

THESIS ABSTRACT

The Tarboro Three: Rape, Race and Secrecy in a Small Town

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This thesis examines the events surrounding the arrest of three black men in Tarboro, NC in the summer of 1973 for the alleged rape of a white woman. Court records, newspaper accounts and personal interviews provide the historical material needed, but the fact of writing a history of the events is an insistence on breaking the secrecy surrounding the story. The thesis explores the writer's struggle with the need for information and the various individuals' desire for privacy. Is there inherent value in the work of a writer uncovering a lost story of significant historical import? Are people entitled to forget awful events they wish they had no part in? Is it in the public interest to revisit these difficult times and thus expose the grandchildren of alleged rapists and victims to the harsh realities of their loved ones' lives? In 1973, Tarboro became a national story. The Southern Poverty Law Center took over the appeal process. The *Black Panther Newsletter* wrote on The Tarboro Three, as did *The New York Times*. Angela Davis and the Rev. Ralph Abernathy came to town to protest. Thirty-seven years later, the story is largely forgotten, nationally, and largely wished away, locally. Perhaps that's for the best, but I resist the impulse to silence. The Tarboro Three case is an important moment in the waning years of the Civil Rights Era. It is a story that needs to be told, but at what cost to the people who'd rather it stay a secret?

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I Know Her Name

I know her name. It's not something I should know, but we both live in Tarboro, North Carolina—a small town 70 miles east of the thriving progress of Raleigh and 100 miles west of the tourist bustle of the Outer Banks and seemingly unable to benefit from either. I know where she lives, I know who her husband is and I know who her Facebook friends are. Many other people know her name as well, but they won't tell you. In his autobiography, Southern Poverty Law Center founder Morris Dees called her Mary Ann Womack, which was a fiction he chose to let stand without comment. The newspapers—from the local *Daily Southerner* to *The New York Times*—simply left her name out of the story.

Dees met her here in Tarboro. He was acting as defense attorney in the successful appeal process and then preparation for the second trial of three men who became famous and then were forgotten. Bobby Hines, Vernon Leroy Brown and Jesse Walston became known as The Tarboro Three soon after they had sex with the woman not named Mary Ann Womack on the night of August 5, 1973. The white woman said it was rape and the three black men said it was consensual. The story is as old as the South; it runs through Martinsville, Virginia and Scottsboro, Alabama and on back through the entire history of Jim Crow, Reconstruction, the Civil War and slavery. On December 10, 1973, after a nine-day trial in Tarboro, Hines, Brown and Walston were sentenced to “inhale lethal gas of sufficient quantity to cause death” in the gas chamber in Raleigh on January 10, 1974. Three men in their early twenties had thirty days to live.

The woman in question was willing to let them die. I want to know why. Thirty-seven years after the night, I want to know what she remembers, how she felt then and how she feels now, but I am afraid to talk to her. I am afraid to ask her the questions necessary to get any balanced understanding of what happened on August 5, 1973. I have picked up the phone to call and set it back down after pressing three digits. I have made a list of mutual acquaintances that might assist me in approaching her, but have not acted on it. I need to talk to her or this recounting of the story of The Tarboro Three will remain hollow, but perhaps a certain hollowness is of little consequence compared to the painful memories I will insist she reexplore. Is my invasion really necessary? Do we need to know her name, her motivations, her pain, her story, or is it just the intrusive intrigue of a writer after a story better left forgotten?

I keep coming back to this fact: she was willing to let Bobby, Vernon and Jesse die. I must find the courage to contact her. In all likelihood she will slam the phone down or slam the door in my face or, in the most modern of embarrassments, block me on Facebook. But doesn't the name of someone who would let three men suffer the terror of death row for a crime they may not have committed belong in the public record? Isn't her crime, if she was not raped, worthy of a place in history?

