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THE HOUSTON RACE RIOT, 1917

The most serious riot involving Negro soldiers which occurred in the United States during the first World War took place in Houston, Texas, on the night of Thursday, August 23, 1917. At that time over a hundred Negro United States Army regulars seized rifles and ammunition by force, and marched upon the city. This outbreak followed a period of rising racial tension climaxed by an altercation between white police officers and Negro "military police." The following morning it was announced that there were thirteen known dead, of whom only one was a Negro, and nineteen wounded, including five Negro soldiers, as a result of the riot.

A few days later the mayor of Houston appointed a special investigating commission which sat in open session for several days. Much of the testimony there presented is quoted in subsequent issues of *The Houston Daily Post*; upon these reports the following analysis is based.¹

THE SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SETTING

The several companies of Negro troops of the 24th United States Infantry who later took part in the riot had been sent from a western army post to Houston to guard government property during the construction of Camp Logan.² This detachment, totalling about 600 men, included both men who had been in service for some time and were more or less seasoned troops, and more recent enlistees who came from various parts of the country, particularly from the North.³

Houstonians were expecting the early arrival of a considerably larger number (about 3,000) of Negro troops

¹ To keep the length of the citations to a minimum, all references unless otherwise noted will be to *The Houston Daily Post* for 1917, the editions being those on file in the Library of Congress.

² July 28.

³ Editorial, August 27.

along with the white National Guardsmen from Illinois who were to be housed at Camp Logan upon its completion. In addition to some of the white Guardsmen, one company of Negroes had arrived on Monday, August 20.⁴ The anticipated arrival of further substantial contingents of Northern Negro troops, alarming in itself to some Houstonians, gained special significance in its relation to the hotly debated issue of local prohibition.

Another point which needs to be mentioned is the fact that Houston was currently being considered by military authorities as the site of a new aviation center. Probably this circumstance had something to do with the lack of public admission of the race tension which was mounting prior to the outbreak itself. A final element in the situation, which may or may not have been of importance, was the fact that early in the week during which the riot occurred there was a change in commanding officers at the Camp. The new commander, possibly less experienced than his predecessor, apparently had not fully gained the respect of the Negro troopers.⁵

This brief résumé of the objective social factors in the situation leads to a consideration of what various segments of the population of Houston were thinking and doing, and particularly what types of interracial interaction patterns were developing prior to the riot. As has already been

⁴ August 21.

⁵ It is reported that "The life of the major [Major K. S. Snow, in charge of the Negro troops following the departure of Colonel Newman, on the Tuesday preceding the riot] was threatened as he tried to quell the rioting troops." (August 24.) Elsewhere it is stated that after the trouble had begun, and Major Snow had talked to the men, ". . . trying to get them to return to the camp . . . they turned upon him and said, 'You white —, get back into camp.' . . ." (August 30.) It should be pointed out that Major Snow was sometimes referred to as "Captain Snow" in the published testimony. The fact that he had been promoted to the rank of Major and made commanding officer at Camp Washington only two days prior to the riot helps to account both for the inconsistencies in the rank by which he was designated and for his inexperience as a commander. (August 21.)

pointed out, there was practically no recognition in the Houston press of the ominous indications regarding local racial friction. Almost without exception the reports of developments published prior to the riot indicated that everything was serene in Houston and at Camp Logan. The pages of the local newspapers, however, echoed and re-echoed with the reverberations of racial troubles elsewhere. The notorious rioting in East St. Louis and the subsequent investigation were reported during July and early August. Fairly prominent news items appeared in the *Post* on the East St. Louis investigation in the issues of August 16, 17, 18, and 19—that is, just before the Houston riot.

Another indication of editorial recognition that racial troubles were imminent—elsewhere—is to be found in a published letter to the *Post* by a Mr. B. F. Riley, of Blue Ridge, N. C. This letter reported a noteworthy conference of prominent Southerners at Asheville, N. C.

For three days, day and night, the sessions went on in the discussion of topics relative to mob violence, the sanitary condition of negroes, their wages, the treatment accorded them by railways and on street cars and in waiting rooms, the disparity in public education, the term [sic.] produced by an attitude of threatening and mob violence. . . . It was recognized that we are facing a crisis in the South, which is eating away like a hidden gangrene, to the undoing of law and order, and which, if not arrested, must work ruin. . . . The regret was general that these matters so little claimed the attention of the pulpit. . . .⁶

A grim reminder to the Negro of the dangers of getting out of place is contained in the following item from Brenham, Texas, which said, in full:

Willie Shears, an Independence negro, was shot to death at Caldwell Sunday night while resisting a deputy sheriff who attempted to arrest him. The coroner's verdict says it was a clear case of suicide. Funeral services were held at Independence Monday.⁷

The foregoing items indicate a recognition of stirring racial troubles *elsewhere*. But regarding Houston not only

⁶ August 13.

⁷ August 15.

was there almost no admission of potential racial conflict; there was even evidence of apparently amicable race relations. An example is the announcement of an all-Negro baseball game which was scheduled for the Saturday before the Thursday on which the riot occurred, and of a similar double-header for Sunday, for which "As usual there will be special accommodations for white patrons. The Isles' band will be on hand with ragtime airs. . . ."⁸

Again, one week before the day of the riot, it was reported that ". . . At Camp Logan work is going on in the same even tenor, putting the finishing touches on the many structures already raised. . . ."⁹ And a front-page story on the very morning of the riot reported that "Camp Logan is one day nearer ultimate completion; a day marked by no unusual occurrences, but characterized by the same swift moving efficiency that is not unusual in the record of the big job. . . ." The story was headlined "Camp Logan Work Moving Smoothly."¹⁰ Furthermore, the good behavior of the Negro troops was scheduled to be rewarded by giving them a watermelon feast at Emancipation Park that fateful Thursday night.¹¹

Buried on the 14th page of the issue for Sunday, August 19, is the only item the writer found published prior to the time of the riot which indicated the existence of local racial friction:

While standing in the pay line at Camp Logan Saturday noon, Sam Blair, a negro employed at the camp, was stabbed and slightly wounded in the back by an unknown white man. The negro is said to have pushed his way into the pay line ahead of the white man, who resented it.

Blair, it is said, grabbed the white man by the shoulder while someone else hit him with a shovel, when the white man, with a free arm, pulled a knife and stabbed Blair in the back. The latter was taken to the infirmary in the ambulance of the Houston Undertaking Company.

⁸ August 18.

⁹ August 16.

¹⁰ August 23.

¹¹ August 24.

Even this item, it will be noted, deals with civilian workmen employed at the camp rather than with the Negro soldiers themselves.

What is the explanation for the silence of the press regarding racial tension which subsequently was freely admitted to have existed from the first appearance of the Negro troops on the scene? One plausible hypothesis is that it was thought publicizing of the racial tension would serve merely to intensify rather than dissipate it. Another hypothesis is that while the construction of Camp Logan was good for business in Houston and also, apparently, for labor, it was thought public admission of serious racial tension might tend to jeopardize completion of the project. The following items emphasize the economic advantages to Houston of the proximity of Camp Logan.

More than \$60,000 of war department money was released into circulation in Houston when the contractors building Camp Logan paid off Saturday evening. . . .

It is not improbable that the sum for next week will pass the \$100,000 mark.¹²

Men at work on the big job are wishing that the work might keep on until the sea dries up, and they are not reticent in saying so, coming home at night in cars and jitneys. Pay was never better, they say. . . .¹³

When the construction phase was completed there would be the business brought in by the thousands of soldiers, their officers, their visiting friends and relatives, to look forward to.

Furthermore, one of the Texas representatives in Congress had been working assiduously to further the interests of Houston by securing for it another military training center.

On August 21st it was announced that within the next few days the War Department would make known its decision with regard to the location of the aviation camp at

¹² August 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Houston. Ironically, just one day before the riot the following victorious announcement appeared:

Houston has been passed upon by the aviation board and chief of the signal corps and has been designated for one of the aviation camps soon to be located in Texas for the training of aviators. . . .

