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### **"The Contemplation of Our Righteousness": Vigilante Acts against African Americans in Southwest Minnesota, 1903**

Christopher P. Lehman

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# “THE CONTEMPLATION of OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS”

## VIGILANTE ACTS AGAINST AFRICAN AMERICANS IN SOUTHWEST MINNESOTA, 1903

**Christopher P. Lehman**

**I**N THE LAST WEEK of July 1903, Minnesotans congratulated themselves in newspapers all over the state. There had been at least two opportunities between July 18 and July 23 to lynch an African American man, but they had refrained from doing so. Many claimed that he deserved lynching because he had robbed and attacked a European American woman in her home near Montevideo in southwestern Minnesota: “Assaulted in Her Own Home at Dead of Night by a Negro Fiend, who Brains Her with an Axe” read one headline. Nevertheless, citizens had abided by the law and would let the courts handle the criminal. They would not be as savage as those southerners, whose vigilante killings of African Americans constantly appeared in “Stories across the Country” sections of the state’s newspapers. No, Minnesotans were different.<sup>1</sup>

Or were they? Their celebrations of self-restraint left out incidents of terrorism-by-skin-color during that same five-day period. A mob chased all of Montevideo’s African Americans out of the city on the night of July 19 and, three nights later, residents of nearby Olivia held a mock lynching of the criminal in lieu of actually killing him. Most of the country’s acts of vig-

ilantism against African Americans had taken place in the South, where the great majority of African Americans lived, but Minnesota’s location in the Northwest and dearth of African Americans did not insulate the state from the ethnic tensions gripping the nation. Montevideo’s expulsion of its African Americans and Olivia’s lynching performance initiated Minnesota’s contributions to the nadir of African American life—a period that reached its most violent point in the state with the lynching of three African Americans in Duluth in 1920.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout Minnesota history, its people have distinguished themselves from those in the South despite that region’s strong influence on the state. From the 1820s to the 1850s, the U.S. Department of War appointed slaveholders to serve at Forts Snelling, Ridgely, and Ripley, and the White House appointed slaveholders to positions in Minnesota’s territorial government. The slaves of these appointees remained with their owners; Minnesotans did not use slave labor for local businesses such as lumberyards and granite quarries. When southerners left the state in 1861 to defend their region in the Civil War, Germans and Scandinavians, who comprised the state’s majority, took control of government. Ex-slaves flooded into the state after the war

ended, giving residents an ever-present reminder of the South. African Americans were restricted to such jobs as barber, laborer, and domestic, but the state was not keeping them in perpetual debt as sharecroppers nor was it lynching them. Minnesotans *did* lynch European Americans and Native Americans, but those killings were irrelevant to claims of moral superiority regarding southerners and African Americans. On the other hand, both Minnesota and the South relegated African Americans to an inferior social and political status, and the European American residents of both places were invested in maintaining the status quo.<sup>3</sup>

**T**HOMAS JEFFERSON, an African American from Kentucky, arrived in Minnesota in 1862, about 25 years old, and lived all over the southern part of the state before settling in Chippewa County. He met Betsy White in Northfield; after they married in the early 1870s, they moved to Mantorville. The first of their ten

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VOLUME 27.

## AN AWFUL TRAGEDY!

### Helen Olson, of Watson, the Victim.

Assaulted in Her Own Home at Dead of Night by a Negro Fiend, who Brains Her With An Axe.

Her Skull Crushed in Several Places, but Still Lives.

Her Companion, Julia Torgerson, Escaped Through a Window and Calls The Neighbors.

The Villain Takes to the Woods, but is Tured 16 Hours Afterwards and is Now in Jail at Glencoe.

He Makes a Confession and Will Pay Penalty for the Most Brutal Crime Ever Committed in Chippewa Co.

The most brutal crime in the history of Chippewa County took place at Watson, Saturday night, when the house of Mrs. Olson was broken into, and the young girl, Helen, was given chloroform and her skull crushed.

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## A BRUTAL CRIME.

### Miss Helen Olson, of Watson, has Her Skull Broken and all But Murdered.

### Her Assailant a Negro and the Weapon Used an Ax.

### Miss Julia Torgerson, Her Room Mate, Escapes Through a Window.

### The Brute Captured.

### Miss Olson Alive Late Last Evening.

### Full and Latest Details of the Guesome Affair.

One of the most brutal crimes in the annals of Minnesota history since the Indian outrages of '32 occurred at Watson, a station seven miles west of this place, Saturday morning between the hours of 2 and 3 o'clock.

## The Story of His Capture and Confession.

It was not generally known in Montevideo that any crime had been committed until after 9 o'clock, when after consulting County Attorney Smith, Sheriff Hartley drove through the streets and in the name of the state commanded every man to get out and search for the criminal. In a short time armed men were scouring the country for the criminal, a description of whom had been given by Miss Torgerson and which afterwards proved correct. The search was kept up and numerous reports came in of Negroes being seen. A report of this kind came to her from Miles but little heed was paid it. However the credit and honor of capturing him was to go to Miles for a Negro had stopped at the house of H. G. Peterson about 11 o'clock and asked for something to eat, and washed his face and hands; from there he went to A. O. Strassman's farm about one mile north and got a drink of water and then cut six miles to the house of Knute Olson in section 30 where he remained until seven o'clock.

