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Oral Histories of the Springfield, Illinois, Riot of 1908

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Oral Histories of the Springfield, Illinois, Riot of 1908

Edith Carpenter, Albert Harris,
Nathan L. Cohn, Mattie Hale, and
Sharlottie Carr

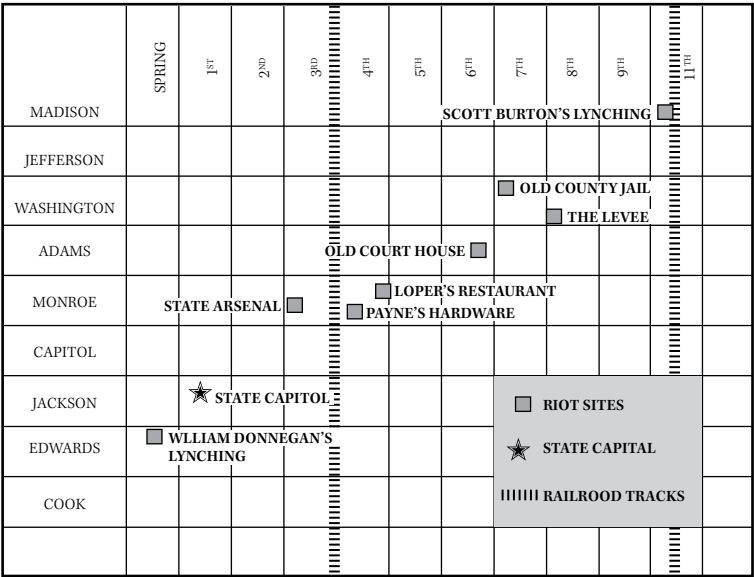
Most daily newspapers published at the turn of the twentieth century carried little news of the lives of African Americans, let alone their perspectives. That was indeed the case with the coverage of dailies in Springfield, Illinois, about the riot of August 1908 in which whites intentionally tracked, harmed, and killed blacks. Thanks to the foresight of oral historians working in the 1970s and the diligence of college librarians in preserving their interviews, a record exists of the varied responses of African-American residents to the violence of the roaming white mob. Some fled. Some hid. Others took up arms to defend their lives, homes, and businesses. The threat to fight back was sometimes enough to ward off attackers, though some black men did fire their guns into hostile white crowds, wounding or killing an unrecorded number of white rioters.

What follows is a compilation of five excerpts from more expansive oral histories taken from four black residents and one Jewish resident of Springfield who lived through the riot. Their accounts reflect a remarkable degree of social organization in a community but two generations out of slavery. African Americans who fled to the surrounding countryside were housed, fed, and protected by black farming families for the weekend until the National Guard arrived and restored order in the state capital. Other families who remained in the city collaborated to identify homes or, in one

case, a park where they could gather and conceal themselves. One neighborhood quickly formed a self-defense committee, with women serving as lookouts and men as armed guards.

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Locations of Major Episodes in Springfield, Illinois, Race Riot of 1908



Adapted by Harini Palugulla. Source material reprinted by permission of Springfield Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Edith Carpenter was about 14 years old at the time of the riot. Her father owned a grocery store and commercial real estate, and also rented a dairy farm. She told Reverend Negil L. McPherson in a 1975 interview about her father's proactive measures to defend his children and property. He obtained a stockpile of guns and ammunition, sent his children to the countryside, and boldly declared his ability and readiness to confront aggressors. Carpenter's account of the riot illustrated the fortitude and resourcefulness of the African-American community in the face of racial violence. Edith Carpenter, who married a funeral home director, died in 1985.