. . . ever since Houston announced that she possessed an ideal aviation camp site Congressman Garrett has been hard at work hammering home the idea to the members of the aviation board the desirability of locating a camp in that city. . . .¹⁴

Confirmation of the second hypothesis, above (that acknowledgment of racial tension might delay or indefinitely postpone completion of the camp), would seem to be given in an editorial which appeared one week after the riot. After admitting that "The public hearing of the causes leading up to the mutiny of the negro soldiers last Thursday night, as well as the incidents thereof, is revealing conditions that were entirely unknown to the body of Houston's citizenry . . ." and also that the situation was far from desirable, the unknown editorial writer lets the cat out of the bag:

The only explanation of toleration of this insolent and disorderly conduct is that those who knew of it thought it best to endure in patience rather than run the risk of losing the camp by flooding the department with complaints. In other words, it was thought that the negro soldiers would soon be removed and that their lawless conduct would cease to trouble the authorities. . . .¹⁵

In brief, then, it would seem that most middle and upper class white Houstonians knew little about the developing racial friction, for they were too far removed to learn about it at first hand, and the press did not inform them. Those who were in a position to know the facts thought it better not to publicize them. It is impossible to determine on the basis of available evidence the extent or importance of rumor and gossip in this connection.

The law enforcement officials, at that time exclusively white persons, in the performance of their duties soon came

¹⁴ August 22.

¹⁵ August 30.

into direct contact with the disturbing realities of the situation. From the testimony of Houston's Superintendent of Police C. L. Brock it is clear that instances of racial difficulty, especially those growing out of the Negro troops' resentment of segregation regulations, were not infrequent. In all probability the subsequent violence employed by certain Houston policemen was regarded by them as a legitimate and indispensable means to the end of maintaining law and order—and particularly the racial mores.¹⁶ Superintendent Brock is quoted as follows:

Q. How much trouble has your department had with the negroes?

A. When they first came the situation was bad for a day or so. They were overbearing and I feared trouble. Colonel Newman told me there would be no trouble. I believed all the time we would have trouble with them. Colonel Newman passed an order that no soldier should be out of camp after 11 p. m. There were several clashes on street cars, and in one instance a street car conductor gave the money back to negro soldiers and they got off the car. There was friction at different times. The troops resented the Jim Crow signs in street cars and often threw them out the window. One instance particularly, I remember, a negro on a Washington street car pulled out a knife when told to move to the negro section of a car. There was no trouble as he moved. Colonel Newman told them to obey the city ordinances.

We had a conference and I told Colonel Newman that I believed military police would assist in keeping order. First I was informed the men wanted to wear side arms. I told the officers this would not do and the city got them clubs. Next he said they had to have means of transportation to town. I went to David Daly, manager of the street car company, and he agreed that they should ride free. Then they wanted a badge. I bought out of my own pocket the cloth to have the badges or brassards made. Finally 16 military police were put down town. The men seemed satisfied.

Q. Was there much trouble?

A. No, very little. There was unrest all the time and especially around pay day. . . .¹⁷

¹⁶ See the vivid and enlightening treatment of "Day-by-day law enforcement" in a Southern city by Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner, *Deep South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), pp. 498-508.

¹⁷ August 30.

In spite of Superintendent Brock's minimizing of the trouble with the Negro troops, the fact that he aided in the organization of the Negro "military police" seems to demonstrate his awareness of the imminence of more trouble than his own staff could properly cope with.

That the office of the sheriff was both cognizant and tolerant of the illegal transportation of alcoholic liquors to the Negro troops at their quarters is suggested by the testimony of a painter living near the camp, W. E. Quin, in which he reported seeing Negro women taking bundles containing whisky to the troops:

Yes, I went to the sheriff's department and they would not take my information. I told Mr. Fitzgerald at the sheriff's office about it. I went to Mr. Green and he wouldn't take my testimony.¹⁸

A third group, numerically small but very important in an analysis of the general situation in which the riot occurred, is the white officers in charge of the Negro troops. There is considerable evidence to indicate that these officers (1) exercised rather lax discipline over their troops, and (2) tended to show sympathy with their troops rather than with local white civilians when interracial differences arose. For example, M. J. Howard, a white dairyman, testified that he had had trouble with Negro soldiers crowding him into the ditch. He reported this difficulty to a deputy sheriff, and to an officer at the camp

... who told him that the trouble was he had been calling the soldiers "niggers." He waited until Major Snow came and reported the case, who told him to come back the next day. He called the next day, and Snow told him that the white people were causing the trouble, he said. He also told him that he had placed the two offenders on double guard duty as a punishment.¹⁹

Similarly, City Detective Bob Martin, in response to the question, "Tell us what you saw there [at the camp]," testified as follows:

I noticed a lot of negro women inside the camp. I asked Captain

¹⁸ August 29.

¹⁹ August 30.

Snow if it wasn't an unusual thing to have so many negro women there. He said: "We have to do it in order to hold the men here." The second time I went out was last Thursday afternoon [immediately before the riot]. When Detective Fife and I got there Captain Snow was using the telephone. He was talking for perhaps twenty minutes and I saw a crowd of negro soldiers in his office. I went a little nearer so I could hear some of the conversation. He was talking to someone about Sergeant Baltimore. After he hung up the receiver he spoke to a negro civilian, who said he knew something about the trouble. The negro said he did not see Baltimore shot, but heard the shot fired. Captain Snow asked him what they did to Baltimore. The negro replied that they took him to jail. Captain Snow appeared indignant at this and said: "They should not have done so; they should have taken him to the hospital." Then the Captain asked the names of the officers who Baltimore had trouble with, and said: "Those officers must be prosecuted to the limit of the law." By this time there were about 200 negro soldiers ganging up around us. . . .²⁰

The testimony of Superintendent Brock confirms the foregoing statements:

Colonel Newman told me when I spoke to him about them shooting craps and having negro women, that he let them shoot craps and let the women in camp because it kept the men satisfied. I heard through reports by officers that many negroes were drunk at the camp.²¹

A fourth group whose role in the pre-riot situation should be recognized is the advocates of prohibition for Harris County, in which Houston is located. Thirsty soldiers were not forbidden to quench their thirsts at Houston saloons which were sufficiently removed from the Camp itself, but it was contrary to regulations to sell alcoholic drinks within a certain radius of the Army installation or to bring liquor on Government military property. But the main reason for giving attention to the prohibitionists here is not with regard to the violation of these regulations: it is the content of the following four-column advertisement which appeared on Monday, August 20—just the day before the first company of colored infantry was scheduled to arrive from Illinois:

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

3,000 NEGRO TROOPS TO BE IN HOUSTON WITHIN
THE MONTH

Can the men of Harris County afford to vote to continue the saloon in face of this? For the security of the homes of this community and for the protection of the law-abiding negro, who will be helpless

MAKE HARRIS COUNTY DRY—
REMEMBER BROWNSVILLE

Harris County, Local Option Committee,
A. S. Moody, Vice Chairman

Thus it appears clear that the coming of the additional Negro troops, in this case entirely from the North, and furthermore to be quartered permanently at the Camp, in contrast to the 600 colored troops already in Houston who were expected to remain on guard only during the construction of the Camp, was causing genuine concern to some of the white residents. It may also be pointed out that if the Negro troops already in Houston had no intention of resorting to open conflict, this advertisement could hardly help but implant the suggestion.

To understand the import of the exhortation, "Remember Brownsville," a brief account of the Brownsville "race riot" is necessary. Although eleven years had elapsed since it occurred, it was probably vividly remembered by Houstonians, or the brief slogan used by the prohibitionists would hardly have been sufficient for their purposes. The following statement is the published telegraphic report of the investigating officer, Major Blocksom, to President Theodore Roosevelt:

Brownsville, Texas, Aug. 20 [1906].—The Military Secretary, United States Army, Washington, D. C.: Causes of disturbance are racial. People did not desire colored troops here, and showed they thought them inferior socially by certain slights and denial of privileges at public bars, etc. Soldiers resented this. There were several individual encounters between soldiers and citizens. About midnight of 13th a party of soldiers, probably nine to fifteen, made a raid through several squares of town, firing 75 to 150 shots, killing a bartender and dangerously wounding a lieutenant of police. They also fired into several houses where women and children narrowly escaped being shot. The raid lasted from eight to ten minutes. It

is claimed that citizens fired first, but I believe this is without foundation. Although the act was probably preconcerted I do not think the commanding officer could have foreseen. Citizens cannot identify individual raiders, and authorities have made no demand for them. Investigation now going on has yet discovered none. Commanding officers today invited committee of three citizens to assist in conducting the investigation. The people are still in a state of great nervous tension, and men nearly all carry arms openly at night. Women and children are still frightened. I consider it necessary to remove the colored troops—the sooner the better. While now apparently under perfect control, an entire company is on guard every day, it is a great strain, with little prospect of relief. Differences between soldiers and citizens are irreconcilable. Fuller report will be made in regular course. Blocksom, Major.²²

In accordance with Major Blocksom's recommendation the troops were soon removed. But meanwhile the papers of Texas had daily front-paged the accounts of Brownsville's plight and the inability of her citizens to return to normal living until the Negro garrison had been removed. Thus we get some intimation of the attitudes of fear and resentment which must have been renewed by the prohibitionists' slogan, "Remember Brownsville."

