

Chapter 19

Atlanta Is the Black Capital of U.S.

By Ray Sprigle

Atlanta Negroes like to boast that their town is the "Black Capital of America." They react with horror and indignation to outrages against Negroes in the smaller towns of the South. They contribute thousands to defense funds to protect the rights of their people or avenge their wanton murder.

For hours they'd sit and assure me that "It can't happen here." But the bloody record of Negro killings in their own town proves them wrong. Reluctantly they'll finally admit it.

That's another thing I'll never understand - the intense local patriotism of the Southern Negro. If he lives in Atlanta, then Atlanta's the finest town in the world. And Georgia is the greatest state. He wouldn't live anywhere else. And the Mississippi Negro will pound the table and tell him he doesn't know what he's talking about. As a temporary black man I'll tell the world right now that there isn't a square foot of the South that I like and if I were permanently black, if you ever caught me south of the Smith and Wesson line you could shoot me.

But if you're black it isn't too hard to get yourself thoroughly killed by a white cop, or a street car motorman or just a plain everyday gun totin' citizen, in this "liberal" town of Atlanta.

Motormen On Carry Guns

Atlanta is unique in the South in the matter of its kill - crazy street car motormen. An ancient law makes them police officers and gives them the right to carry guns.

There was Madison Harris, 22 years old, who had words with Motorman T. H. Purl. When he got off and started home, Purl stopped the car, called the young Negro back and ordered him to put up his hands. He obeyed and Mr. Motorman shot him dead. The examining magistrate ruled it justifiable homicide and that was the last of that - and of Madison Harris, too.

Walter Lee Johnson, another young Negro of 22, ought to have learned a lesson from that. He didn't, though. He had "words," too, this time with Motorman W. D. Lee. When young Johnson left the car, the motorman followed him off. Motorman Lee must have had a bunch of bad cartridges because witnesses testified that Lee's gun missed fire twice. But the third time the firing pin hit a good one and Johnson followed Harris into the hereafter. That was justifiable homicide, too.

Standard Line of Defense

But you don't have to be a motorman to kill Negroes and get away with it. Just last year when a Negro refused to quit smoking a foul-smelling cigar on the back platform of an Atlanta car, a retired mail carrier waited until he stepped off and then shot him dead.

"I thought he was going to reach in his pocket," the killer explained to the magistrate. That, by the way, is the standard line of defense in the South.

Atlanta cops shoot quick and fast, too - and ask any necessary questions afterward. There's this much to be said in favor of the shooting cops. They're usually scared stiff all the time they're on duty and a scared man shoots easily. They have good reason to be scared. In Atlanta, Birmingham, Memphis and other Southern towns with a large Negro population they're pitchforked into a seething black maelstrom of crime. The white cop can very well find himself dead as he rounds the next corner. So his first thought when trouble looms is to grab his gun and shoot somebody quick.

This is true because there isn't even a pretense of adequate law enforcement in the black belts of the larger Southern cities, particularly in - Atlanta., Birmingham and Memphis.

At Mercy of Criminals

Decent, law-abiding Negroes, not only in these cities but in the Negro sections of smaller towns, are at the mercy of the criminals of their race because the white folks in the South don't regard it as a serious crime for a Negro to kill a Negro.

"Bad Negroes" do their four or five years in prison gangs for a killing. Then they come back to their home communities where they rule the more peaceful elements with gun and knife. Cutting, shootings, robberies bring only fines or short jail sentences to the offender. Intelligent and adequate policing could, of course, end this chaos of crime in the Negro areas in a matter of months. But the white folks don't care and the better element of Negroes is powerless to force action.

I checked a few of the more recent police killings. There was John Mahone, black, drunk, disorderly and fighting with his wife. The cop shot and killed him. Thought he had a knife. The knife turned out to be a can opener.

R. D. Mance, 38, black and insane but unarmed. Cop was called to subdue a demented person. He did - with his gun.

Killed on Refusal to Halt

Over the De Kalb county line in an Atlanta suburb, a county officer was making a search for illegal whisky. Harris Miller ran. When he refused to halt, County Officer E. C. Dailey killed him.

Negro killings, by Negroes, hit an all-time high in Atlanta in 1941 when they mounted to 107. The year before there were 100. This year may set a new record with 43 killings up to June 1. Only bloody Memphis surpasses Atlanta in its record of Negro killings.

Negro leaders in Atlanta are powerless to institute any measures which would bring law and order to their community. First thing required, of course, is a complete overhaul of the entire

police system with a proper system of training for police officers - something which most Southern cities haven't thought of. Basic reform, of course, would be a change in Southern thinking. Atlanta, and the rest of the South have got to get the Idea that it's murder to kill a Negro wantonly.

First Atlanta Negro Policemen

I watched the first Negro policemen ever to function in Atlanta during the first day of their service. They were neat, competent appearing Negroes, most of them ex-service men. But they were tossed into the teeming Auburn avenue section without any proper training for the hardest and most exacting jobs in the department.

And they were hamstrung at the start by being denied the right to arrest anyone white. Also they are not permitted to carry guns. That last rule is likely to cost the lives of some of them.

Take it from me, I didn't feel any safer as one of Atlanta's black citizens than I did in the smaller and more deadly towns in the cotton country.