Roughly 11,000 people live in Tarboro today, which is only 1,500 more humans than lived here in 1970. A series of postcards made in 2010 could easily pass—with a little added yellowing and a few creases—for a series made eighty years earlier. The downtown architecture is largely intact, though many of the locally-owned stores have become centers for discount goods from China or boarded up shells waiting on a new

future for the old facades. Still, the downtown is doing much better than many other small towns in Eastern North Carolina. There is a viable center with a coffee shop, several banks, a local shoe store and a world-class restaurant and wine shop. The beautiful Colonial Theater built in 1919 with its separate entrance for colored people has recently come back to life, but not as a functioning movie palace. The neon-lit marquee has been restored and posters for classic movies like *Gone With the Wind* and *Casablanca* appear weekly in the coming attraction boxes, but no film has been screened at the Colonial since 1974. Inside the building is dark and the walls are crumbling; the seats have long since been removed and the old orchestra pit has been replaced by two feet of standing water. The Colonial Theater is waiting for \$1,000,000 that may never come, but at least it looks good on the outside. In 2010, the restoration committee spent \$40,000 on a mural for an outside wall: five scenes from American wars from the Spanish-American to Iraq spread across 100 feet of newly white brick background. The Colonial Theater is a canvas for a militarized version of the past—though remarkably absent the War Between the States. A final touch of strangeness: half of a female mannequin sits in the glass enclosed ticket booth permanently smiling, waiting to take your money for a *Zombie* revival weekend.

Tarboro does look good on the outside. The Tar River bends through and separates white Tarboro from black Princeville (and periodically unites them in an ugly flood of brown water turning fetid. If you have heard of Tarboro, it's probably because of the devastating 1999 flood precipitated by the arrival of Hurricane Floyd shortly after Hurricane Dennis's departure.). If you could ignore the cars parked on the side streets—St. Patrick, St. Andrew, St David--of the historic district, then it would become difficult

to place a specific time on the scene in front of you. The homes were built in the agrarian heyday of 19th century Tarboro. Wraparound porches and lovingly preserved wood exteriors with the omnipresent white columns give Tarboro the unmistakable feel of the old South. You wave to folks sitting under outdoor ceiling fans as you stroll slowly down sidewalks made hilly by magnolia tree roots bumping up the concrete.¹ The Town Common looks no different—save the Confederate Memorials and the WWI artillery gun—than it did 150 years ago. There’s even one of the world’s few remaining antebellum cotton presses, restored to its 1860 splendor, displayed on the Common.

In spring, Tarboro is intoxicating.² The pink dogwoods, the spray of red, purple and white azaleas and the intrusive but lovely lilac wisteria turn Tarboro into a postcard you’d be happy to send to any friend living in an exotic, happening location. You are here, in Tarboro, and isn’t it beautiful? But something is missing: an entire generation. You’d be hard-pressed to find a young adult. Everyone between 18 and 35 has fled, it seems, to Raleigh or Charlotte or Asheville. Or somewhere other than here. All the passion and energy and new ideas that spring from the young have moved on, and Tarboro is left behind.³ It’s left to live and relive its past as prime reason for its present.

¹ Sidewalks are often ignored. Many black people of Tarboro stick to an old custom of walking in the center of the street. The side streets—Church, St. John, Trade—are slow enough to allow it. The root of the custom? The center of the street provided a small sense of safety when walking in the white part of town. The mean dogs couldn’t reach you and the shouts and spits of the mean white people were at a remove.

² And not just because of the extraordinary liquor cabinets I was surprised to find here. I have not encountered better-stocked private collections of alcohol in any major city. Several varieties of bourbon are a particular constant. Tarboro is a town that knows how to drink.

³ Each year I run the library’s used book sale and each year I’m left with dozens of copies of LaHayes and Jenkins’ Christian apocalypse. The *Left Behind* series is hard to move because everyone in Tarboro who wants one has already read it.

The first person to tell me her name was a librarian at Edgecombe County Memorial Library (ECML). She overheard me asking another librarian about what files the library had on The Tarboro Three.⁴ Twenty minutes later she joined me in the Janie F. Allsbrook Local History Room and handed me a small slip of paper. On it was the woman's name. It was her maiden name and it was spelled wrong, but the secret was out. I'm not sure why the librarian decided to give me the information I hadn't asked for. I didn't know her well, but I think she saw me as a white sympathizer with what that poor woman had suffered, as someone willing to take on the black-controlled version of history that had ruined this woman's reputation and life.