It has already been pointed out that white workmen, either on construction crews at Camp Logan or from that vicinity, were reported to be quite happy over the high wages they were able to make on the job. It has also been indicated that the only instance of local racial difficulty publicized before the riot occurred in connection with members of this group. At the municipal investigation following the riot a William Bigley was asked to describe "whatever friction existed between the white people and the negro soldiers on guard at the camp." His statement follows:

About three weeks ago Saturday I went to the camp to get my pay. I saw an old man standing in line, waiting his turn to get to the paymaster's window. He must have been standing there for an hour. When he reached the window, the paymaster rejected his receipt because it was not signed with an indelible pencil, as is required, and he asked the man to step outside the line a few minutes while one of his clerks got a pencil. The old man did so and leaned up against a building where he was not in the way at all. While he

²² *The San Antonio (Texas) Daily Express*, August 22, 1906.

was standing in this way, a negro soldier on guard approached him and, using the vilest of vile language, told him to get back in line. When he saw the old man was not inclined to obey him, the soldier roughly shoved him into line with considerable force. I expected trouble any minute. I saw white men grit their teeth at the occurrence and clench their fists. I said to myself the time has come at last. Just then a negro officer came up and said, "What's the matter here?" Then all the white men spoke up at once and told him and said the fault was all with the negro soldier on guard. At this the negro officer ordered the soldier back to his post and told him to stay there where he belonged.

I worked at the camp eight days and got all I wanted of it and quit. I knew just as plain as anything that trouble was coming.

Q. What was the attitude of the white workmen there toward the negro soldiers?

A. Very bitter. We had orders not to speak or have anything to do with the negro soldiers. . . .²³

A sixth group whose contact with and attitudes toward the Negro troopers was brought out in the investigation is the street car motormen and conductors. A motorman, B. M. Spiegel, told of difficulties in enforcing segregated seating. "They said, 'We're from New York and we'll sit where we please. We're as good as any white man in town.' This happened frequently, but I could not tell whether it was the same soldiers or not."²⁴ A conductor, O. J. Charboneau, ". . . told of trouble he had experienced with negro troopers in the removal of segregation signs or 'screens,' as he called them. . . ."²⁵ Three other transportation workers gave similar testimony during the first day of the inquiry.

In connection with the same problem a deputy sheriff reported that he had arrested a Negro soldier ". . . for refusing to observe the Jim Crow sign on a street car. . . ."²⁶ A police officer, G. Peyton, was questioned as follows:

Q. What trouble did you, as an officer, have with the negro soldiers?

A. The only trouble was in disregard of the Jim Crow law. The

²³ August 30.

²⁴ August 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

negroes seemed to object to the screen which separates whites from negroes in the street car.

Q. Did you find any of these screens in the street?

A. I found two of them near a water plug down town. I saw two negro soldiers at Travis and Preston and one of them had a street car screen in his hand. He told me some of the troops had taken it out of a car and he was going to return it. I took it from him.²⁷

Their attempts to disregard the segregation regulations suggest how the Negro troops were feeling on this issue. Further information on their thinking, feeling, and behavior comes from various sources. The city engineer, E. S. Sands, stated:

. . . I learned . . . that the negro soldiers were trying to incite negro civilians to revolt against the whites and their government. I happened to overhear some of their conversation one day. Some of the soldiers told the Houston negroes that they were taking too much from the white people. . . .²⁸

C. C. Craig, replying to the question, "Did you hear threats?" said:

Yes. Soon after the negro soldiers came here a white contractor backed his wagon over a negro civilian and two negro soldiers said: "We will put some damn white man in the grave."²⁹

A white foreman of a Camp Logan contractor

. . . told a reporter for the *Post* Saturday that he had reported to the authorities talks that he had had with negro guards. They told him, while half-drunk on guard and unable to keep from boasting, he said, that the battalion was going to "raise h—l with the white ——— after pay-day." . . .

The same foreman says that the negroes hated the Illinois guardsmen so that they could hardly speak of them without cursing them. They considered that the Illinois soldiers were to blame for killing negroes in the East St. Louis riots, and they were out to get them, he says. . . . [There is nothing to confirm this last idea.]³⁰

A member of the [National] Guard from the camp said after the shooting had occurred that he had known it was coming. Members of the negro troops, who were placed on guard duty at the camp, have for two or three days been insulting the white soldiers.

²⁷ August 30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ August 29.

³⁰ August 26.

Although the trouble did not start between the negro and the white troops, the action of the former in their remarks to the white men showed the frame of mind in which they were. . . .³¹

The testimony of Negro witnesses was to the same general effect.

A negro living on Providence street was the next witness. He said that he was working at the camp on the Monday before the trouble, and that six of the negro guards who were guarding the warehouses told him that they would "raise hell with Houston" because they had been mistreated. "They said they would do Houston like the Ninth and Tenth did Brownsville. They cursed the people of Houston, and said they didn't now how to treat Northern people right. They said us Southern darkies didn't have sense enough to protect ourselves. . . . I told several people, I told my landlady that those niggers told me that about four or five days ago. It was four or five days after they reached here that I heard that the colored troops were going to straighten out Houston."³²

One of the firemen stationed at the warehouses at the camp, G. J. Wolf, reported that he learned from Howard Burks, a Negro guard ". . . that they had intended to start the riot on Tuesday, but postponed it. . . ."³³ W. C. Wilson, desk sergeant from 11 p. m. to 7 a. m.,

. . . stated . . . that sometime before the riot one or two negro troopers were brought in who complained about the treatment given them and said they were going to get even. . . .³⁴

The last three witnesses were the only ones whose testimony would indicate that rioting had definitely been under consideration prior to the day of the riot itself. It will be recalled that the reported reference of the Negro troopers to the Brownsville incident was stated to have been voiced on Monday, the day on which the prohibitionists' advertisement containing the "Remember Brownsville" slogan appeared. As was pointed out above, it seems entirely possible, since the *Post* is a morning newspaper, that the advertisement suggested the Brownsville parallel to Negroes as well as to whites.

³¹ August 24.

³² September 1.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

With the exception of the hospitable behavior of young women and girls, little information is available regarding the reception accorded the Negro troops by the colored residents of Houston. Nor is it certain that all the feminine entertainment provided the troopers was afforded by genuine Houstonians, for camp followers were reported to have come from the troops' previous station in New Mexico. As an example of the type of testimony given by a number of Negro girls and young women, here is that of Edna Tucker, a 13-year-old girl who ". . . looked to be much older than the age she gave. She was asked, 'How did you happen to go to the camp Thursday night?' "

A. They asked me.

Q. Did you see any whisky there?

A. Yes; Lizzie had a bottle of whisky in a paper bag in her bosom. She took it in the camp and gave it to her man. . . .

Q. What did the soldier do with the whisky?

A. Put it under the bed.

Q. Did you see any women there?

A. Yes sir; lots of them. They were in tents. . . .

Q. Did the guards see you and the women come and go?

A. Yes; they didn't stop me.

Q. Did white officers see you?

A. Yes sir; I saw lots of them.³⁵

THE PRECIPITATING INCIDENT: MORNING

On the day after the riot there appeared on an inside page of the *Post* a brief item which evidently was written and prepared for publication prior to the outbreak of the riot. Inconspicuous in comparison with the blaring headlines of the riot itself, it gives the first account of the incident which precipitated the riot.

Two negro soldiers, one of them a member of the military police, were arrested by Officers Daniels and Sparks on Thursday afternoon and claim to have been beaten up to some extent by the officers. Later two other negro soldiers from Camp Logan approached the officers to ascertain what had become of their comrades, and on receiving the information reported to their superior officers at the camp.

³⁵ August 30.

Afterward the officers in command of the negro soldiers had a conference with Superintendent of Police Brock, which resulted in the issuance of an order by the chief that hereafter negro soldiers are not to be referred to by members of the department as negroes, but as "colored" soldiers. It is said that the order has stirred up a good deal of feeling.