He came out of the grove within 10 feet of Gilbert Peterson, a brother of Miss Deen Peterson of this office, who was mounted on a spirited horse and armed with a revolver. He called to the man to halt but he continued to run. Mr. Peterson began snoring his gun and made it difficult to run him down. However after continuing the chase for a quarter of a mile and being closely pressed he left the highway and took refuge in a pasture where the horseman could not follow. At this point Harry Halverson coming from another direction on a mowing law in the section and began firing at him with a .38 Winchester rifle. Three shots without effect and it was growing dark and the negro continued to run. Mr. Halverson then fired a fourth shot and stopped him. He realized that desperate actions were necessary and stopped putting a ball in the villain's back if possible.

He continued to advance toward him keeping him covered with the rifle until others came up. The fellow attempted several times to get his right hand to his pocket where a large knife was afterward found. Harry Halverson, who captured the dangerous man, is the son of Mrs. Anna Halverson of section 9 Big Head Township, 22 years old.

He was taken to Miles Hartley notified, who went up on the next details in a manner that was shocking. He said that he had seen the young people at the young people had left conceived the idea of it and entered the house and committed the crime. He says he struck her three or four times with the ax.

He was taken to Glencoe on the express train the county jail. He claims his motive was to get a young lady, the daughter of Thomas in Wisconsin and did not touch the body of his mother having died when she was but a child. Her cousin and room mate was also a very much loved and both girls were about as well known here at Glencoe as every one were their friends. The father of the young lady was not lynched while at the jail over that should be not pay the penalty of his crime people.

The newspaper yarn regarding chief Deputy Sheriff and did nothing and Sheriff but little more.

The prisoner was brought to Minnesota Falls county in charge of the Sheriff of Glencoe and Sheriff Smith and Justice to the grand jury. His admitted every thing the party hardly started and no remorse were carried behind the iron bars where he will remain until taken to the penitentiary.

children was born there, and Thomas started his lifelong profession as a barber. The Jeffersons relocated to Zumbrota in 1880 and Howard Lake in 1885; Thomas found work cutting hair wherever the family went. By 1893 at least two family members resided in Chippewa County: the patriarch in Clara City and his daughter Winnie in Granite Falls.<sup>4</sup>

Joseph Henry Scott, a 25-year-old African American, came to Chippewa County by accident ten years later when his train from Sioux Falls was sidetracked there on July 17, 1903. The Kansas City native had just completed a 19-month prison sentence for forgery, and he boarded the train to start a new life in a new location. While stranded, he went looking for water and came upon a two-story house on the outskirts of the town of Watson. He saw people outside the house, and he overheard them talking

about money. As he later confessed, he needed money and so decided to rob the house. That decision would have grave consequences for the county's single-digit African American population.<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Olson, the Norwegian widower who owned the house, was not at home. His daughter Helen, a milliner in her twenties, was left alone, but her cousin Julia Torgerson had come to stay overnight. The Torgersons—Thomas's in-laws—had looked after the Olsons since the death of Thomas's wife in 1883; he and Helen had lived for a while with the Torgersons in Tunsberg, three miles north of Watson. Eventually they returned home, but the families stayed in touch. By 11 P.M. on July 17, the last of Helen's visitors for the day were gone. She and Julia prepared for sleep.<sup>6</sup>

Scott lay in the grass outside the Olson house that night and waited

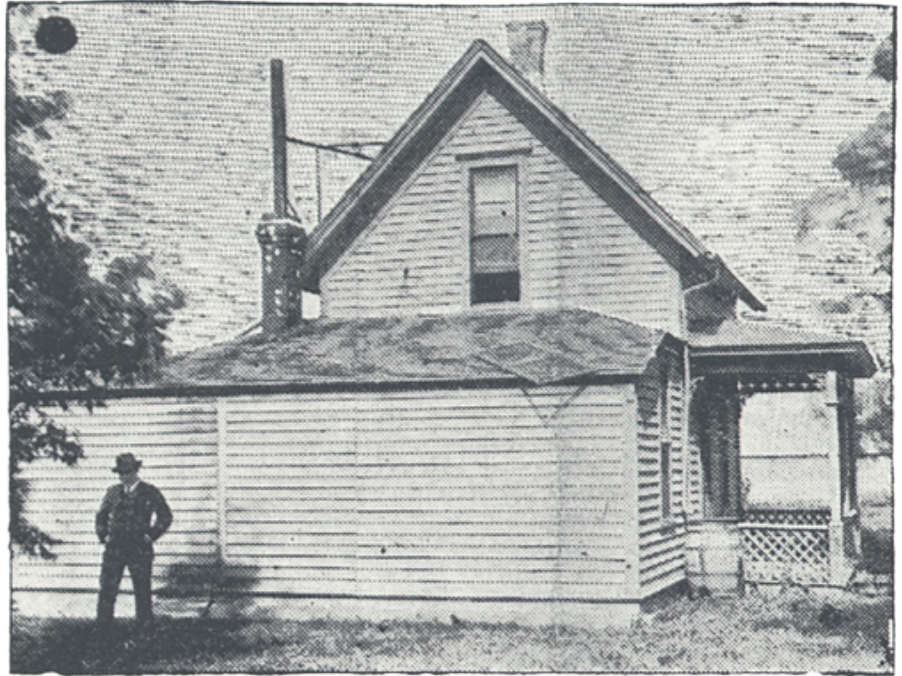
Page one of Monte Video's two weekly papers, the Leader (left) and Commercial, July 24, 1903; newspapers of the era did not mince words.

