

[Isaac T. Davis]

1

Folkstuff - [Pioneer [lore?]]

Mabel M. Hamilton

Palestine City Guide

Pioneer, R.H. Davis

Writers' Project

District #8

Palestine, Texas

Page 1 Interview of Pioneer by: Isaac T. Davis, Elkhart, Texas

Son of R.H. Davis

I was attending my first dance the night that Mrs. Randolph Hassell was murdered. Although I was only a youngster in my teens and somewhat [overjoyed?] being at this dance, I could not have failed to notice Randolph Hassell, as he would walk downstairs, (The dance was in the hall over the store of John Burke in Elkhart) and look toward his wife's lighted window, 300 yards away, so often that anyone could tell he was worried about something.

Somehow, Randolph had a feeling or premonition that trouble was in the "air" for he had told his attractive wife to keep a light in her window until his return so he would know all was well in his home- but the murderers never gave her a chance to extinguish the light, for it continued to glow and light the face of their sleeping baby until Randolph came

Library of Congress

home about midnight and found his wife missing and signs of the awfullest tragedy this county has ever known. Perhaps the reason Randolph had felt the possibility or tragedy was because only a few days previous to that fatal night he had experienced trouble in arresting a negro by the name of Will Rogers and had found it necessary to knock the negro down with his six-shooter; Hassell realized this had incurred a grudge within the negro. Furthermore, Mrs. Hassell had also just made the negroes, Andy Jackson# and wife, Lizzie Jackson, mad because she had given them orders to either quit getting water at her well or else quit making a sloppy mess around it. They carried/ water from the Hassell's to their house which was about 200 yards south. [???

That night when the dance broke up around midnight Hassell left immediately for home. I left for my home just about the same time with a few of my friends and going in a different direction from town and did not learn of the tragedy until a few hours later. But on the way home we heard a negro yell behind us. It was Will Rogers, one of the murderers. This negro worked for my father on our farm. I'll never forget his first words as he reached our side that night, they were: "What a fox I am!" But he was not such a "fox".

2

[Thirty?]-six hours later when I saw him hanging from the limb of an oak!

My older brother, Jim, did not leave town with us that night but continued to loiter around. So, it was, when only a few minutes after Hassell had left until he returned totown, and almost prostrated with fear and grief, he gave the news of his wife's disappearance. In a short while my brother, in company with every man in town, began the fateful search for the missing wife. Within an hour or so, my brother, along with Billie Morriss, found her body. She was lying in a thicket about 200 yards to the rear of her house with her neck cruelly slashed. It was painfully evident that criminal assault had been committed upon the helpless mother.

Library of Congress

Just as an insight to the hideous crime, the inhuman action of the negro murderer, Andy Jackson, is the fact that he helped “hunt” for her with the party of whites, and, went so far as to help carry her body home.

Needless to say, feeling was running high by daybreak when a mob of two hundred or more men gathered and rounded up every negro in this section. They put the negroes in confinement in an old abandoned storehouse in Elkhart and guarded them vigilantly while others in the mob would take the negroes out, one at a time, in effort to scare the truth from them. Finally, after many unsuccessful attempts to fix the guilt, they drug a batch of them to the top of the hill. (There the Elkhart high school now stands) and told them that they were going to hang them all in order to get the guilty ones. Many of the negroes fell to the ground and started praying and pleading. In this bunch 'praying-negroes' was Will Rogers; about the only one who was not praying was the negro, Frank Hayes, who worked with the railroad section gang. Finally he began cursing profusely, and, looking down at the praying negro, Will Rogers, he sneeringly said, “Dam you, prayers ain't g'wine to help you, we are guilty as hell”. Whereupon, he told them that Andy Jackson, a carpenter by trade; Joe Norman, a negro farm hand of my uncle Tom Davis; Will Rogers, farm hand of my father, D.T. Davis; Liz Jackson, wife of Andy Jackson; and himself, Frank Hayes, were the guilty ones. After many 3 attempts to find if any others were implicated they finally decided this was all. This negro, Bill Hayes, had an insideous courage, he told it all in horrible detail and punctuated with curse words. He boastingly told that they had handled Mrs. Hassell “just as we wanted to”, and afterward had cut her throat. This negro died while cursing as he dangled from the oak.

Upon the evidence that Liz Jackson was only partly implicated she was turned loose with the warning to “get going and never come back”. She came [back-to?] get her snuff! Whereupon, she was promptly swung up and her life snuffed [out!?!].

Library of Congress

Andy Jackson was swinging from an oak alone; but near-by in a larger post-oak the other four were dangling like ebon ghosts when I saw them a short thirty-six hours after their crime had been committed!

My father, D.T. Davis, and my brother, Jim, both now deceased, were among the ring-leaders of this mob. The law never gave them any trouble for their action; after all, an atrociously criminal deed had been committed upon the wife of one of their own brother officers, naturally their feelings were in sympathy with the vigilants. What human could have felt otherwise after knowing an innocent mother had been brutally pulled from beside her baby, drug into the woods and forced to undergo the hell of savage beasts until her throat was laid open for death!

-THE END-