Officers Daniels and Sparks gave their version of the trouble as follows: they had arrested a negress on San Felipe Street Thursday afternoon, when a negro soldier came up to them and asked them to turn the negress over to him. They refused and finally the soldier became so insistent that the officers were obliged to subdue him and send him to the station. Shortly afterward another negro soldier, one of the military police, asked the same officers what had become of his comrade and one word led to another and this soldier also was sent to the station *a little the worse for wear*.

In speaking of the occurrence Thursday evening, Superintendent Brock said one of the soldiers had been returned to the camp, while the other was still detained at police station. He could not say what action would be taken by the government against the two officers who are alleged to have hit the soldiers, but he had put the whole thing up to the government. The chief said he was doing all in his power to preserve order between the two elements and would continue to do so.³⁶

It is worth pointing out that the central importance of this incident is admitted in the front-page major story of the riot following a brief version of the same incident: "From every source Thursday night, reports came that this treatment of the troops led to the riot." To avoid confusion in the material about to be presented it should be noted that the "trouble" referred to occurred Thursday morning rather than Thursday afternoon, as the above account has it. It seems hardly necessary to state that the order issued by Superintendent of Police Brock regarding the mode of address to be employed by police officers in dealing with Negro soldiers was later stricken from the police records.

At two points in the investigation testimony was taken regarding the incident which precipitated the riot, and certain basic inconsistencies between the versions of the white policeman who participated and of other informants were

³⁶ Italics added by the writer. August 24.

clearly developed.³⁷ The crux of the matter seems to be whether the treatment of the Negro soldiers by the white civil policemen was justified. The following is that of the white policeman:

Mr. Sparks said that he and his partner arrested a negro woman on Bailey and San Felipe streets Thursday morning on a charge of abusive language. They took her to the police box at San Felipe and Wilson streets and sent in a call for the patrol wagon. While waiting there they saw a negro soldier running toward the negro woman, and when told that he could not have her he said that he would take her anyway.

Sparks said that he told the negro Edwards three different times to get back, but that when he kept coming in he struck him four times with his revolver. He then made him sit down and wait for the patrol wagon, and he and the negro woman were put in it together and sent to the police station. Edwards was drunk, he said.³⁸

Officer Sparks was called to the witness stand a second time in the course of the next day of the investigation. This time he was quoted as follows:

"I arrested the negro woman for abusive language. While I was waiting for the wagon Edwards came up with about 20 negroes following him and said he wanted the woman. I said he couldn't have her. He said he was going to have her and reached over. I hit him over the head three or four times till his heart got right and he sat down."³⁹

But to return to Officer Sparks' first version of the events which followed later in the course of the day of the riot:

He said that he and Daniels went to the same box Thursday afternoon to ring in and that while they were waiting there Corporal Baltimore came up and asked them who hit Edwards that morning. Sparks said he did, and asked why Baltimore wanted to know. Baltimore answered that he asked because he wanted to know. Sparks answered him to the effect, "I don't report to any negro." Baltimore said, "By — I'm on this beat and I have a right to know." Sparks said that Baltimore was acting so ugly that he hit him once with the butt of his revolver and then arrested him. When he started to run by Sparks shot in the ground behind him to scare

³⁷ Only one of the two police officers involved survived the riot.

³⁸ August 30.

³⁹ September 1.

him, and then arrested him and sent him to the police station. . . .

Afterwards he [Sparks] said two negro soldiers came to him and Daniels and asked them in a nice way what the names of the two soldiers were who had been arrested. The policemen told them they did not know, but they called up at the police station and learned that the names were Edwards and Baltimore, and told the two soldiers what the names were. . . .⁴⁰

The second session of questioning, however, elicited a substantially different version of the same incident.

The action of the police officers in arresting negro soldiers the day of the riot was threshed out by the Committee Friday night. Testimony introduced tended to show that Corporal Baltimore, one of the men arrested, simply inquired of Police Officers Sparks and Daniels concerning the negro who had previously been arrested, so that he might make his own report to the commanding officer of his company. Sparks' testimony, however, was to the effect that the negro was insulting in his inquiries, and that he was forced to deal roughly with him. . . .⁴¹

Here is the pivotal question in the entire affair: what was the nature of the interaction between Sergeant Baltimore, a colored soldier playing the role, but not clothed with the authority of, a military policeman, and the two white civil policemen, Sparks and Daniels, resentful of being questioned by the Negro, and possibly covering up an inward fear by an outward show of violence?

Superintendent of Police Brock was recalled to the witness stand and was questioned by Judge Henry J. Dannenbaum regarding the encounter between Sparks and Sergeant Baltimore and the latter's arrest. He said that the negro soldier made a statement at the station which was produced and read. He said Captain Haig Shekerjian, Detectives Daugherty and Fife and he were present at the time.

According to the statement, Sparks struck Baltimore over the head with his pistol, then fired at him, and Baltimore ran into a house and got under a bed. Sparks followed him, according to the statement, and made him get up, and then struck him twice. Baltimore said he was just inquiring what had become of his brother officer, and that it was his duty to investigate the matter. . . .

Sparks said he only struck Baltimore once, that he did not strike him after he had run into the house. He said Baltimore had no

⁴⁰ August 30.

⁴¹ September 1.

arms or police club with him. . . . Asked why he hit the negro more than once he said he wasn't going to wrestle with the big negro.

He admitted that in making arrests in the thickly populated negro sections where the more vicious elements of the negroes congregate, he thought it necessary to use more force than was legally or morally necessary in order to keep the other negroes from running away with him.

In answer to General Chamberlain, he said he had received no instructions as to the relations to be maintained between the police officer and the military police and General Chamberlain observed, "I thought so." . . .

Sparks and Daniels made a verbal statement, said Mr. Brock, and he told Sparks he would be suspended in the morning. Sparks said he could not afford to be suspended, that he had been suspended before and Brock told him he would wait until he investigated the matter. . . .⁴²

. . . Sparks said that he told the chief and the officer that nothing more was said except that Chief Brock told him to go home and stay away until he was called for. Baltimore seemed to have been drinking, he said.⁴³

Detective E. F. Daugherty, who took the negro Baltimore's statement on the typewriter, explained the conversation in Superintendent Brock's office. He said that besides himself, Officers Fife and McPhail, Superintendent Brock, Captain Shekerjian of the Twenty-fourth Infantry and Baltimore were in the office. He said that Baltimore stated that he was coming down San Felipe Street when he met another negro soldier of whom he inquired where the police officers could be found. He said he went to them and asked them why they had arrested another negro soldier that morning, telling them that he wanted the information in order to be able to report to his commanding officer.

Baltimore, according to Detective Daugherty, said that Officer Sparks then hit him with his pistol, and that when he turned and ran three shots were fired at him. He said he was arrested in a house about a block down the street.

Daugherty said that later Superintendent Brock and Sparks were in the former's office alone, and that when Sparks came out he said something to the effect that he wasn't getting a square deal. He also said that any man who would stick up for a negro was no better than a negro himself, Daugherty testified, and as he went out of the door he continued that if that wasn't enough he would give him (Brock) the rest of it. Later Daugherty said that Sparks sent an apology to Superintendent Brock by Captain Anderson.

When asked whether he knew if Sparks had been suspended by Superintendent Brock, Daugherty said that Brock and Captain

⁴² September 1.

⁴³ August 30.

Sherkerjian were to have had a conference Friday morning, and that he understood Sparks was to be suspended until the matter had been settled. He said that Sparks said after his interview with the Superintendent that "if Chief Davison had been in the office he would have told Captain Shekerjian to get out and take his negroes with him. . . ."⁴⁴

Even though it involves some repetition, since it adds some significant data, the first interchange between Inspector General Chamberlain, U. S. Army, and Superintendent Brock is next presented:

Q. You took a statement from Sergeant Baltimore. What did Baltimore have to say?

A. Baltimore asked the officer why he arrested the woman and the officer told him he was not in the habit of reporting to a negro, and the officer hit him.

Q. Did Baltimore strike or attempt to strike the policeman?

A. I can't say he did.

Q. Did both policemen claim the striking was justifiable? Why did they beat up the private?

A. The private demanded the release of the woman. They hit him.

Q. Did the negroes try to strike the officers?

A. I don't know.

The witness was then asked to explain the general attitude of negro troops since they came to Houston and the trouble the police had with them.