When I moved to Tarboro from Buffalo, NY in 2004⁵, I was taken off-guard by the ready assumption that my whiteness would guarantee sympathy with whatever racist rant another white person felt like sharing. My first trip to the playground with my then two-year old twin girls, Natalie and Clara, was made uncomfortable by a grandfather who practically ran over to me to exclaim, "Can't believe there's no blacks here today. Usually eighty, ninety percent black. Kids all running around not listening to nobody. They got their own playground on the other side of town." And later when I tried to sign my girls up for swimming lessons at the local rec center, the white woman there let me

⁴ The ECML has a small disorganized clippings file on significant local events. It consists of photocopied articles from various local and regional papers (largely Tarboro's own *The Daily Southerner*) and is a reliable source for initial research. Completely absent from this file is any mention of the Tarboro Three, the rape, the protest or the trial. Any record of what are probably the biggest events in post-WWII Tarboro history has been disappeared from the local history files. A different racial event leads to a similar disappearance in the Oxford, NC library, as documented in Timothy Tyson's *Blood Done Sign My Name*.

⁵ My wife had just finished medical school with a scholarship that demanded that she work in an underserved area. The complex ratio of doctors to poor and uninsured people left us with choices that included devastated Youngstown, Ohio and the lake effect snows of western Michigan. We chose the apparent beauty and warmth of Tarboro.

know about the community pools. Her voice dropped to a whisper when she clued me in: “There’s a pool in East Tarboro, but that’s where the blacks go.”

I always get nervous when a voice drops to a whisper. Often it also includes a quick glance over the speaker’s own shoulder to see if there are any “blacks” around. But the whisper works both ways. An old black woman with wrinkles as deep as the crevices in the dry Tar River bed in August hobbled up to me one hot summer day as I walked out of the recently opened coffee shop on Main St. “What’s that?” she said as she pointed a gnarled finger at the new-fangled espresso joint. I explained it as best I could—without mentioning the impossible idea of a \$3 coffee—and offered, “you should go in and check it out.”

At the suggestion, she moved a step closer and leaned into me. She whispered, “Can anyone go there?”

I used the information on the slip of paper the librarian had handed me to figure a few things out. The woman was still alive and still in Tarboro thirty-seven years after the rape/consensual sex. She was married to the same man--then her boyfriend, now the recently-retired Chief of the Tarboro Police Department--she had been arguing with on the night of August 5, 1973, which led to her being picked up by Bobby, Vernon and Jesse. I talked with a friend, Brandon, who is a current Tarboro cop and asked him about his former boss. I just wanted to get a read on the ex-Chief, to try to gauge the level of danger I might be putting myself in if I approached his wife about the night of August 5, 1973. Brandon offered vague assurances that he wasn’t overly difficult to deal with, but I

didn't mention specifically why I wanted to talk with him. A defense attorney⁶ in town has warned me about possible retribution from police if I reopened the wounds of this case.

I know the woman has children. I can't imagine my insistence upon reopening the past will be well received, but maybe she has been waiting for the right moment to tell her side of the story. Maybe it would be a relief to finally let the secret go and to talk openly about what did and did not happen to her 37 years ago.

I have lived here in Tarboro for six years. For five and one-half of those years I heard not even a whisper of the tumultuous events of the trial, the ensuing protests, the appeal and the eventual plea bargain that released the Tarboro Three before the second trial could begin. For Tarboro, 37 years has not been long enough to completely erase the past, provided I am able to talk to those who were directly involved in the events. Is my belief in the need to unearth secrets stronger than my desire to let people who have suffered live their lives without further disruption? Vernon Brown also still lives here in Tarboro. He is not granted the privilege of anonymity, but he also has no interest in talking about what happened in Tarboro all those years ago. *SPLC Report* editor Penny Weaver tried to set up a photo shoot with Brown in 1997, but he disappeared and avoided the return of the spotlight. He also has grandchildren who know nothing of their grandfather's days on death row as a convicted rapist. Is it my place to tell them, however indirectly, his secrets?

⁶ This defense lawyer recently took over the practice of Jack Hopkins, the defense attorney in the Tarboro Three trial.