until between four and five A.M. to break in. After finding what valuables he could on the first floor, he went up to the second floor, awakened the women, and demanded Olson's money. He then dragged her down the stairs. When she yelled to her cousin to get the revolver, Scott struck her twice over the right eye with an ax handle, smashing her skull.<sup>7</sup>

Torgerson escaped through a window onto the porch (or kitchen) roof. Scott stepped out of the house to fire his gun at her. He missed and then fled. She screamed as she descended from the roof and ran to a neighbor's house. Many in the Watson community awakened to her screams, and the townspeople quickly spread the word about the incident. Neighbors



Helen Olson (above), pictured in the July 31, 1903, *Montevideo Commercial* along with reports that she would recover. The Olson house (right), showing Julia Torgerson's window-and-roof escape route.



who came to Olson's house found her lying on the floor, blood pooled under her head. She reportedly cried, "O my head, my head, be careful of my head," as doctors arrived. They immediately declared that she was near death, and the community started its hunt for any suspicious-looking African American man.<sup>8</sup>

The residents of Montevideo, about six miles east of Watson, responded quickly when they heard the news. The marshal rang the town hall bell at 9:30 A.M., and residents swarmed to the building. County Attorney Lyndon A. Smith, who only months earlier had finished his term as lieutenant governor, approached the steps of the hall and cautioned the crowd to use restraint but to find the attacker.<sup>9</sup>

As Smith spoke, Chippewa County Sheriff Charles Hartley drove up in his buggy, and his actions set in motion a county-wide manhunt. The *Montevideo Leader* reported that Hartley announced, "In the name of the State of Minnesota, I as sheriff summon you and each of you to go with me in search of the negro who murdered the

Olson girl at Watson this morning, and I hold every man responsible for the arrest of the negro. Who will go?" By noon the sheriff had dispatched posses to the northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast. An eight-man posse from Milan and several others from Chippewa County towns assisted in the search. Meanwhile, Watson residents armed with rifles, pistols, and shotguns scoured the countryside. The posses dispersed with a mutual understanding that whoever caught the perpetrator would give him "short shrift," as the *St. Paul Globe* later put it.<sup>10</sup>

All morning and afternoon, Scott walked through the county. At 10 A.M. he approached the Peterson household at Big Bend, about six miles north of Watson, and Mrs. Peterson fed him a meal. When her husband, Hans G. Peterson, came home and heard about his wife's guest, he rode into Milan to tell the community. Meanwhile, Scott hid in a grove and then, around 7 P.M., headed toward Milan. There he encountered Milan's posse, and one of its members—

Henry Halvorson—fired four shots from his .38 Winchester. The last shot hit Scott in the arm, and he surrendered.<sup>11</sup>

First, townspeople took Scott to a doctor to examine his wound. Fearing for his safety, Milan officials wanted him transferred out of town as soon as possible. At 11:30 P.M., Sheriff Hartley met the captive and his captors at a farm south of Milan and assumed custody of Scott. As he encountered groups of people while traveling with the prisoner through Chippewa County, he determined that he could neither securely take Scott to jail in Montevideo nor keep him there. Lyndon Smith later confirmed to Gov. Samuel R. Van Sant, "There were hostile crowds at both Watson and Montevideo, and I am of the opinion that an attempt to lynch the negro would have been made had he been brought through here on a regular train as was expected."<sup>12</sup>

Hartley decided that Scott would be safer two counties to the southeast, about 90 miles away, at the McLeod County jail in Glencoe. He and his

party waited at Milan's station for the 3 A.M. excursion train to Glencoe. It was now July 19. The sheriff and his deputies were armed, but their presence did not prevent an assassination attempt. At the station, a man pointed a pistol at the captive's head, but attorney Christopher A. Fosnes of Sparta convinced the gunman not to shoot. Eventually, all ticketed passengers boarded the train, and Scott and the authorities reached Glencoe with none of those townspeople aware of their arrival. The assassination attempt proved Hartley's assumption about Scott's safety in Chippewa County correct.<sup>13</sup>

The newspapers published soonest after the attack printed the most inaccurate accounts of the 24 hours following the incident, and these stories persisted as other papers reprinted them. Editors in Bemidji, Willmar, and Minneapolis, for example, believed the falsehood told by Ortonville's police chief, Charles S. Denny, who simply happened to be on the train that Hartley boarded with Scott. Making himself the hero, Denny claimed that a mob numbering in the hundreds and holding firearms and ropes awaited him and his party at the Montevideo train station, and

## The newspapers published soonest after the attack printed the most inaccurate accounts of the 24 hours following the incident.

he said that he threatened to shoot the first person who tried to take Scott. Also, multiple reports labeled the prisoner a "murderer," although Olson had not died. The *Rock Island Argus* in Illinois reported on July 18 that both Olson and Torgerson had been assaulted and "will probably die." The papers assumed that a mob would lynch Scott. Such inaccurate reporting threatened to agitate Chippewa County's angriest residents to fulfill the prophecy.<sup>14</sup>

The mood of the county was not soothed by the disruptions that the manhunt had caused to public events. Clara City's baseball team prepared to host a game against Montevideo's club on Sunday, July 19, but the Montevideo team failed to show up. Its players "had been on the negro hunt all day Saturday till late in the evening and did not feel like playing ball the next day," according to the *Clara City Herald*. The hosts and spectators were not pleased.<sup>15</sup>

leave the city of 1,700 people. The African Americans complied with haste—"Most of them did not take the full time limit but left immediately," according to the *Willmar Tribune*—despite having to abandon much of their property. By noon the next day, one-third of one percent of Montevideo's population was gone.<sup>16</sup>