- Q: Now what about . . . do you know anything at all about the race riot?
- A: Well, we were little bitty kids at that time and we didn't know what it was all about and there isn't much that I can tell you about it. I remember that I've heard them say that my father . . . we had our store on the corner of 15th and Adams, and our home was in the thirteen hundred block of Monroe. And the people . . . my father put out the word if they bothered him, what he would do to them. I had a sister, that's the oldest sister, and at that time she was living in Chicago and she was expecting a new baby and so my mother had gone to Chicago to be with her until the baby was born. So anyway I guess we must have called long distance and told them about this thing and so my sister's husband got a whole lot of ammunition together, guns, big long guns, and a whole lot of the bullets and everything, and he bundled that stuff up and got it to Springfield and it was taken to my father's store. So he had sent word out and let everybody know that if anybody bothered him, he certainly had everything to do with and I'll let you know they came right straight down that street, so they say, Adams Street; our store was on Adams Street. I'll let you know they never bothered him, and my father had all day long, he might get a chance to nap a little bit, but all day and all night long, he had a gun on each shoulder and he marched from where

our store was on 15th and Adams to our home where we lived at 1312 East Monroe, and that was back and forth all evening. And so, I think somebody said that one time he looked out and saw them coming, I think, and so when they saw him with all his guns, they turned and went the other way.

Q: Is that right?

A: But they knew he was a good man. They knew he hadn't bothered anybody. Many of them had traded at our store, buying up the chickens and the turkeys. There was a gang, you know, just together, but they certainly didn't bother him. And he was ready for them, I can tell you that. And he sent word, if you come here, you might as well know that I'm gonna take care of myself and what I own. And so they didn't touch him, didn't come near him.

Q: Did you hear anybody talk about it after you grew up a little bigger?

A: Well, my folks didn't want us to know too much about it to tell the truth about it. We were frightened as children, naturally, and my father sent us out of town. That was what he did during this time, and we went and stayed . . . we had some friends who lived out in the country and so my father sent us out there and he wanted the boys to go, too. He wasn't going to let them be targets. And so these people had a big farm and they had plenty of room in their home, and he sent all of us little kids out there, and I think one or two of the boys was out there because they had boys, you know, and they could . . . the boys sleep together and the girls sleep together. But in those days, why, you know, it was just a thing that you had to protect yourself.

Q: Yeah. Where was this country . . . where did you go?

A: Lanesville, I think.

Q: That's east of here?

A: Yes, east of Springfield. Yes, I think that was Lanesville. And I think there were some other people out there, too.

Q: Now how long did you stay out there?

A: Oh, just a few days. We just stayed a few days. One of the older girls went along with us, and a couple of the boys.

Q: Now when you came back, everything was all over and settled?

A: Oh, yes. When we came back, everything was quiet.



In a 1974 interview with Reverend Negil L. McPherson, Albert Harris related the destructive path of the bloodthirsty mob, which murdered an elderly man well-known in the white and black communities. Harris, at the time about 13 years old and living away from the city's center, recalled the courageous acts of saloon proprietors who stood their ground. He also cited evidence of unreported deaths of white rioters. Harris owned several businesses in Springfield and died three years after the interview.

A: ...I lived on Lincoln Avenue—and the riot had made it that far. The rioters had made it that far, to Lincoln Avenue, and the soldiers turned them back. They were circling around trying to pick up the few—we didn't have many blacks that lived out here, see. The Braziers and myself—just about four or five families was all.

Q: Out here?

A: Out here, yes.

Q: You mean Lincoln Avenue then.

A: Yes, yes, right on Lincoln. And so they...right over there in the camp, that's where we stayed for three nights.

Q: Over at Camp Lincoln.

A: Yes, right there in Camp Lincoln, three nights. And we were surrounded by the soldiers, see. And so when they [the rioters] left town, that's when they