A few years ago, Tarboro invested in some new historical markers as it began to reimagine itself as a place a certain kind of tourist might embrace. These markers are called “The Occupation of Tarboro” and are in full color in five locations around town. The “occupation” occurred, according to the marker located next to the Blount-Bridgers House,⁷ on August 13, 1863 at 9:00 a.m. and ended at 5:00 p.m. on August 13, 1863. The eight-hour occupation. A day’s work in the Union Army’s four-year aggression. Still, an occupation is an occupation regardless the duration, and Tarboro was holding on to its grudge, selling its grudge to whoever is inspired to travel the Tar River History Trail.

Another brightly bordered marker stands in the Town Common near the Confederate Memorial.⁸ This one decries the burning of “productive plantations” by the invaders. The cliché says that the winners of wars get to write the histories. Shouldn’t these signs then read “The Emancipation of Tarboro”? Shouldn’t these signs rejoice in the burning of the grotesque pillars of sinful productivity? Tarboro’s historical markers are selling a version of history that will attract white people who still hold onto the perceived suffering of their ancestors. I try to imagine new markers in place that spell out the trials and terrors faced by The Tarboro Three from 1973 to 1975. Would such markers be good for tourist business? Good for the well being of the town regardless of tourist interest? Could the Chamber of Commerce embrace this history as another side of Tarboro’s past? Tarboro is invested in the idyllic pre-Civil War 19th century. Hidden, in secrets and avoidances, is another history of Tarboro just as another history exists for the

⁷ Built in 1808, the Blount-Bridgers House is the centerpiece of Tarboro’s Historic District.

⁸ The Tarboro Confederate Memorial obelisk rises 35 feet into the air and holds a Rebel soldier at its apex. It was erected in 1903. Fresh plastic flowers still arrive weekly at its base.

handful of individuals who still live here and who were directly impacted by The Tarboro
Three events. My prejudice is toward the opening of buried secrets and the resurrection
of disappeared history. If I am willing to insist upon a reexamination of a painful past,
then I suppose I should be willing to look into a few of my own secret histories as well.

A Fickle Wisp In The Night

Jack Hopkins is a gruff man. He has a scraggly gray beard to match barely thinning hair caught somewhere between respectfully short and free spirit wild. His eyes are gray as well, but centered by a pinprick of black intensity that leaves no doubt that this 78-year-old will still take you on—intellectually or otherwise. He was a 40-year-old lawyer recently moved to Tarboro, and only two years past being admitted to the bar, when he took on the defense of the Tarboro Three in the original trial. But don't think he was naïve or unworldly. Hopkins was a veteran of the Intelligence Service (“that will make you a little cold-blooded,” he says), was fluent in four languages and entirely aware of what he was up against: “Let me tell you how to piss people off—defend three blacks in a rape case in Tarboro. Nobody would take the case, but I thought they were being hung out to dry. I took it.”

He didn't mention the money the families came up with to hire him (Morris Dees says it was only a few hundred from each family), but I don't doubt his conviction. At first, Hopkins refused to talk to me until I had done my homework--or jumped through his hoops.

“Get back to me when you've read that Southern Poverty guy's book on the Tarboro Three,” he said, clearly unwilling to waste his time on someone who wasn't up to speed.

“I didn’t know Morris Dees wrote a book on the Tarboro Three.”

“Then it’s good you called. What are you doing this for?”

“It’s a Master’s thesis,” I said, unable to offer simple curiosity as explanation enough.

“Well, academics love to pound on each other so there’s plenty of room for you to exact your piece of flesh,” he offered as a way of approval I guess. “What do you hope to get out of it?” He was clearly going to interview me first.

My instinct was to disarm him or to fall back into a natural self-denigration or both. I said, “A good grade,” and he cackled for a good five seconds and then said that at least I was honest. Which I wasn’t, but I made a note to myself not to let myself be so subservient to Hopkins’s apparent ego, but then I remembered the journalist’s first rule of interviewing: Be dumb. You’ll learn far more from stupid questions, feigned or naturally invoked, than from the camaraderie of intellectual equals. Hopkins thought of himself as smarter than I (probably with good reason) and it would do me good to let him continue to think so.