None of the local newspapers identified the expelled residents by name, but the Jeffersons were most likely the victims. As of 1900, only the Jeffersons had at least six African Americans in one household in all of Chippewa and surrounding counties. At that time they were a household of ten in Lac Qui Parle County, bordering Chippewa to the west. Also, the *Clara City Herald's* editor reported that he drove with "the barber" into Montevideo on July 19, the day of the baseball game. By placing himself among the tense and volatile residents of Montevideo, some of whom had just returned from the previous day's "negro hunt," Thomas Jefferson would have been both visible and vulnerable. As one local periodical put it at the time, "Any man whose actions are suspicious . . . is likely to be strung up." The Jeffersons avoided that fate but only by permanently leaving southwest Minnesota, which they had called home for the past ten years.<sup>17</sup>

**I**N THIS CLIMATE of manhunts, lynching talk, and cancelled events, European Americans in Chippewa County looked at their African American neighbors with suspicion. African Americans, in turn, sensed the danger and began to flee. Late at night on Sunday, July 19, a group of young European American men approached Montevideo's six remaining African American residents, who all lived in the same "shack," as the *Olivia Tribune* put it. The visitors gave their neighbors until Tuesday night to abandon their home and

**W**ITH THE AFRICAN Americans gone, Chippewa County's residents breathed a collective sigh of relief. "I think the danger of lynching is past," Smith declared to Gov. Van Sant on July 20. On the



Joseph H. Scott, his arm still bandaged at the time of his trial; *Montevideo Commercial*, November 27, 1903, page 1.

|       |                  |          |   |   |           |    |      |             |             |             |              |   |     |     |     |   |   |  |
|-------|------------------|----------|---|---|-----------|----|------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|---|-----|-----|-----|---|---|--|
|       | Margaret         | Daughter | W | F | July 1896 | 3  | 2    | Minnesota   | Germany     | Germany     |              |   |     |     |     |   |   |  |
|       | Hertha           | Daughter | W | F | July 1898 | 2  | 2    | Minnesota   | Germany     | Germany     |              |   |     |     |     |   |   |  |
|       | Louisa           | Daughter | W | F | July 1899 | 1  | 2    | Minnesota   | Germany     | Germany     |              |   |     |     |     |   |   |  |
| 12114 | Jefferson Thomas | Head     | M | F | Feb 1837  | 63 | m 25 | Kentucky    | Kentucky    | Kentucky    | Barber       | 0 | yes | yes | yes | R | H |  |
|       | Betsy            | Wife     | F | F | Sept 54   | 45 | m 25 | N. Carolina | N. Carolina | N. Carolina |              |   |     |     |     |   |   |  |
|       | Fanny            | Daughter | B | F | May 1874  | 26 | 2    | Minnesota   | Kentucky    | N. Carolina | Housekeeper  | 0 | yes | yes | yes |   |   |  |
|       | Virnie           | Daughter | B | F | Nov 1875  | 24 | 2    | Minnesota   | Kentucky    | N. Carolina | Housekeeper  | 0 | yes | yes | yes |   |   |  |
|       | Grant            | Son      | B | M | Nov 1877  | 22 | 2    | Minnesota   | Kentucky    | N. Carolina | Farm laborer |   | yes | yes | yes |   |   |  |
|       | George           | Son      | B | M | July 1881 | 17 | 2    | Minnesota   | Kentucky    | N. Carolina |              |   | yes | yes | yes |   |   |  |
|       | Filarene         | Daughter | B | F | July 1884 | 19 | 2    | Minnesota   | Kentucky    | N. Carolina |              |   | yes | yes | yes |   |   |  |
|       | Jessie           | Daughter | B | F | Feb 1889  | 11 | 2    | Minnesota   | Kentucky    | N. Carolina |              |   | yes | yes | yes |   |   |  |
|       | Edna             | Daughter | B | F | Sept 1892 | 5  | 1    | Minnesota   | Kentucky    | N. Carolina |              |   | yes | yes | yes |   |   |  |
|       | Boyd Ethel       | Lodger   | B | F | Jan 1871  | 9  | 2    | Minnesota   | Kentucky    | N. Carolina |              |   | yes | yes | yes |   |   |  |
|       | Olaf             | Head     | B | M | 1873      | 4  |      | Norway      | Norway      | Norway      | 1873         |   | yes | yes | yes | R |   |  |

other hand, the county attorney and others saw the calm as tenuous. “Should anything occur to change the situation here I will advise,” Smith promised. Indeed, a Minneapolis reporter in Montevideo revealed that same day, “The feeling is still bitter here,” and the *St. Paul Globe* assessed that “lynching . . . would have been a certainty.” Furthermore, local newspapers reminded readers of the close call they had just experienced. On July 21 several of them revisited the community’s angry feelings and heralded the posses as heroes. The *Granite Falls Tribune* declared that Scott deserved to be lynched: “If the mob [in Montevideo] had had a leader the negro would never have been allowed to escape the rope he justly merited.”<sup>18</sup>