He said: "It was reported to me Thursday morning that two police officers arrested a negro woman in San Filipe Street. She was drunk and also had used abusive language. A negro soldier, a private, came up to the officers; he was drunk and tried to take the woman from them. I was busy and did not wait for the rest of the report. At 2:30 Thursday one of the officers informed me that one of the negro soldiers was marked 'hold for chief.' The man was brought to my office. He had blood on his face. I asked him to wash it off and he did. He told me he had asked a policeman why the officer was beating up a woman, and the policeman beat him up and shot at him. It was Sergeant Baltimore. He made a statement and Captain Shekerjian and the other officers heard it. The negro did not seem to be sore. I told the Captain he could file charges against the officer if he wanted to. He said let it go until Friday. That was all right with me.

"I turned Baltimore over to the Captain. That was about 5 o'clock Thursday afternoon."

⁴⁴ September 1.

Q. Did the negro soldiers know Baltimore was not shot?

A. They must have known it, for he was in camp. . . .

Q. What was the first information you had there was going to be trouble?

A. Later Captain Kessler (city detective) told me he had word from the Sheriff's office there was trouble at the camp. I got busy and about that time Captain Snow came to the station. He told me when Sergeant Baltimore got back to camp and the negroes saw he was not hurt there would be no trouble. Captain Snow told me "can't a man get out of camp? There won't be any trouble." I went home and went to bed. It was raining. About 8 o'clock I heard shooting. I called the camp over the phone and asked for Captain Snow. I asked him if there was trouble. He said "yes." The telephone wire went dead then and we were disconnected. . . .

Q. Were you afraid of trouble with white troops too?

A. Yes.

Q. If a white provost guard should inquire of one of your policeman why he arrested a man or woman, would the policeman hit the guard?

A. I don't think so.

Q. Would you expect a white man to do any different?

A. I don't think a white man would act like Baltimore did.

The witness said there had been no complaint of lack of courtesy to the military on the part of policemen, and the soldiers seemed satisfied. The army officers also seemed satisfied. He said few of the soldiers had been arrested for being drunk.⁴⁵

About a month after the riot, the following was reported from El Paso, Texas. It was based on testimony taken before the special board of inquiry at the Fort Bliss stockade, where the Negro troopers were being tried for their role in the riot.

The evidence taken before the board of inquiry develops that the meeting was carefully planned, and that it was the result of the beating up of a negro provost guard by a Houston policeman. This negro, with his face still showing the scars of combat, was before the board of inquiry Wednesday and told his story.

According to this story the man returned to the camp at 11 in the morning of the day of the mutiny. He told of his experiences at the hands of the police and two hours later it had spread throughout the entire battalion.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ August 30.

⁴⁶ September 20.

THE ROLE OF RUMOR: EARLY AFTERNOON

We are now in a position to give a brief synthetic account of the *supposed* sequence of events up to mid-afternoon. It began with the arrest of a Negro woman, drunk and therefore using abusive language, by the white policemen Sparks and Daniels. In this process they treated her with considerable severity if not actual brutality as a result of which Edwards, a Negro soldier (a private, but also a provost guard, and therefore Baltimore's "brother officer"), attempted to intervene. This led to his beating, arrest, and incarceration; but as he was not kept long at the station he was able to be back at the camp in the late morning.

Early in the afternoon Corporal Baltimore, another provost guard, attempted to locate the police officers stationed in the San Felipe district to find out what had happened to Edwards and why. Directed by another Negro soldier, he soon located Officers Sparks and Daniels.⁴⁷ Being refused the information he sought he attempted to escape from the policemen, was chased, shot at, captured, beaten, arrested, taken to the station and locked up in the early afternoon. Sparks and Daniels, meanwhile, returned to their beat, where they were subsequently approached and questioned by a pair of Negro soldiers whose demeanor was such that they saw fit to reward them with the desired information. Meanwhile, also, the story of Baltimore's ill treatment at the hands of the same policemen who had that morning beaten up Edwards had been carried back to the camp by

⁴⁷ From the conflicting testimony and news accounts it is not clear, however, whether Baltimore had previously had direct or indirect contact with Edwards; whether he had been ordered by his superior officers to make the inquiry; whether he was supposed to relieve Edwards on provost guard duty, and made inquiry when he could not be located; whether the Negro soldier who directed him to the policemen's station also accompanied him there; whether Baltimore had been informed that the policemen had been beating the Negro woman whom they had arrested that morning; and whether he asked them only about the reason for the arrest of Edwards, of the woman, or both.

the soldier who had directed Baltimore to the policemen, and who had hung around awaiting developments. Broadcast throughout the camp by the grapevine, and at the same time exaggerated, this news proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back. For it tended to confirm the already current notion that the only way to release the cumulative pressure of resentment and rage was to retaliate directly against the offending San Felipe policemen.

It seems clear that the resentment aroused by the returned Edwards was terrifically intensified when the report that Baltimore had been "shot at" became transformed into the rumor that he had been shot and killed. The first reports after the riot included this statement:

The trouble began early in the afternoon when a member of the military was arrested by the local police officers. Within a short time this was reported at the camp of the negro soldiers and quickly became bruited about that the negro had been killed by a policeman.

There has been much unrest in the camp for several days past. Within a short time after this report became general it was noted by the officers that some of the negroes were stealing ammunition and passing it from one to another.⁴⁸

Another statement on this rumor appeared in the published reports of the municipal investigation:

It was this clash between the police and the negro soldiers that caused a rumor to reach the camp that Corporal Baltimore had been killed by a policeman. The rumor spread like wildfire among the negro soldiers and brought to a climax the smoldering feeling that the negro soldiers had been harboring against the white citizens, particularly the police force, for nearly two weeks.⁴⁹

Said N. L. Daniels, a construction worker, ". . . One negro soldier had told me the shooting was going to start at 9 o'clock because the police had shot a soldier. . . ."⁵⁰ According to E. E. Ammons, gate keeper and special deputy sheriff at Camp Logan:

. . . the negro soldier on guard at my gate that came on at 3 o'clock when the guard was changed started swearing. I asked

⁴⁸ August 24.

⁴⁹ August 30.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

him what the matter was. He said "the ——— police had shot up one of our men and we won't stand for it." I told him he would have to obey the laws if he stayed around here. I asked him his name, but he was surly and refused to tell me. I told him I would force him to. I called the sergeant and told him what had happened. The latter reprimanded him and made him give me his name, Albert Wright. I wasn't satisfied at this and phoned to the negro camp. I don't know who answered the phone, but I believe it was a petty officer. I told him how the soldier had talked to me and that he said there was going to be hell in Houston tonight. He asked me to arrest the soldier, but I did not think it necessary. . . .⁵¹

PLANNING, PREPARATION FOR, AND EXECUTION OF THE RIOT:
MID-AFTERNOON AND LATER

James Divins, member of Company I of the Negro regiment, in an affidavit obtained by the District Attorney's department, stated that he

. . . came off guard duty at about 2:30 and heard some of the men of [his] company talking about Corporal Baltimore having been shot downtown by a police officer, and they were all talking among themselves as to who would go down town and raid. They all agreed to wait until night, so they could see about the ammunition.⁵²

A similar statement was made by Leroy Pinkett, a Negro private:

Yesterday about 3 o'clock we heard that Corporal Baltimore of our company had been shot by special police officers (white officers who ride horses). All the boys said: "Let's go get the man that shot Baltimore." . . .⁵³

According to the news dispatch from El Paso at the time of the soldiers' trial,

About three in the afternoon the men commenced stealing their rifles and ammunition and planning the descent on the town. The real leader of the mutiny, Sergeant Henry, committed suicide with his own pistol rather than surrender.⁵⁴

The news of the imminent riot spread quickly from soldiers to civilians. V. G. Dustin, white foreman of the Houston post office, reported that the morning after the

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² August 25.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ September 20.

riot he said to a Negro mail carrier, Herman J. Ford, “. . . it seems that a great many of you people knew about this trouble beforehand.” Ford’s reply was “. . . that he knew about it when he got off from work Thursday afternoon about 4 o’clock. He said he brought his wife and child in from the Brunner district, where he lives, to San Felipe for safety. . . .”⁵⁵

Several Negro girls testified to having been warned of the imminence of danger. Josephine Wright, a 13-year-old girl, quoted the soldiers as saying:

“ ‘You better hurry home. If you don’t hurry you’ve got to stay here overnight. If you don’t go you’re liable to get killed. You better go, because we’re going to raise sand. Somebody killed one of our brothers and we’re going to get him.’ They were cleaning their guns,” she said, and had ammunition. That was at 4:30 o’clock.⁵⁶

Lorraine Forman, a 16-year-old mulatto girl, testified:

I heard them say they were going to raise sand because one of our soldiers was killed, one was arrested, and one was beat up. . . . I saw one white officer out there when the soldier told me that. He said this colored soldier is right and this white policeman is wrong.⁵⁷

A white man, Henry Koenig, asserted:

. . . that on Thursday afternoon about 5 o’clock some negro soldiers passed on the way to the warehouses and that they were cursing and telling what they intended doing to the white people. . . .⁵⁸

Said E. Hartwell, captain of the temporary fire station at the government warehouse, in response to the question, “Did those men [the Negro guards at the warehouse] tell you anything of the trouble?”:

They said when the wagon came that night bringing provisions the men had been told that the police in town had shot one of their number. When they left the camp they said they were going to the police station to get revenge. . . .⁵⁹

⁵⁵ August 30.