SPLC sent me Dees’s autobiography with the two chapters on the case. Dees gently critiqued Hopkins’s performance as the only lawyer in the trial of the Tarboro Three. Hopkins was on his own—Dees did not enter the scene until the appeal process—defending three black men in the judicial whiteout of Tarboro. Armed with information, I called Hopkins back. I told him I had read what he had asked me to and jumped quickly to a semi-accusatory observation from the book. Dees suggested that Hopkins didn’t have enough money to adequately defend the men, but of course to acknowledge that would

mean that Hopkins would have to admit that he hadn't adequately defended them. That was not going to happen.

“It was not a matter of money. I'm sitting up there against 3 or 4 prosecutors and the resources of the Tarboro police department with their trained witnesses,” Hopkins shot back, suggesting that no one man, no matter how excellent an attorney, can defeat the power and lies of the system. He went on to declare that he had the same plea deal from the get-go that Dees eventually got for them 18 months later. He says the prosecution offered him assault with the attempt to commit rape and a two-year sentence, but Bobby, Vernon and Jesse insisted they hadn't raped her and wouldn't take the deal.

“The world, and I can tell from your questions that you think this, too,” Hopkins condescended, “the world naively thinks lawyers want to do justice. The fact is, from the defense lawyer's point of view, it's all risk management.” For Hopkins, the defendants had failed to understand this simple fact of legal reasoning and thus deserved most of the credit for losing the case and being sent to the gas chamber. I suppose I should mention here that defense character witness Reggie Moss had told me previous to my conversation with Hopkins that he thought Hopkins intentionally threw the case. Moss felt that Hopkins knew he had to live in this community—make a living in this community—and there was no way he was going to do so if he successfully defended these black men. But Hopkins was aware of this critique as well.

“Public opinion is a fickle wisp in the night,” Hopkins said. “There were a lot of white people mad at me, but after the conviction the blacks said I rolled over and sent them to the dogs and stuff like that. But I'm a big boy.”

I wanted to get to the specifics of the trial. For Hopkins, their innocence was established the moment she got in their car. “From their point of view,” he said, “why would she get in the car with three blacks unless she wanted to get laid?” That’s hardly an enlightened take on sexual (or racial) relations in the post-feminist twenty-first century, but for 1973 Tarboro perhaps Hopkins had a point. But Hopkins had theories on rape all his own: “The difference between rape and seduction is salesmanship.” I was a bit stunned by this declaration, but he went on to clarify that a rapist brings a gun to the date and the seducer brings flowers and candy.

I spent a year as a volunteer at the Seattle Rape Relief Center. Hopkins’s theories were definitely not part of the training curriculum, but my work in Seattle made me aware of how rape cases often get tried. I asked Hopkins if he included the victim’s sexual history as part of his defense.

“No, her sexual history was not part of the trial,” he said.

“Was it because it was illegal or unethical?” I wondered why he chose to avoid the topic.

“It was not illegal or unethical. I would have loved to have 18 guys say they had fucked her, to have someone say that she was the kind of girl to have sex twice a week—once with the choir and once with the football team.”

And here I ask the forgiveness of all my committed co-workers at Seattle Rape Relief because, God help me, I laughed. Jack Hopkins and I laughed together over his, what, joke? Did we laugh together as men who could appreciate a good gang bang joke? I suppose we did, but Hopkins went on to offer this appraisal of the situation, “In the mind of the unwashed proletariat...you can’t open that door.” For all the coarseness, Jack

Hopkins, it seems, was also willing to grant a woman, any woman, the sexual control of her own life and to insist that promiscuity and rape were entirely different topics. “Rape is sexual access without consent and has nothing to do with her sexual history,” he continued, and that was a central component of all of my Seattle Rape Relief training.

Now I’m not saying that Jack Hopkins was an early—early for Tarboro—feminist, but if I accept his explanation, then it is clear that he at least understood that women had as much right to a sexual past as men. But this is one of the problems the black community, according to Reggie Moss, had with Hopkins. Everyone knew—publicly in the black community and in whispers in the white community—of the promiscuity of the alleged victim. Hopkins’ refusal to raise the issue seemed like a polite pandering to the phony moralities of the white world. “She was promiscuous,” Moss said, “and we all knew it.”