July 22 brought yet another rehashing of the Ortonville chief’s account—this time in the *Willmar Tribune*. Although the town lay only 40 miles from Montevideo, the *Tribune* lazily reprinted an inaccurate article from the *Minneapolis Tribune*. However, the periodical added its own postscript to the story, disclosing that law enforcement in Glencoe worried about persistent anger in Montevideo: “It is deemed necessary to keep a heavy guard to prevent a mob from coming down and taking him out for execution.” Montevideo and Glencoe were nearly 90 miles apart, but Glencoe officials feared that residents of Montevideo were angry enough to go to nearly any extent to lynch Scott.<sup>19</sup>

The events of that day proved the *Willmar Tribune* article prescient. Sheriff Hartley met McLeod County

Sheriff Murdoch McKenzie in Glencoe to bring Scott by train back to Chippewa County, the scene of his crime, for a hearing. Local newspapers printed conflicting reports of what followed, but the basic elements are consistent. Lyndon Smith telegraphed to the Minnesota Falls train station, an intermediate stop, to warn that a mob awaited at nearby Granite Falls, but the sheriffs did not receive the message. Meanwhile, Helen Olson’s uncle Paul Torgerson and two other relatives spotted the sheriffs and Scott. Seeing the train leave Minnesota Falls, the three quickly pedaled their bicycles the five miles northwest to Granite Falls to tell the mob of the train’s approach. When the sheriffs and Scott arrived and saw the crowd, they dashed to a buggy and retreated back eastward. Olson’s relatives pursued Scott’s party on bicycle for 19 miles, gathering followers along the way, but the buggy outdistanced them. Stopping at Sacred Heart, Scott’s keepers telegraphed the Renville County sheriff for assistance. After he arrived, they traveled safely through the county, passing through Olivia before reaching Bird Island.<sup>20</sup>

Although the pursuers were too tired to continue the chase when they reached Olivia, they riled up the townspeople for a lynching. Angry residents obtained a life-sized figure to represent Scott, dressed it in clothes and shoes, and crudely hung it on a telegraph pole. The mob waited the length of time they thought it would have taken for Scott to die before removing the figure

Thomas and Betsy Jefferson, their seven children, and a lodger, living in Lac Qui Parle County when the 1900 U.S. census was taken

from the pole and laying it on the ground. Then they burned the effigy until only its shoes remained. The simulation was not unlike actual lynchings around the country, and it showed that Olivia’s residents knew what they were doing and how to do it. Fortunately, the town had no African American residents to serve as Scott’s proxy.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, the sheriffs had taken Scott to a farmhouse back in McLeod County, which served as a makeshift courthouse. Smith and a judge met them there to bring criminal charges against Scott. The prisoner confessed to robbing and attacking Olson, and the sheriffs returned him to the Glencoe jail. It was 2:00 A.M., July 23, and the saga of the attempted transfer and pursuit was finally over.<sup>22</sup>

**I**N THE WEEK FOLLOWING Scott’s return to Glencoe, Minnesota newspapers rationalized both the recent expulsion of African Americans and local lynching sentiments. They described Scott’s looks in detail, as if to say that his appearance made him a criminal and worthy of lynching. The *Glencoe Register* called him a “repulsive looking negro” and “black as the ace of spades.” Milan’s *Standard* identified him as a “negro brute.” The *Clara City Herald* was most expressive, noting Scott’s “retreating forehead,” “charcoal skin,” “big eyes,” and “heavy

protruding lips”—all of which gave him a “repulsive brutish appearance.” These illustrations were similar to those found in southern newspapers reporting on African Americans accused of crimes.<sup>23</sup>

Some of Minnesota’s journalists discussed the events in the national context of African American migration. The *Olivia Times* saw the mob activity of the five-day period as a natural response to the actions not of an individual but of the stereotypical African American savage: “It’s rather hard on us Northerners, who have held up our hands in horror at the brutal acts of the southern negro, to awake to the fact that a terrible crime has been committed in the north, in our fair Minnesota, by a negro, presumably a northern product.” The *Montevideo Leader* quoted a *Minneapolis Tribune* editorial that referred to the migration as the “black shadow” that was “creeping northward” and “has reached Minnesota.”<sup>24</sup>

The media promoted Minnesotans as capable of lynching but reluctant to follow the South in actually doing so. Still, the disagreement among the state’s newspapers about the propriety of lynching was similar to southern

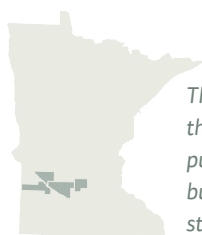
disputes about the practice. Some Minnesota papers argued for vigilantism as a viable alternative to the failure of due process. “The citizens of Olivia are ever ready to mete out justice, if the courts do seem a little slow and uncertain,” declared the *Olivia Times*. The *Montevideo Commercial* warned that “should [Scott] not pay the penalty of his crime at the instance of the law, he will get a speedy exit at the hands of an indignant people.” On the other hand, the *Granite Falls Journal* declared, “We do not want a Southern lynching charged up to us.”<sup>25</sup>

Newspapers described mobs in as harmless terms as possible, and they largely distanced their communities from the mob activity. The *Milan Standard* trumpeted its community’s lack of involvement, boasting, “We feel happy in the contemplation of our righteousness.” It identified the residents as “a law abiding community” and noted that “the people of this village . . . restrained their indignation and protected the inhuman wretch from the irregular procedure of mob law.” The *Granite Falls Tribune* reported that there was “no mob or signs of one” in town, “but one or two went down to [Minnesota] Falls to see how the nigger looked.” The city’s *Journal* stated that townspeople were “law abiding”; the “crowd at the depot” was “hoping to get a sight of the negro if taken from the train.” But it added, “Besides the relatives of the girl who live here, enough more sympathizers

could have been found to have prevented the man from being jailed until a mob could have gotten here from Montevideo . . . he would never have been placed behind the bars again.” The *Montevideo Commercial*, meanwhile, portrayed Glencoe as vulnerable to lynching. Residents had lynched two European Americans seven years earlier, and the town “may not be free from mob passion.”<sup>26</sup>