⁵⁶ September 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ August 30.

Flossie Chaney, another of the Negro girls, was at the camp Thursday afternoon and left at 6:30.

Q. Why did you leave camp so soon?

A. "They told me they were coming to town and raise hell, and told us to go home. . . . They were all talking about it. All of them said there was going to be trouble. They talked it all over the camp. . . ." Questioned relative to any demonstration against white people, she said the negro soldiers cursed and abused both the white people and their white officers.

Q. What did they say about the white people before they started to shoot up the town?

A. "They called the white people every kind of name. They called them everything. They cursed the white military officers and said 'We'll kill them, too.' They cursed the whites all the time. . . ." ⁶⁰

Bessie Chaney, 15-year-old sister of Flossie,

. . . said she was at the negro dance hall near the camp Thursday night and left at 7 o'clock.

Q. How came you to leave?

A. "The soldiers told us to leave. They said a soldier had been killed down town by a policeman and they were going to town and raise the devil. They told me and the other women to go now or stay all night. 'If you don't go ahead of us you can't come behind.'" She testified she had been in tents with negro soldiers; that no one stopped her and no one bothered her. . . . ⁶¹

Edna Tucker, 13-year-old Negro girl, was asked, "How came you to leave?" She replied:

A white soldier and some negro soldiers said for me to leave by 7:30. They told us to go home and stay there, or we would have to stay in camp all night. They said, "there is going to be the devil." I came home and told the rest of the women to come. . . .

Q. Who told you to leave?

A. Jackson and Thomas of Company I. They were cussing. They said the police had killed one of the soldiers. They were mad. . . . ⁶²

Leroy Pinkett, a Negro soldier previously quoted, asserted in his affidavit:

. . . It was getting late then, and we stood retreat at 6 o'clock and then our men began changing by talking. I heard Sergeant Henry

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

of our company say: "Well, don't stand around like that. If you are going to do anything go ahead and do it."

After that I saw some of the boys slip over to Company K and I heard them say they had stolen the ammunition. Then Captain Snow called the men out in line. He asked what we were doing and ordered a search made for the ammunition and also ordered that our rifles be taken up. Another sergeant (I forget his name) took up our rifles from our tent. In this same talk Captain Snow told us that Baltimore was not in the wrong. I heard him say that.⁶³

James Divins, another Negro soldier, reported on the same period:

About 7 o'clock Captain Snow called the company out, called them in line and Sergeant Henry called the roll. Every member of the company answered except Corporal McKnight and Private Singleton. They were away from the camp on leave.

Captain Snow told the men in line that they had the officer who had beat up Baltimore and that the officer was in wrong and would be punished. Some member of the company spoke and asked if the officer would be punished on federal grounds. Sergeant Scott then checked the company for ammunition and all rifles were then taken up and turned in to the supply tent.⁶⁴

A white grocery salesman, B. A. Calhoun, testified as follows:

. . . I took Captain Snow to the police station. We went to the station at 4:30 and returned at 6:00 o'clock.

Q. What was the temper of the negroes?

A. They were surly at 6 o'clock. Captain Snow talked to them about the trouble Sergeant Baltimore had with police officers and told them that Chief Brock had said his police officers were wrong in his case and they would be suspended and would be punished. . . . The men seemed ugly and congregated in groups. . . . About 8 p. m. Sergeant Henry came to Captain Snow and told him he could not make the men obey. Five men of Company K were put in the guard house. The bugle was sounded for the officers' call. All officers came out and reported to their companies, and they were assembled. They all lined up and were without arms. This was about 8:10 o'clock. Captain Snow said to me, he had collected all arms, and ordered all negro civilians out of camp. Just at that time someone cried out "break ranks, and get your guns." Firing began. I don't know who fired. It may have been the men designated to do police duty downtown. [It will be recalled that Supt. Brock stated the military police were armed with night sticks only.]

⁶³ August 25.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

But all seemed to have ammunition. . . . I ran into Captain Snow's tent and his negro attendant told me to lay down. He told me if the troops knew he had not joined them they would kill him. A part of them marched right by the tent I was in. Others refused to join them and were threatened with death. Some officers ordered them to halt. They kept on, about 150 in line, I guess. Some one said, "Stop firing, save our ammunition, for we will need it later." I heard one say, "We are headed for the police station!" . . .

The witness said . . . that Captain Snow told him when he had disarmed the negroes that he believed the trouble was settled and that Captain Snow refused to carry a revolver, saying, "There won't be any trouble." He said he was told the negroes liked their officers and did not want to kill them. . . .

In reply to questions from the committee he said Captain Snow had ordered a double guard about the ammunition tent and said, "The lieutenant . . . in charge of the tent was beaten and thrown out of the tent when the negroes seized the ammunition." . . .

The witness testified he heard remarks about like this from Sergeant Henry: "If we are going to go down, let's go. What's the delay?"

He said Captain James and his company were loyal, but in direct answer said Captain James did not order his company to stop the riot.

"They wouldn't have fired upon them, anyway," he said.⁶⁵

The soldier who gave the signal for the break is identified in the statement of Leroy Pinkett:

A big fellow in our company named Frank Johnson then came running down the company street hollering, "Get your rifles, boys." We all made a rush then for the supply camp and got our rifles and we went to a large ammunition box and got our ammunition. Sergeant Henry was the leader. . . .⁶⁶

The following statement of James Divins takes up immediately after the company had been checked for ammunition, and the rifles had been collected and turned in to the supply tent:

About half the company then gathered around the stump and they were talking about someone getting the box of ammunition. Captain Scurgion walked up and said he wanted to speak to the company. About that time some member of the company said, "There is a mob coming, get your gun," and everyone commenced hollering, "Get your gun" and we all rushed to the supply tent

⁶⁵ August 29.

⁶⁶ August 25.

and got our guns. Someone then was pitching ammunition out of the box and Sergeant Henry asked, "Has everybody got their ammunition?" and some hollered "I have not got enough." Sergeant Henry formed the company in front of the officers' line and Sergeant Henry made a little talk and said this is serious business and everyone was asked to stay with him.

As we all went off towards town I heard a demand to halt but it was not given by anyone in our company and no one obeyed the command. Sergeant Henry after going a short distance halted the company and said, "We will go back and make L company go with us," and we marched down to L company's street and some said that L company would not go. We came back and Sergeant Henry stopped the company again and said his father was a soldier and had gone down, but we men would have to follow him and he would carry us down.

Sergeant Henry then ordered a flank guard put out in the rear and he also put one out in front and we marched down the shell road. . . . I think there were about 150 men in this company and a little over half of them were from my company and the others were made up from other companies. . . .

None of the men were drunk that I know of; they didn't seem like they were drunk to me. We did not have any beer at the camp and I never heard of any men getting any beer that day.⁶⁷

In charge of the rear guard was Corporal Baltimore, according to the El Paso dispatch, "with instructions to shoot down any negro of the battalion who refused to join in the shooting up of Houston, or who attempted to fall out of line."⁶⁸

Another witness was a white civilian, R. R. McDaniel, who was going home Thursday night with

. . . four or five negro cotton pickers in his car. As he reached the end of the West End car line a white soldier jumped on the running board, he said. When they had almost reached the negro camp the firing began and the white officer jumped off and ran and the negroes quit shooting. Just then Major Snow ran up and jumped in the car, begging McDaniel to save him, he said.

Mr. McDaniel said that he told Major Snow to keep quiet and that they would get away. In turning around he said he ran the car in the ditch and got stuck and that Major Snow jumped out and ran. He overtook him again, and picked him up. They met Police Officer Gentry and his partner and Major Snow told them to go back or they would be killed, McDaniel said. . . . He said that Major

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ September 20.