Another factor was at play in Tarboro in the early seventies. There was talk of several “white female thrill seekers” who would hitchhike at night because, as Hopkins puts it, “they wanted to get laid by black men.” It sounds like complete nonsense and even Hopkins allowed that “it might not have been true,” but it served to create an environment of white panic over the sexual mores and sexual satisfactions of white women.

It wasn’t until 1977 that the Supreme Court in *Coker v. Georgia* determined that rape was not a capital offense punishable by death, but a 1972 decision (*Furman v. Georgia*) on the death penalty led most states to end the practice of punishing convicted rapists with death (on another legal matter in the case, Hopkins quotes Tarboro Three Judge John Webb as saying, “Well, the Supreme Court comes out with a lot of stuff I

don't understand" as a reason for his ignoring its rulings⁹). Prior to these rulings, 405 black men in Southern states were legally executed after a rape conviction. In post-Civil War North Carolina, 85 black men and 8 white men were executed for the alleged crime of rape. Of course, the South also had its own extralegal means of dealing with black rapists of white women--and Tarboro has its own history of lynching.

On July 18, 1930, two young girls, ages 7 and 5, complained to their parents that a black man, 30-year-old Oliver Moore, had hurt them while playing a game in the tobacco barn. A "paste-like substance" was found on one girl's dress. A posse was formed and the manhunt for Oliver Moore began. Moore wasn't found until August 17 (a white man, Ernest Harrell, overheard noises coming from Moore's brother's house and took it upon himself to walk in. He found Moore hiding in a closet. The nonchalant assumption that it was the prerogative of any white man to enter a black man's house and have a look around says plenty about the times in Tarboro.).

Fourteen cars arrived at the Edgecombe County jail on the night of August 19, 1930. A simple knock on the jailhouse door allowed them access. The jailer, it is said, tried to lie about the whereabouts of the cell keys, but the mob quickly found them and pulled Moore from his cell and put him into one of the waiting cars. They drove across the Edgecombe County line into Wilson County--near where the alleged crime had been committed—and stopped under a pine tree at Aspen Grove Church Road.

⁹ Judge Webb went on to become an Associate Justice on the North Carolina Supreme Court, which makes me question Hopkins's suggestion that he was a bit of a bumpkin. Webb died in 2008. The prosecuting attorneys were Cam Weeks (who was completely blind after a childhood accident) and Chandler Muse, and both were Tarboro natives. Weeks died in 1986 and Muse died in 2002.

In 2010 it takes 25 minutes to drive from downtown Tarboro to the Wilson County line at Aspen Grove Church Road. In 1930 it must have taken a good 45 minutes even in a posse of cars fleeing the scene of a kidnapping. I try to imagine the terror of Oliver Moore's journey as I drive past the tobacco and cotton fields on a bright September morning. This is pesticide-blasted farm country and was so 80 years ago as well. The occasional appearance of a misplaced suburban ranch house and a few blighted stretches of trailers huddled together in the comfort of mutual disrepair are the only breaks from the fields and forest. Was the car Moore rode in loud with the lustful boasts of men about to torture and kill a man? Before air-conditioning, the car was already loud with the rush of wind in the humid, still 80-degree night. Perhaps the wind blew the idea of conversation into silence. Yes, Oliver could hear the sounds of the night, the frogs and crickets in the deserted eastern North Carolina landscape. The men would be grim—silenced by their firm conviction that this was the work that had to be done to keep civil society possible. It was up to these men to protect the white women and children of Tarboro.

They crossed the county line and stopped by the pine tree already prepared for the job. Plow line had been tossed over a strong low-hanging limb. They didn't put the rope around his neck. Hanging was too quick, too painless. Or it didn't offer enough community participation. They tied the rope under his arms and hoisted him into the night. Swinging through the air, Oliver screamed. By now as many as 100 cars were there to watch justice. The guns--rifles and pistols and shotguns--were fired at the moving target. Fifteen, twenty hits into Oliver's twitching body. The cars pulled away in orderly fashion as the body dripped blood until dawn.