The media excused the expulsion of African Americans from Montevideo as if the evacuees were collateral damage of Chippewa County’s reaction to Scott. Indeed, their anonymity in the local press and the ease with which the city disregarded them emphasized their expendability in the community’s eyes. The *Montevideo Leader* referred to the departed simply as “the darkies.” Clara City’s periodical actually rejoiced and mused, “If the negroes could be driven out of the United States as easily, the race problem would soon be solved.” The *St. Paul Globe* ludicrously described the incident as a matter of Olson’s “classmates and personal friends” who “simply asked” Montevideo’s African Americans to leave.<sup>27</sup>

Only the *Montevideo Commercial* expressed any hint of regret about the expulsion. Moreover, it broke from other local papers by describing the incident as vigilantism. It scolded, “The actions of a few irresponsible parties in taking the law into their own hands as they did Sunday night is



The journey of Joseph Scott, the lawmen, and their pursuers, traveling by train, buggy, and bicycle before state highways existed



strongly condemned by the law abiding and responsible citizens generally, not for the love of the negroes but for the respect of law and order.” Resigned to the city’s new lack of diversity, the *Commercial* predicted, “A black man will be a pretty scarce article in this locality for some time to come.”<sup>28</sup>

**T**HE STATE’S WEEKLY PAPERS had finished discussing the events of July 18 to 23 by the end of the month, and both the expulsion and lynching simulation were quickly forgotten. The case was revisited in the next few months only to report on Olson’s improving health. In September a few newspapers mentioned a doctor’s successful removal of the part of Olson’s skull that had pressed against her brain.<sup>29</sup>

A new wave of coverage began in November 1903, when Scott was due to stand trial. People flooded into Montevideo, and Smith wrote again to the governor to assure him that Sheriff McKenzie kept Scott safe

in Glencoe. Smith was concerned that “some persons . . . say there is an organized body plotting [Scott’s] death,” and the governor telegraphed Chippewa County’s sheriff to see if he needed assistance. Hartley declined, and Scott was safely brought to Montevideo. He pleaded guilty to first-degree burglary, first-degree robbery, and first-degree assault “with intent to kill” and was sentenced to 30 years in the state prison at Stillwater—ten years for each charge. Scott had stolen \$4.50 in coin and property (about \$117 today), but the judge did not believe he deserved leniency on that count.<sup>30</sup>

At this point, the *Appeal*, the Twin Cities’ African American newspaper, indirectly addressed the July expulsion from Montevideo by warning of the ramifications for African Americans whenever communities treated one man’s crime as proof of the criminal nature of an entire group. The newspaper discussed Scott only after the trial ended in November, thus refraining both from condemning

him before due process of law and from publicizing him to the detriment of African Americans. The *Appeal* was especially sensitive to the media’s implied accusation of sexual violence. “There was no attempt to commit rape,” it observed, “although the papers at the time endeavored to create the impression that there was.” The *Appeal* acknowledged Scott’s criminality and reprimanded him for soiling the reputation of all African Americans. “It is just such criminals as Scott who do so much to bring discredit upon the race, as the entire race is called upon to bear the villainy of any one criminal, but gets no credit for the good which is done by the hundreds and hundreds of thousands.”<sup>31</sup>

Between July and November, African American newspapers nationwide had ignored the story altogether, perhaps in order to avoid publicizing Scott and his bad example. After reporting the trial’s conclusion, Minnesota’s African American and European American newspapers moved on to other stories, and public memory of the case faded into oblivion.

Meanwhile, the Jeffersons had settled in Minneapolis sometime between 1903 and 1904, and they

Three indictments against Joseph Scott: robbery, assault, and burglary in the first degree. BELOW: Joseph Henry Scott, Stillwater State Prison inmate #1161.







Front-page commentary on the problem of lynching nationwide, *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 23, 1903

encountered hardship in their new environment. Records are spotty, but Minneapolis city directories show Thomas working as a barber from 1904 to 1910, his daughter Jessie as a charwoman in 1908, and his son George as a driver from 1905 to 1910. Daughter Winnie quartered siblings Jessie, Florence, and George at her home at 237 10th Avenue South. On March 2, 1905, all in that household were arrested and sent to police court. Jessie and Florence Jefferson pleaded guilty to being disorderly characters, and each received a ten-day sentence

to the workhouse. Winnie was charged with keeping a disorderly house and got 40 days in the workhouse. George was discharged. It was a public disgrace that added insult to the injury of the family's exodus from Chippewa County just two years earlier. Thomas died on November 22, 1910, at 74 years old; the *Twin City Star*, an African American newspaper, remembered him as "one of the old school gentlemen."<sup>32</sup>