Snow was so nervous that he (McDaniel) asked the druggist to give him something to steady his nerves.

He said they got back in the car in about 30 minutes and drove back toward the camp, and that when they were about four blocks this side of the Heights boulevard police officers stopped them and asked Major Snow about the affair. While they were talking some white officers came out from the town and asked the major to tell them all about the trouble. He said that he took the arms away from the men, all but about 135 of them, who refused to give them up.

Q. What did Major Snow say that he did after the trouble started in an effort to quell it?

A. He said he gave repeated orders and pleaded with the men to give up their arms and stay in the camp, but that they paid no attention to him.

Mr. McDaniel said Snow told him the men were shooting at the telephone wires in order to cut them when the firing started at camp. He declared that Major Snow lay huddled in the rear of the car and would not get on the front seat with him.⁶⁹

Captain L. A. Tuggle, post commander at Camp Logan, and in charge of the Illinois troops who were sent in to Houston to break up the riot, is quoted by a reporter of the *Post* as follows:

I sat here just where I am sitting now at 8:30 o'clock Thursday night. . . . I was working on reports.

Up from the east came a vicious whirr of rifle fire. I jumped to my feet in amazement, ran out of my tent, and strained my eyes toward the source of the sound. . . . Officers from the six companies of infantry and the battery of artillery on the line here, had by this time clustered at my tent. We all were gazing into the east and wondering whether it might not be a sham battle. A sham battle on a rainy night, with mud underfoot and a drizzle still falling seemed foolish to undertake. . . .

The lights of a motor car dashed through the pines and played on us. The car darted up and stopped with a wrench of the brakes. Captain J. A. Rossiter . . . leaped out and after him came a bare-headed negro soldier.

"Captain Tuggle, this man says the colored troops of the Twenty-fourth are mutinying and killing their officers," Captain Rossiter gasped.

The soldier then told me what he knew. . . . The man had run all the way to the camp of Captain Rossiter's engineer company more than a mile to the west, to ask for help. . . .⁷⁰

⁶⁹ August 30.

⁷⁰ August 26.

Meanwhile what was happening in Houston? We can get some idea from the story of P. F. Lowder, a reporter representing the Chicago *Herald*, which was reproduced in the *Post*:

The first Houston knew of the trouble was at 8 o'clock. A few scattering shots were heard. Everybody began to ask everybody else what the trouble was. Then the telephone began to ring.

"Send help! Send help! The niggers are shooting up the town."

Three automobiles loaded with police officers started for Camp Logan. They halted at the city limits and confined their activities to warning people not to go near the camp. An ambulance that ventured near to pick up the wounded girl [hit by a stray shot while she was within her home] was stopped by the colored troops.

The tires were shot full of holes, the driver told to turn around, a few shots were fired in the air and the machine came tearing back the road on flat tires.⁷¹

Other reporters, out to see what was happening, had the following to say:

Eighty of the negroes, marching in military formation, in column of twos, led by a tall private, marched south . . . This was at 9:20 o'clock. The men were in perfect order, though they were marching along out of step. When two other newspaper men, bound for the camp to find out the cause of the trouble, ran into the column, they made no threatening move, except that the tall leader shoved one of the reporters into the ditch. . . . The two civilians were allowed to go on toward the army camp unmolested. As they were abreast of the middle of the column, one negro called out: "See here, boys, what you let them two go by for? You goin' to pass up them two? Let's get 'em."

There was no answer and no move was made to "get 'em." . . . It is thought that these soldiers marched down the Shepherd's Dam road, across the bridge, and entered the city in the San Felipe Street section where the fighting kept up long after it had ceased everywhere else. . . .⁷²

Testified Mrs. Maude Potts, a jitney operator, in response to the question, "What do you know about the riot?":

I was in the center of it. . . . I heard a negro soldier tell me, "get away from here, white lady, we don't want to kill you, but we are

⁷¹ August 24.

⁷² *Ibid.*

after the white policemen who have called us names and have been beating our men up." . . . I saw many civilian negroes go along with the negro soldiers and they were armed and some of them were shooting wild. . . .⁷³

James Divins further testified:

We crossed the bridge and we met two United States officers in a car on San Felipe Street and halted them and returned their guns to them and let them go. . . . I saw two officers (police officers) in uniform. One lying in the street on his back had been shot but he was not dead and the other one was lying on his side in the bend of the road. I don't know if he was dead or not. . . .⁷⁴

From the last four items it seems clear that the Negro troops were not out to mow down Houston whites indiscriminately. That some of the Negroes, both soldiers and civilians, may have had an inclination to be less discriminating in their violence is entirely possible. But the disciplined and relatively orderly way in which the departure from the camp was organized and carried out strongly suggests that the leaders, while inflexibly determined to punish the San Felipe policemen, had no intention of generally "shooting up the town." This interpretation is corroborated by the statement of Captain Tuggle:

"Of course everyone knows . . . Captain Mattes and the [police] officer (Meineke) . . . had gone on ahead of the troops, had met the crowd of negroes advancing up San Felipe, and had been killed. . . . I am fully convinced that Captain Mattes would never have been shot if he had not been in the car with a police officer. I believe that the negroes thought he was another policeman."

After Captain Tuggle had made this statement a negro prisoner, in a signed confession, made a similar statement that bore out Captain Tuggle's theory. The negro said that if they had known that Captain Mattes was an army officer they would never have harmed him. They had shot out the street lights. They saw, in the front seat, a man whom they knew to be a police officer. In the dark they thought Captain Mattes was another and killed both. Then they plunged bayonets into them.⁷⁵

More light is thrown on the general turmoil and alarm among the civilians of Houston by the following quotations:

⁷³ August 29.

⁷⁴ August 25.

⁷⁵ August 26.

Houston policemen, armed civilians, and members of the Texas National Guard, as well as Illinois guardsmen who were in town when the trouble started quickly went to the scene of the shooting . . . where Captain W. P. Rothrock, constructing quartermaster of Camp Logan, assumed command.

Angry cries of "lynch them" and "come, let's go kill 'em," were heard on all sides. Captain Rothrock placed an armed guard across Washington Avenue with instructions not to let anyone pass, then climbed upon the hood of an automobile and appealed to the men to listen to reason. . . .

About the undertaking establishments great throngs gathered and there was muttering and denunciation of the most rabid sort.

At the police station probably a thousand men, many of them armed, gathered and there was a seething mass which circulated wild rumors and offered their services to the chief of police and his lieutenants. This crowd stayed around most of the evening, though there was a gradual thinning out and at midnight there were only a score or so.

At 10 o'clock every available member of the police department was being rushed to the scene of the trouble in autos, armed with repeating rifles and pistols.

A report reached police station that one-third of the riotous negro soldiers were under restraint and that the balance had divided up into small groups and were rushing their way into other parts of the city. . . .

Someone broke in the front window of Bering's Main Street [hardware] store, but Lieutenant G. G. Howard stationed himself in front of the door and refused to let anyone in.

A large crowd gathered in front of Bering-Cortes wholesale [hardware] store in Prairie Avenue upon the report that negroes had broken into the store to get arms, and in some way a number of them gained admittance to the store and obtained guns.⁷⁶

The importance of the rumors which accompanied the beginning of the outbreak is indicated in the following report:

. . . The vagueness and uncertainty of early reports of the trouble of Thursday night caused much uneasiness and fear. . . .

Added to the more or less authentic reports as to what was actually taking place were rumors—wild imaginings of disordered brains. One was to the effect that the negro troopers were moving upon the city, 600 strong, sweeping everything in their path. Another was that local negroes had joined the soldiers in a general uprising; that they were forming in various parts of the city and awaiting a general signal to start their work of destruction. As a

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

result of these rumors many spent an anxious and sleepless night. . . .⁷⁷

A brief account of the role of the Illinois National Guardsmen concludes the section on the riot proper.

Companies were marched to the camp site of the negro companies. Other companies went to the San Felipe district where the army negroes had gone.

The camp site was surrounded and not a man, white or black, was allowed to leave.

Word was received late at night that the San Felipe quarter was surrounded by Illinois troops and that they were waiting for daylight to capture the negro company. . . .⁷⁸

AFTERMATH

Peace and quiet failed to settle upon troubled Houston with the capture of the last of the riotous Negro soldiers. On the Sunday after the riot appeared a report of flaming fear and boundless rumor:

What appears to be a deliberate attempt to incite a race riot is being made.

Negroes have been told, in all sections of the city, that the white citizens and police intended to raid, murder, and burn. Whites have been told that negroes are arming and preparing to attack.