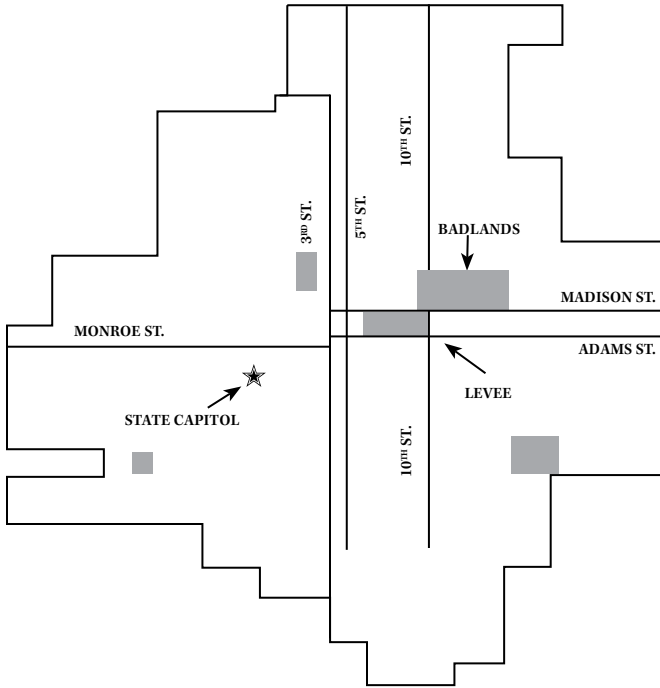
started out this way. Then they were turned back and then they went to Old Man Donnegan's—out on South Pasfield, I think it is, someplace out there. I think it was on Pasfield. And they killed the old man. And he told them, he said he hadn't done anything to them and that he'd fixed some of their—he was an old cobbler—said, "Even I've worked on some of your shoes." But they hung him, killed him anyway.

Then when they were in town—now, this is what I heard, I didn't see this. When they were in town before they come out there—but I saw the effects after this—we had a restaurant called Loper's Restaurant, one of the swellest restaurants in town. And these—Dad and I used to go there and eat all the time, see. So they had heard, I guess, about blacks, feeding blacks, and they just wrecked it. Wrecked that swell Loper's Restaurant. Then when they were in town, then they started breaking—you know how a mob will do, breaking glasses, breaking up everything. And said then when the mob started back to town, up into the black district on East Washington Street and another street what they called "up in the Badlands," then they started up there and they got as far as Eighth and Ninth and Washington. And there was a saloon run by a fellow by the name of Dandy Jim. Dandy Jim and Andy Gordon, and they were bad men! And they tell me that Dandy Jim and Andy stood upon his platform—I mean his counter—and just poured volley after volley with their guns into this mob.

It'll never be known how many whites were killed in that riot, but they do know that when people would come to Springfield from the surrounding towns looking for their people, the officials of Springfield would say, "Well, Mrs. So-and-so, we can't tell who...if he was here during the riot, we can't tell it. We don't know because we know that there were some casualties." And at that time they said this, that this here Dudley had a livery stable on East Washington Street, and for three or four days they'd find bodies where they had crawled up there and died in his livery stable.



Black Neighborhoods of Springfield, Illinois, in 1908



*Reprinted from In Lincoln's Shadow: The 1908 Race Riot in Springfield, Illinois,
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Nathan L. Cohn, a 15- or 16-year-old Jewish immigrant who lived in the northern part of town, recounted the different aspects of Jewish involvement during the riot. He shared an eyewitness account of Scott Burton's lynching, white residents' measures to avoid harm, and his black neighbor's stealthy escape. The interview was conducted in 1973 by Syma Mendelsohn. Cohn died in 1977 after working as a salesman for 35 years.

Q: There were a lot of Jews who lived there [around a synagogue]?

A: Oh, yes. That was a Jewish neighborhood. Friedman lived a block away, you know, and a block away from that was B'Nai Abraham. See B'Nai Abraham was on, let's see, what street...

Q: It was at one time at Seventh and Mason.

A: Well, it always was there. Then this was, I think, on Eighth and Mason, where we first lived. And then, I think my dad bought the house on Thirteenth Street, 224 North Thirteenth. That was between Jefferson and Madison, it was the second house from the railroad and right next [door], north of us, which was the corner [house]—the second house from the corner—right on the corner lived a colored fellow. Very, very, very, very nice fellow.

I never will forget during the riot where he was. You know, the right was right around there and I think there was a Jewish fellow—I can't think of his name, I used to know his name—Jewish fellow, and he went out and hollered, "All white folks hang out a white sheet and put it on their fence."

Q: So that the crowd would know it was a white family?