**L**AW ENFORCEMENT and the media treated the expulsion and lynching simulations as acceptable reactions to Scott's crime, and this permissiveness hindered the develop-

ment of multicultural communities throughout Minnesota. None of the people who drove out Montevideo's African Americans faced legal consequences, and Olivia's newspaper actually took pride in the town's violent message to African Americans. Public memory of the events of 1903 faded, but the residual hostility toward African Americans lingered, and they stayed out of Montevideo and Olivia for many years. The same anger that nearly killed Scott in 1903 fueled the lynching of African Americans in Duluth in 1920. At that time, Minnesotans revisited old debates over the propriety of vigilantism, but they failed to cite Montevideo and Olivia. Still, the Duluth lynching prohibited them from credibly claiming moral superiority over the South, and they did not try.<sup>33</sup>

African Americans did not receive federal protection of the right to live where they wanted until the Civil Rights Act of 1968, and Congress only passed that law because of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination days earlier. As late as 1990, no African Americans resided in Montevideo, and only three lived in Olivia. However, the African American populations of both towns rose to the double-digits by 2010—still no more than one percent of the total. While Minnesota did not preserve the memory of the expulsion and mock lynching, those events cast a restrictive pall that the passage of both time and law have just begun to reverse.<sup>34</sup> □

## Notes

1. "Watson Girl Assaulted," *Olivia Times*, July 23, 1903; "An Awful Tragedy!" *Montevideo Leader*, July 24, 1903 (quote); "Murderously Assaulted," *Granite Falls Journal*, July 23, 1903; "Montevideo Was Not in Hands of a Mob," *St. Paul Globe*, July 23, 1903, 2; "Kill the Brute—Legally!" *Zumbrota News*, July 24, 1903.

2. See Michael Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth*,

2nd ed. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2000).

3. Walt Bachman, *Northern Slave, Black Dakota: The Life and Times of Joseph Godfrey* (Bloomington, MN: Pond Dakota Press, 2013), 9–10, 68–69; David Vassar Taylor, *African Americans in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), 3, 7; John D. Bessler, *Legacy of Violence: Lynch Mobs and Executions in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 5–22.

4. U.S., Census, 1870, Northfield, Rice Co., Minnesota, 38 (Betsy White); Minnesota, Census, 1875, Mantorville, Dodge Co.; U.S., Census, 1880, Zumbrota, Goodhue Co.; Minnesota, Census, 1885, Howard Lake, Wright Co.; Minnesota, Census, 1895, Clara City, Chippewa Co.; Minnesota, Census 1895, Granite Falls, Yellow Medicine Co., schedule 7, p. 221. Census records for 1895 are incomplete for the other Jefferson family members. Thomas Jefferson also served as a soldier in the Civil War; see Minnesota, Census, 1905, Population, Hennepin Co., enumeration district [e.d.] 38, ward 3, sheet 7.

5. "Tried in November," *Minneapolis Journal*, Aug. 1, 1903; "Convicted Negro Makes Confession," *St. Paul Globe*, Nov. 26, 1903.

6. "Sullen Mob Waits for Prisoner," *St. Paul Globe*, July 19, 1903; "Awful Tragedy," *Montevideo Leader*, July 24, 1903; "Watson Girl Assaulted," *Olivia Times*, July 23, 1903; "Murderous Assault," *Willmar Tribune*, July 22, 1903. Reports disagreed about where Thomas Olson had gone and Helen Olson's age.

7. "Mob after Blood," *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, July 21, 1903; "Escaped J. Lynch," *Minneapolis Journal*, July 20, 1903; "Joe Scott's Crime," *Milan Standard*, July 24, 1903; "Watson Girl Assaulted," *Olivia Times*, July 23, 1903. The events of July 17–23 have been reconstructed from reports in various newspapers, using details that recurred and/or were corroborated by other sources. Stories—correct or not—were quickly reprinted elsewhere; see, for example, "Probable Lynching in Minnesota," *Deseret Evening News* (Salt Lake City), July 18, 1903; "May Lynch Assaulter," *New York Tribune*, July 19, 1903.

8. "Awful Tragedy!" *Montevideo Leader*, July 24, 1903; "Mob after Blood," *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, July 21, 1903.

9. "Awful Tragedy!" *Montevideo Leader*, July 24, 1903; "A Brutal Crime," *Montevideo Commercial*, July 24, 1903; "Sullen Mob," *St. Paul Globe*, July 19, 1903. Smith was lieutenant governor under John Lind and Samuel R. Van Sant.

10. "Awful Tragedy!" *Montevideo Leader*, July 24, 1903; "Mob after Blood," *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, July 21, 1903; "Sullen Mob," *St. Paul Globe*, July 19, 1903; "Joe Scott's Crime," *Milan Standard*, July 24, 1903; "Watson Girl Assaulted," *Olivia Times*, July 23, 1903.

11. "Awful Tragedy!" *Montevideo Leader*, July 24, 1903; "Murderously Assaulted," *Granite Falls Journal*, July 23, 1903; "Brutal Crime," *Montevideo Commercial*, July 24, 1903; "Joe Scott's Crime," *Milan Standard*, July 24, 1903.

12. Lyndon A. Smith to Hon. S. R. Van Sant, July 20, 1903, Correspondence, Samuel R. Van Sant gubernatorial records, State Archives, Minnesota Historical Society; "Joe Scott's Crime," *Milan Standard*, July 24, 1903.

13. "Mob after Blood," *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, July 21, 1903; "Joe Scott's Crime," *Milan Standard*, July 24, 1903.