Both races are excited in a manner which has become most dangerous.

Hundreds of negroes have fled the city, many of them leaving during the day and other scores during the night.

Practically the whole of the ship channel has been deserted by negro workmen, who declare they have been warned to leave the city, but they do not tell who warned them.

As a result of these wild rumors which were spread throughout the city Thursday a feeling of continued unrest and anxiety prevailed among both white and negro citizens in several of the outlying sections Thursday night.

In the Fourth Ward the word was passed along that a raid would be conducted on the negro residences by white soldiers and civilians. There was no foundation for any such rumor.

At the same time in the Cottage Grove section, near Brunner, the word was spread that a raid would be conducted by the negroes on the white residents. The rumor gained credence when a party of white men riding through the section in an automobile warned the people that such a raid would be made. People rushed from

⁷⁷ August 25.

⁷⁸ August 24.

their homes in their bare feet and dressed as they were at the time of the warning and congregated in the stores along Washington avenue. No foundation existed for this rumor.

As a result of these rumors, a large number of negroes have already left the city and others are preparing to move away.⁷⁹

Immediately below this account were published three resolutions by groups of colored residents of Houston condemning the action of the colored soldiers and commending the restraint shown by the white citizens of Houston.

In spite of assurances by the military authorities, however, that the situation was entirely under control, hysterical fear and the rumors engendered thereby continued to agitate the people of Houston. Almost two weeks after the riot the following notices were published conspicuously on the front page of the *Post*:

By Maj. Gen. Geo. Bell, Jr.
To the Public:

The frenzied appeals made to me personally and to the officers of the staff of the 33rd division during the last 24 hours, coupled with the rumors which have come to us, demonstrated that a condition of apprehension exists in the minds of the people of Houston which demands a statement from me.

The only colored troops in Camp Logan are in Company G of the Eighth Ill. infantry, which numbers three officers, 134 men, 10 men attached, 3 men sick, and 4 men absent on leave, a total of 154.

. . . they have no service ammunition in their possession and no organization is quieter or better behaved. . . .

There is abundant evidence to show that many people in Houston have worked themselves up into a state of frenzy bordering on hysteria on the subject of these colored troops.

A certain newspaper in Houston has under large headlines given circulation to a rumor that "negro soldiers and civilians are preparing for a raid," and that "the time of the attack has been set for 11:15 o'clock Wednesday night." [That very night.]

It is impossible for me to find terms sufficiently strong to condemn such statements as these. They, and every one of the rumors which have come to my ears in the last 24 hours, are absolutely and unqualifiedly false and without the slightest justification in fact. . . . I therefore appeal to the sensible people of the city to put an end to all the unfounded reports and resultant hysteria created

⁷⁹ August 26.

thereby for the good, not only of Camp Logan, but for your city as well.

GEORGE BELL, JR.
Major General, U. S. Army.⁸⁰

By Mayor J. C. Hutcheson, Jr.
To the Public:

So many hysterical and unfounded rumors calculated to disturb the peace of the city of Houston and to bring discredit upon our city if persisted in have reached me and there seems to be such a feeling of uncertainty and unrest generally prevalent that I feel it necessary to personally state that I have been assured by Gen. Bell that every precaution has been taken against disorder arising out of or connected with Camp Logan, and that I have arranged with Gen. Bell for placing in the city, beginning Wednesday, a sufficient number of white military police, composed of picked men, to thoroughly police all quarters where the soldiers from Camp Logan may be. . . . *Certainly it is utterly inexcusable for any of our citizens when thus reassured on the matters of original apprehension, to circulate or give credence to wild and disturbed rumors, wholly without foundation such as have been recently current. . . .*

J. C. HUTCHESON, JR.
Mayor.⁸¹

These statements speak for themselves. But along with the general hysteria the conception of the riot held by the people of Houston was undergoing a transformation; a legend was being born.

At the time of the riot it was generally admitted that the Negro troops were bent on wreaking vengeance on the civilian policemen who they felt had treated them very badly. The first attempt to re-define the event seems to be that of a minister preaching a funeral sermon:

Dr. W. S. Lockhart, pastor of the South End Christian Church, who delivered the funeral sermon over the remains of Officer Ira D. Raney, who was killed by negro soldiers in the mutiny Thursday night, declared in the sermon that, while there appeared to be an attempt on the part of many to attribute this mutiny to race troubles, the real facts were that the mutiny was due to just two causes—"vice and booze" . . . It was simply a case of a bunch of "bad niggers" dressed up in a uniform, given a little authority and put under very lax discipline, who, under the influence of women

⁸⁰ September 12.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

and booze, perpetrated this murderous crime against the army and the city of Houston.

The blame ought to be placed where it belongs, he said, and a great mistake will be made if Houston allows the impression to grow abroad that it was race prejudice that caused the trouble, and it is a slander on the Houston people, white and black, to make it appear so . . . He praised the police force for the brave fight it put up against the armed desperadoes. . . .⁸²

A week later the sermon of another Houston minister was reported as follows:

A beautiful tribute to the men who gave up their lives for the defense of the people of Houston on the night of the mutiny of the negro soldiers, was paid by Dr. H. D. Knickerbocker, at the First Methodist Church, Sunday morning.

The minister was preaching on "The Atonement" and he used this incident to illustrate his sermon. Those soldiers and policemen who died that night to stem the black tide of death sweeping toward the homes of Houston, they entered into the glory of God himself, who gave the fullest exhibition of vicarious suffering in the death of his Son. . . .⁸³

Thus we see the role of the Houston policemen identified with that of Jesus Christ himself, beyond which it would seem difficult for any apologist to go.

Four weeks after the riot from a special Camp Logan section of the *Post* we learn how complete the transformation has already become: the conception of the event has shifted from one in which direct retaliation is central into one featuring incipient mass slaughter. Say the headlines: "How Illinois Guardsmen Saved City of Houston—Nothing Stopped Mutineers on the Night of August 23 Until They Faced the Unflinching White Soldiers from Camp Logan."

Illinois guardsmen on the night of August 23 saved Houston. There is not a Houstonian who will contest this statement. . . .

[The Negro soldiers] with their rifles and belts and bandoliers filled with ball ammunition . . . marched into Houston, then down Felipe street shooting at every white face they saw. . . .

What broke up the organization? What was it that crumpled the will of these angry soldiers, that scared them into slinking away

⁸² August 28.

⁸³ September 3.

up side streets, each man by himself? What was it that checked their march on Houston, saved dozens, perhaps hundreds of lives? It was the men in khaki, from the State of Illinois. . . .⁸⁴

One more item must be presented to round out this account:

Thirteen negro soldiers of the 24th United States Infantry were hanged at dawn today for murders committed at Houston last August, when members of that regiment engaged in mutinous rioting in the city's streets. Forty-one other negroes were sentenced to life imprisonment, four others for short terms, and five were acquitted. . . .⁸⁵

But this is not the final scene, for that lives on with the people who experienced directly or indirectly the terror and hatred of the riot and its aftermath.

CONCLUSION

The data presented in the course of the municipal investigation demonstrate that the stage was all set for a serious disturbance growing out of race ill feeling.

The data also indicate that although there were other situations in which tension was aroused, it was the members of the Houston police force, and particularly those stationed in the Negro district around San Felipe Street, against whom the colored troopers' hostility was directed.

As a case study of racial conflict involving Negro soldiers, this particular event yields a number of hypotheses which should be tested for validity as principles of general significance in the phenomena of race conflict, particularly of riots:⁸⁶

1—Transportation difficulties growing out of resentment due to segregation are significantly symptomatic of growing tension.

2—Mistreatment of Negro women being arrested by white police officers is keenly resented by Negro men; this

⁸⁴ September 20.

⁸⁵ *The New York Times*, Dec. 12, 1917.

⁸⁶ See Edgar A. Schuler and Charles G. Gomillion, "The Pattern of Military Race Riots," unpublished study.

resentment is likely to cause Negro men, particularly military personnel, to say or do something which is unacceptable to white policemen.

3—The pattern of relationships and interaction between Negro military police and white civilian police is perhaps of crucial importance in understanding and controlling racial relationships in which Negro military personnel are involved.

4—Whether on the basis of factual or rumored incidents of mistreatment, when the feeling of tension or resentment becomes sufficiently oppressive a nucleus of Negro military leadership is likely to appear, organized about the attempt to secure arms and ammunition, with the objective of taking direct retaliatory action.

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