

Information for Episode #3

Remembering the Georgia Slave Murders of 1921

In 1867, Congress outlawed peonage in an effort to curb the problem; violators were subject to a \$10,000 fine and 10 years imprisonment. Some states also prohibited the practice. However, the police and courts usually turned a blind eye to what was going on. Many local law enforcement officials even arrested blacks on false charges to maintain a supply of manpower for the local farmers and actively helped to keep the workers on the farm.

One of those who took advantage of the situation was John S. Williams. In 1921, the 54-year-old father of 12 was the owner of a 2,000-acre plantation in Jasper County, Georgia, approximately 40 miles southeast of Atlanta. With three of his adult sons, he ran his spread by using peons.

Williams managed his farm like a brutal dictator. One man made only 35 cents during an entire year and there is no record of any peon paying off his debt to Williams. At night, the hands were crowded into bunkhouses whose windows were nailed shut, shutters boarded from the outside, and doors locked and secured with a chain. But worst of all was the physical treatment the men received.

Beatings and whippings were handed out daily for such offenses as picking less cotton than the other field hands and being unable to do physical tasks because of on-the-job injuries. On Sundays, the Williams family took their tracking dogs out for practice by forcing a black to run through the woods for the hounds to chase. And there was murder. Before 1921, there were at least four, and possibly as many as 10, killings for such offenses as trying to escape from the plantation and not rolling wire up a hill the way the family liked.

For years, stories circulated in Jasper County about conditions at the Williams place, but nothing was done to discourage or stop John or his sons. The Williams family was rich, powerful, respected, and intimidating. They were not alone in using peons and no one wanted to be seen as being on the side of the blacks. Besides, the occasional killing of a peon was considered nothing more by the southern white society than as a minor business expense (you could always get another peon cheap) and no white southerner had been convicted of murdering a black for over 40 years. But all of that changed in early 1921.

In November 1920, a peon named Gus Chapman successfully escaped from the Williams' farm and, a few weeks later, made his way to the Atlanta offices of the Bureau of Investigation (as the FBI was then called). Peonage was not high on the Bureau's list of priorities, but at least it might take the complaints seriously and investigate. While looking into other federal matters in the area, two federal agents visited the Williams plantation on February 18, 1921. They interviewed the black farmhands and Williams. Most of the blacks said nothing, but the agents caught one, Clyde Manning, in a lie about an earlier escape attempt by Chapman. Still, they left only vaguely suspicious and not very eager to pursue the matter further. Williams, however, heard rumors that some local farmers might soon be charged with peonage and he concluded that the agents' visit meant that he was a target. Therefore, Williams decided to get rid of the evidence.

The 26-year-old Manning was the Williams's farm boss. Uneducated and illiterate, he came to the Williams farm with his family at about age 13 or 14 when his father was ambushed and murdered by unknown assailants. Also working and living on the Williams' farm were Manning's mother, siblings,

wife, and children and Manning knew that to protest even the smallest of Williams's orders would put his family's lives at stake. Furthermore, he had no idea of where he could escape to or where to turn for help; Manning knew the local police would be of no assistance, and he had virtually no knowledge of anything beyond Jasper County. Indeed, when two peons escaped the Williams place and had gone beyond Jasper County before they were captured and returned, Manning referred to them as having "been out of the United States."

On the morning of February 19, Williams walked out to Manning's shanty and told him of his plans to kill the peons who worked on the farm: "Clyde, it won't do for those boys to get up yonder and swear against us. They will ruin us. You have got to get rid of all the stockade niggers."

After a long pause, Manning responded: "Mr. Johnny, you telling me you want me to do away with them boys?"

"Yes, we'll have to do away with them."

After another long pause, Manning quietly said: "I don't want to do it. I hate to do it."

"Well, by God, if you don't want to do it, that's all right. But it's your neck or theirs. If you think more of their necks than you do of your own neck, it's your neck then."