14. "Women Victims of a Beast Attack," *Rock Island Argus*, July 18, 1903; "Probable Lynching," *Deseret Evening News*, July 18, 1903; "Sullen Mob," *St. Paul Globe*, July 19, 1903; "Mob after Blood," *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, July 21, 1903; *Willmar Tribune*, July 22, 1903, quoting "Black Brute Is Captured," *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 20, 1903. Several newspapers debunked Denny's "newspaper yarns" as "hot air"; untitled paragraph, *Montevideo Commercial*, July 24, 1903.

15. "Clara City and Vicinity," *Clara City Herald*, July 24, 1903.

16. "Mob Is Cheated of Its Victim," *St. Paul Globe*, July 20, 1903; "Murderous Assault," *Willmar Tribune*, July 22, 1903, quoting *Minneapolis Tribune*, n.d.; "Escaped J. Lynch," *Minneapolis Journal*, July 20, 1903; "Local Paragraphs," *Montevideo Leader*, July 24, 1903; "Clara City and Vicinity," *Clara City Herald*, July 24, 1903; "Watson Girl Assaulted," *Olivia Times*, July 23, 1903.

17. In 1900 Thomas, Betsy, and seven children lived one county west of Chippewa; see U.S., Census, 1900, Augusta Twp., Lac Qui Parle Co., e.d. 117, p. 8B. "Clara City and Vicinity," *Clara City Herald*, July 24, 1903.

18. "Mob Is Cheated," *St. Paul Globe*, July 20, 1903; "Escaped J. Lynch," *Minneapolis Journal*, July 20, 1903; Smith to Van Sant, July 20, 1903, Van Sant records, MNHS; "A Colored Fiend," *Granite Falls Tribune*, July 21, 1903; "Mob after Blood," *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, July 21, 1903.

19. "Murderous Assault," *Willmar Tribune*, July 22, 1903, quoting *Minneapolis Tribune*, n.d.

20. "Has Two Close Calls from Lynch Law," *Glencoe Register*, July 24, 1903; "Murderously Assaulted," July 23, and "Some Facts about That 'Mob,'" July 31, 1903, both *Granite Falls Journal*; "Local News," *Granite Falls Tribune*, July 28, 1903.

21. *Olivia Times*, July 30, 1903, [p. 5]; "Joe Scott's Crime," *Milan Standard*, July 24, 1903.

22. "Held for Trial," *Montevideo Leader*, July 24, 1903.

23. "Has Two Close Calls," *Glencoe Register*, July 24, 1903; editorial, *Milan Standard*, July 31, 1903 [p. 2]; "Brutal Deed," *Clara City Herald*, July 24, 1903; Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 302.

24. Editorial, *Olivia Times*, July 23, 1903, [p. 4]; editorial, *Montevideo Leader*, July 24, 1903 [p. 4].

25. "Brutal Crime," *Montevideo Commercial*, July 24, 1903; "Murderously Assaulted," *Granite Falls Journal*, July 23, 1903; *Olivia Times*, July 30, 1903 [p. 5]; Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 292–94.

26. Editorial, *Milan Standard*, July 31, 1903 [p. 2]; "Lynching Mania," *Montevideo Commercial*, July 24, 1903; "Some Facts about That 'Mob,'" *Granite Falls Journal*, July 30, 1903; "Local News,"

*Granite Falls Tribune*, July 28, 1903. On September 6, 1896, a mob entered the Glencoe County jail, abducted two men who had been arrested for allegedly killing the county sheriff, and lynched them. See Bessler, *Legacy of Violence*, 20–22.

27. *Montevideo Leader*, July 24, 1903 [p. 5]; "Brutal Deed," *Clara City Herald*, July 24, 1903; "Montevideo Was Not in Hands of a Mob," *St. Paul Globe*, July 23, 1903.

28. "Brutal Crime," and "Local Paragraphs," *Montevideo Commercial*, July 24, 1903.

29. See, for example, "Victim of Scott," *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 10, 1903.

30. "Sentenced for 30 Years," *Montevideo Leader*, Nov. 27, 1903; "Insanity His Defense," *Minneapolis Journal*, Nov. 20, 1903; Smith to Van Sant, Nov. 16, 1903, Van Sant records; *State v. Joseph Scott*, case file 158 (Nov. 24, 1903), Chippewa Co. District Court Records, State Archives, MNHS.

31. "Scott Sentenced," *Appeal* (St. Paul), Nov. 28, 1903.

32. "Family in Limbo," *Minneapolis Journal*, Mar. 3, 1905; Minnesota, Census, 1905, e.d. 38, ward 3, sheet 7, showing the Jeffersons in Hennepin County for one year as of June; "Minneapolis," *Twin City Star*, Nov. 25, 1910.

33. Fedo, *Lynchings in Duluth*, 116–20.

34. James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: Touchstone, 2005), 130–31, 395–96; Robert Loewy, *On the Forward Edge: American Government and the Civil Rights Act of 1964* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006), 291; U.S. Census Bureau, *1990 Census of Population: General Population Characteristics, Minnesota* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992), 375, 393. The population of Montevideo in 2010 was about 5,400 and Olivia, 2,400; African Americans comprised 5.7 percent of total statewide population. U.S. Census Bureau, "Minnesota," and "Montevideo (city), Minnesota," *State and County QuickFacts, factfinder.census.gov*; U.S. Census Bureau, "2010 Demographic Profile Data, Olivia City, Minnesota," *Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: 2010, factfinder.census.gov*.

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The map on p. 273 is by Percolator; all other images are in MNHS collections, including p. 274, from the Stillwater Prison files, by Eric Mortenson/MNHS.



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