By 9:00 a.m. the next morning, *The Daily Southerner* reported, “thousands of people, white and coloured had come to see” Oliver Moore slowly twisting in the light breeze. I tried to find the pine tree, but 80 years is a long time. It’s probably been logged or fell in the winds of a hurricane or tornado, but there is a tall solitary pine in Wilson County 100 yards from the Edgecombe County line on Aspen Grove. It’s clearly old enough and perfectly located. Its lowest branches are now forty feet above the ground, but I wonder about its physical memory. The tree might be the last remaining witness to the lynching of Oliver Moore. Are there preservation societies out there able to imagine the value of keeping this last witness alive?

It is unlikely that anyone who participated in the killing of Oliver Moore is still alive. But their children and grandchildren are still here. Family histories told around the Thanksgiving dinner table probably leave out this murderous moment, whitewash the history. The story may even be completely lost within the guilty families’ collective memories; it’s a secret buried away until it has rotted into nothing. It is left to that tall solitary pine to tell the story. I returned to the site on a cold December day in 2010; I looked up through sparsely falling snow and into its branches expecting to find a plow line still hanging. I searched the trunk for bullet holes. I poked the ground for spent casings. Nothing. All that remains is an eerie loneliness on a desolate road in an abandoned crossroads in Eastern North Carolina. But someone has visited this spot recently and left an appropriate marker for the grotesque history of the place. A deer carcass has been tossed away here and the bloody organs are frozen to the ground in the unlikely cold. A few turkey vultures circle overhead. I feel like the last person alive who

knows what happened at this spot and it makes me feel like shouting: this history cannot disappear.

But there is another memory out there in the wind. Maggie Noble is a 72-year-old black woman who has lived in Edgecombe County all her life. She was born eight years after Oliver Moore was killed, but her mother, Effie Dawes, was alive at the time. I met with Maggie at her job at Phillips Printing—a storefront operation in downtown Tarboro that specializes in Christian-inspired t-shirts and letterhead—after her grandson, photographer Demetrious Noble, told me that she knew something about the lynching and its aftermath.

Maggie hadn't thought of it in ages, but Demetrious jarred her memory when he told her what I was working on. When Maggie was a young girl, her mother warned her about the white world. She told her about what happened to Oliver Moore, but she also told Maggie about what happened to the white men who lynched Oliver Moore.

“Terrible things happened to all of them,” Effie Dawes told her daughter, “they all died violent deaths.”

“Why did your mother talk to you about it?” I wanted to know the context of the occasion, the reason for the story.

“I think she wanted me to know that the Lord takes care of things in his own way,” Maggie said.

In a time without justice, perhaps an invented justice was necessary to provide any sort of hope for a decent future for the children of black Tarboro. If legal means were unavailable to black people, then the greater justice of God would prevail in the end. Maggie said her mother provided no names of the white men in question, so I can't verify

the existence of these violent deaths, but the simple karmic nature of the vengeance seems highly unlikely. And the vague detail-less account of the “violent deaths” lends no authenticity to Effie Dawes’s story, but Maggie did remember one specific.

“My Momma said one man had a heart attack and fell into his hog pen while he was feeding them. She says the hogs ate him while he lay helpless in the mud,” Maggie told me with the flat, affectless delivery of a weather report. Invented or not, the story provides justice delivered darkly. Maggie believes it and carries with her this firm conviction in the power of a just world: “I guess he got what he deserved.”

The New York Times covered the lynching of Oliver Moore. On Ebay you can place a bid for the actual edition dated August 20, 1930 with the article “Mob Lynches Negro in North Carolina.” The article also says that “more than 200 shots were fired into the Negro’s body as it swung from the tree,” which contradicts *The Daily Southerner* count of 15 to 20 shots. Timothy Hughes Rare and Early Newspapers offers the item, and office manager Doreen Mileto tells me they have had over 150 people view the item online. I asked Doreen who would be looking for such a gruesome collectible and her answer was obvious: people like me. But usually, she added, it’s people who live in whatever town the event occurred in. “Except one person,” Doreen wrote, who “did indicate that a family member had participated in the lynching.” She went on to say that that was information no one should be comfortable sharing. To her credit, she would offer me no names. The families are still here in Tarboro. I surely meet them on the sainted streets of Tarboro, but I can’t know which families carry the secret. I’ve probably talked with them and I might very well be friends with them and would be so regardless

of their family complicity, but only the pine tree knows the guilty and it's not giving up the names.