A: Yes. Now, I want you to listen to this. Of course, naturally, there was a lot of white folks following this fellow. This was Thirteenth and then they went west to about Eleventh Street. And they got hold of a colored fellow [Scott Burton] and they didn't have no rope to hang him. So whoever was at the head of it looked around at the yard across the street and he seen a clothesline. So he went across the street and took the clothesline off and hung this guy. I seen it.

Q: You saw that?

A: Yes, I seen it. Put it around his neck and put it on a tree and just pulled him up. Yes, I seen all that.

Q: What happened to the colored family that lived next door to you?

A: Nothing. They got away. He hid. When everything was over, I was right on the corner of Thirteenth and Madison and seen that the bushes were moving and who comes out of there but the fellow that lived there. In other words, he hid in the bushes. I think this colored fellow was a barber.

Q: The one that hid in the bushes or the one that...

A: Yes, the one that hid in the bushes. But I don't know who this colored fellow [was that] they hanged. They strung him up. I seen that. Boy!

Q: How did you react to that?

A: Just looked at it and that's all. But I used to know the Jewish fellow's name.

Q: His name wasn't Abe Raymer, was it?

A: No. He hollered. He says, "All white folks hang up a white sheet in front of the house."

Q: Were there a lot of Jewish people who were involved in the riot? This fellow, Abe Raymer, who was arrested was Jewish.

A: No, that wasn't his name. It was somebody else. And then another thing, another thing I remember, is Fishman's store. See we had [our store] on Washington Street, 721 East Washington Street, after Stern's took their place over at 804. Mrs. Kanner, she owned a lot of property and she owned this 721 East Washington and that was a tavern and of course the tavern went out of business so we rented it from her. And right next door was Fishman. What the devil was his first name? And, oh, they just wrecked his place to beat the band. You know why?

Q: Why?

A: Well, white folks came in—you know, Fishman handled hardware, guns and so forth—the leaders of the gang came in there and wanted him to give them some guns and this and that. And he wouldn't do it. But colored folks came in there and they wanted that and he gave it to them. He gave [the guns] to the colored folks and they found out about that and they just went in there and wrecked his place to beat the band.

Mattie Hale, the daughter of a coal miner, lived with her parents on a vegetable farm on the outskirts of Springfield. Interviewed in 1974 by Reverend Negil L. McPherson, she noted that some respectable and not-so-respectable men stayed in the city. Meanwhile, her parents and neighbors protected city dwellers who had fled. Hale remained in Springfield for her entire life and died in 1982.

Q: You said you remember the year of this riot.

A: ...A crowd of people went to the country for shelter. They went to these various homes. Mr. and Mrs. George Taylor, the parents of Mrs. Mattie Hale, now living at 1914 East Brown Street; Mr. and Mrs. Robert O. Baynon; Mrs. And Mr. Thomas Gains. All are deceased. Some went far beyond the homes just mentioned. Some went to the country with food and clothing in sacks on their backs. The riot was serious for three days, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. On Monday the people began to calm down. These men were not afraid. They were in business so they remained in town. Mr. Amos Duncan, Mr. Robert Jackson, Mr. James Coral, Mr. Edgar White, Mr. Bob Cancellor, Mr. William George, Mr. Bunny Wright and others not mentioned.

Q: You said a crowd of people went to the country for shelter. Was it out where you were living?

A: That's where they came, to our house.

Q: Oh, I see.

A: They came to our house and they went farther up the road. We called it road, it wasn't a street. And they had their food and their clothes, some were barefooted. We sheltered, I guess, about twenty or twenty-five.

Q: Is that right?

A: Yes. We had a large barn and up above—we called it the barn loft—that's where we kept feed for our horses and for our chickens, but at that time we did not have any. We had ordered our feed for our horses, but it hadn't come in yet. And a lot of them went up there and stayed all night in the barn loft. Some slept out underneath our fruit trees and we'd taken some in the house.

Q: About how many families were living out in the country there where you were living?

A: Six.

Q: Now, did this riot take place before you were married or after you were married?

A: Before I was married.

Q: So you were still at your father's house.

A: Yes, I was still at home.

Q: Did the rioters come out there?

A: From town.

