

Lynching Tree Lane

By Diane Barile, South Brevard Historical Society

Everybody knew what happened to Mr. James Clark in July 1926. No investigation was needed in the segregated town of Eau Gallie, Florida. A community leader later said, "The whole thing was from someone's imagination." Another said, "Rape was a worse crime back then—their thinking was anybody who did a thing like that ought to be hanged."

Mr. Clark was a well-dressed northerner in a black chauffeur cap working for a traveling salesman staying at a riverfront hotel. Maybe he didn't know that blacks were not allowed in town after dark. He was accused and arrested for raping the hotel manager's 10-year-old daughter. An unnamed black preacher was a supposed witness. There was no statement or defense from the accused.

Rumors of a lynching spread through town. A couple of boys watching the alley leading from the jail to the Dixie Highway saw the Chief of Police leave in a car with the black man. Suddenly, ten men rushed out of the pool hall, jumped into two cars, and followed the squad car. Those setting out to be "judge and jury" for that "outsider black man" were easily recognized by the boys.

The police chief returned about a half an hour later saying, "My car was stopped by masked men who took my gun and the accused."

The two cars now drove Mr. Clark three miles north to Rocky Water Camp, a town gathering place in an oak forest with a stand of Longleaf Pines. A rope with a prepared noose around Mr. Clark's neck was slung over the low pine branch. The box where Mr. Clark stood was kicked away for the execution.

But, instead the man was still breathing—handcuffed, legs-bound—his eyes focused on the executioners. Now they were uncomfortable. "Now what?" "What do we do now?" "I don't want to watch this—guess we have to shoot him." "You do it." Clark writhed. Finally, one fellow retrieved a shotgun from the car and shot the strangling man.

The killers left their victim hanging from the tree and melted back to their cozy homes and families. There are no records to date of James Clark's words, family, or home. Thankfully, it was the last lynching in Brevard County.

The boys knew where to find Mr. Clark's body the next morning—still hanging dead on the pine. A local photographer published a postcard picture of the suspended body, for distribution. The Brevard County Sheriff cut the body down later that morning.

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The story circulated through both the black and white communities. The state only required a coroner's report on cause of death. That same morning, a Committee Coroner's Jury of citizens convened and reported the cause of death for Mr. James Clark was, "Hanging from a tree and riddled with bullets."

A 1989 Orlando Sentinel article reported people looking away from the lynching, "with tacit agreement of approval." There was nothing to do but "—keep your mouth shut." The Sentinel said, "—the town felt no guilt or shame." That could be said of the white folks. There were no comments from the African American side of town.

The street sign leading to the killing site officially read Lynching Tree Lane for years. Perhaps it was a standing comment to minorities, "We still have a lynch place if we need it again."

Over the years, the pine tree was felled, and houses were built along the street in the forest. Eau Gallie became part of Melbourne in 1969. A 1980s petition from black leaders encouraged the Melbourne City Council to change the street name.

Today, as you turn West from US-1 to Parkway Blvd. and cross the Florida East Coast Railroad tracks, the street sign reads 'Legendary Lane.'

Today, let us remember Mr. James Clark, Northern Chauffeur—a legend forgotten. §

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