's lynching and the riot are worthy of a marker on the courthouse grounds?

"I am undecided," she said. She suggested that a better place for the marker might be on Hughes's unmarked grave in a county cemetery where the indigent were buried.

Thiel said that immediately after speaking with Salmon she decided to take her crusade public. She gave interviews to local media, launched a Facebook page and urged residents to email or call Magers.

On March 6, dozens of residents attended the public hearing for the marker. About 10 people spoke — all in favor. Shortly after, Salmon finished her term and was replaced by a new chairman, Dusty Williams. On March 9, Williams wrote the Commissioners Court to say the historical marker had met all requirements.

And yet in the months since, there has been silence from Magers and the other four members of the all-White Commissioners Court.

Magers declined to answer specific questions but emailed a written response to The Post. “I will continue to work with the local citizens who are interested in this matter to help facilitate an appropriate outcome that thoughtfully considers all viewpoints, ideas and historical data,” the statement read in part.

The local NAACP president, Al Hambrick, said the group supports the marker, then referred questions to Thiel.

Every week now, Thiel sends an email requesting that the issue be put on the court’s Tuesday meeting agenda. So far, she’s been ignored.

On May 8, Thiel organized a community commemoration of the 91st anniversary of the Sherman Riot and the lynching of Hughes.

It was a blissfully sunny day, barely a cloud in the sky. About 100 people, mostly White, gathered on the grassy lawn of the Grayson County courthouse, the nondescript beige block that in 1936 replaced the steepled stone beauty that had burned.

They carried signs bearing slogans: “We will Remember” and “Stand for Historical Equality.” Ninety-seven people signed a letter to the Commissioners Court: “We collectively recognize, and faithfully concede, there has been a problem with racial injustice in our community in the past. Ignoring it will not make it go away.”

Gospel music filled the air. Candles flickered as dusk fell. Close by on the courthouse grounds, high above the crowd, a towering stone monument to the Confederacy pierced the air.

There was nothing to mark the haunted ground below where a Black man was lynched by a White mob that left a path of racial terror and destruction in its wake.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/06/03/sherman-riot-texas-lynching-marker/