Over the next week, nine of the Williams farmhands were killed. Sometimes, Manning committed the murders; other times, he was assisted by Charlie Chisolm, another of the Williams peons, or the crime was done by Chisolm in Manning's presence. Every time, Williams was there, selecting the victims and telling Manning and Chisolm what to do. Some of the men were killed with axes or pickaxes; others were thrown off bridges into the Yellow River while chained and weighted down with rocks. The murders then stopped, but a week later, Williams decided that Chisolm had to go and he and Manning threw him over a bridge as well. A few days later, Williams shot an eleventh man with a shotgun and had Manning help him dispose of the body.

Manning himself might have become the twelfth victim if the bodies of three men who were tossed into the Yellow River had not been found on March 16. At about the same time, Eberhardt Crawford, one of Williams's black neighbors, went to the Bureau of Investigation's Atlanta office and told of how Williams recently accused him of talking to the authorities and later returned with a carload of white men and shot up Crawford's house.

The bureau suspected that the killings were connected with its earlier investigation of Williams, but murder is a local matter. Federal agents took Crawford with them and went to Georgia's Governor Hugh Dorsey. (Dorsey was then actively denouncing lynching and other forms of persecution against the blacks and was considered to have a possibly sympathetic ear.) The governor listened. He then persuaded the judge and prosecuting attorney in Newton County (on whose side of the Yellow River the bodies were found) to issue warrants for the arrest of a number of witnesses and suspects, including Williams and Manning. At first, Manning said nothing, but after hours of constant questioning he began to talk.

Williams and Manning were both indicted in Newton County for three counts of murder. They were to be tried separately. They would also go to trial for one murder at a time; that way, if found innocent on one charge, they could then be tried on another.

Williams went to trial first. In the meantime, the "death farm" killings drew national attention. The extent of Williams's crimes shocked even southern society and forced southerners to openly admit that peonage existed. Editorials tried to set Georgia apart from the rest of the former Confederacy, and southern political and religious leaders declared that the trials should mark the beginning of an improvement of how blacks were treated.

Described by the Atlanta Constitution as "Georgia's greatest murder trial," Williams's trial began on April 5, 1921. Williams's attorneys protested that they didn't have enough time to prepare an adequate defense, but their objections were overruled. Because of the unusual circumstances of the case, the state provided two lawyers to assist the local prosecutor. Manning was the main witness against Williams. In his own defense, Williams claimed that he knew nothing about the killings and that Manning was a dangerous character. The defense also tried to imply that the charges were a conspiracy by Governor Dorsey, the Bureau of Investigation, and wealthy urban liberals from

Williams wasn't too concerned about his fate. After all, the 12 members of his jury were all white, and Williams did not believe that they would convict a white man of anything on the word of a black. Therefore, his "temporary" confinement and trial were a small price to pay for disposing of the evidence that would have led to a peonage conviction. However, after several hours of deliberation, the jury returned with a verdict of "guilty." Indeed, it later became known that the jurors were quick to agree on Williams's guilt and that they spent most of their time trying to decide whether he should hang. On the jury's recommendation, Williams was sent to prison for life.

Manning's trial began on May 30. The proceeding was unusual for a southern trial of a black in the 1920s in that a serious attempt was made by Manning's lawyers to prove he was innocent. The state, which relied upon Manning's testimony in Williams' trial, now called him a "mean Negro" who committed the murders to avoid prosecution for peonage. The defense countered that Manning feared for his and his family's lives and was forced to commit the murders by Williams. As in the Williams trial, the jury was all white. The entire proceeding lasted only two days, and it took the jury a mere 40 minutes to find Manning guilty. Still, in light of the attitudes at the time in the South, the defense was successful because this jury, too, recommended life imprisonment instead of death.

Manning died in prison of tuberculosis in 1927. Williams was killed four years later in an accident at the state penitentiary in Milledgeville, Georgia. During the 1920s, encouraged by Williams' conviction, a number of state and federal prosecutors successfully tried peonage cases in Georgia and the rest of the South.