Q: I mean the white people.

A: Oh, no. They didn't come out there.

Q: Is there a reason why do you think they didn't?

A: Well, yes. You see because they were after the colored people in town.

Q: Do you know of any white person or heard of it who may have gotten killed?

A: No, but I don't remember of any whites getting killed, but there was some got hurt.

Q: About how long did these people stay out on your place?

A: They stayed until Sunday.

Q: Until Sunday. And then things had sort of quieted down.

A: Yes. Things began to calm down on Monday.

Q: Did you hear anyone say that many people left town and didn't come back?

A: No.

Q: I heard some people took a train and left.

A: No, I never heard.

Q: Now this Mr. Amos Duncan, what did he do?

A: Oh, these were men of the world, they were rough men.

Q: But they had businesses downtown.

A: Yes, they were what you call gamblers, bit gamblers, all of them. They didn't run, you see, they stayed with their...

Q: With their business.

A: Yes.



Sharlottie Carr, then a teenager of 15 or 16, lived with her family in the southeastern part of the city. Interviewed in 1974 by the Reverend Negil L. McPherson, she recalled the measures black adults took to protect their neighborhood, which was not attacked, and related an anecdote about a black man elsewhere in the city who fired guns in self-defense, with skillful help from a young daughter. Carr, a cook most of her working life, died in 1983.

Q: Let's think now—What if anything, do you know about the race riot of 1908?

A: 1908. I remember some, very few things about that. I was young, of course, very young, and I remember the day that they first started that. It was I think in 1908, wasn't it that day they first started that? I remember that it was in a saloon and that it seemed like to me they started trouble.

Q: Now when you said they, who are you talking about? Are we talking about the white people starting trouble or some black people starting trouble?

A: Well now, I don't know.

Q: But some trouble was started then.

A: Yes, some trouble was started, but I don't remember. Of course, that was between the two in this saloon. It was between the two, both colored and white. This one man, he happened to be a little stronger or something than most of them and he was taking care of himself. It seemed as though he was a man that had a gun and he had a little daughter. I think if I'm not mistaken, the daughter was about eight or ten years old. This daughter was able to fill the guns as he fired them. When this gun was empty, the daughter would load these guns up for him. He could unload these guns as fast as this girl could load them. She was a young girl of not more than eight years old and she knew how to do that. I knew of two men, one got killed because the son told him, "Come on, Father," not to stay there because they would come in and kill him. But he felt as though, no, they wouldn't kill him. So he didn't do as the son told him, to come away from this place where he was. The son thought the white people would come in and him being colored, they would kill him. But he had more confidence that the white people would not do that. So he stayed and he got killed.

Q: But his son left?

A: But his son left and his father got killed. Then I knew of one other place where the man was there...let's see, what happened?

Q: Now, have you ever heard of Mr. Loper who had the restaurant?

A: No, I never knew about him. I knew that in my neighborhood the women walked from Cass Street to Capitol Avenue to see if the white people came down to the neighborhood. If they did, they would kill the colored people of that neighborhood. The[y] walked that beat from Cass Street to Capitol Avenue and would keep the colored men [informed] and let them know whether they would unload any white people at that end.

Q: These people sort of served as lookouts. They were looking out to tell the others.

A: These women were watching out for the colored men in this neighborhood. Because the colored men in this neighborhood would take care of that end, and at this end, from Clay Street to South Grand Avenue they had men that walked that beat. They kept [watch on] the South Grand Avenue cars. When they stepped off of the South Grand Avenue cars, the men at that end took care of that neighborhood, and the men and the women from this end kept the men posted in this neighborhood as to whether anybody stepped off of that bus. The men our further in the neighborhood would watch around everybody. My father—we lived on the west side of the street—and on the east side my father almost got killed. Because the men on the east side were watching out and my father stepped out and one of the men on the east side came pretty near to killing my father. But just accidentally.

Q: Was this night or something?

A: This was in the evening. Just accidentally the man recognized my father and didn't kill him. We had to watch out for everything, but they didn't come down in our neighborhood and kill anybody in our neighborhood at all.