

Chapter 5

A Woman Tells How Her Husband Died

By Ray Sprigle

She is worn and aged and bent beyond her time. Nearly a quarter of a century behind a plow and a mule under blazing Georgia suns have done that to her.

In a haze of dull despair, this broken, hopeless Negro farm woman sits in this little parlor in Black Atlanta and tells her tale of murder.

"When the white folks gave him back to me he was in his coffin. I held his head in my hands when I kissed him. And I felt the broken pieces of bone under the skin. It was just like a sackful of little pieces of bone.

"I put my arms around him for one last time as he lay there. All down one side of him there were no ribs -- just pieces that moved when I held him."

Talking About Husband

That was her husband she was talking about—Henry Gilbert, 42 years old, Negro farmer, murdered by the white folks of Harris and Troup counties, Georgia, May 29, 1947.

Henry Gilbert was victim of the mores of the white Southerner. When a Negro kills a white man and escapes, somebody has to pay. Henry Gilbert just happened to be the Negro picked for slaughter.

Sunday night, May 4, Olin Sands, a white planter, in his pickup truck caught up with Gus Davidson, a young Negro with a bad record among both blacks and whites, driving his father's car in front of the Union Springs Baptist Church. Sands accused him of driving over a calf lying in the road and began beating the Negro with a club. The Negro shot and killed him.

Henry Gilbert, a deacon and treasurer of the little Baptist church, was inside the church counting the evening's collection. Mrs. Gilbert and the wives of the other deacons were waiting in front. At the sound of the shots they called their men folk and everybody started for home in short order.

Sheriff Appears

Two weeks later, E. V. Hilyer, sheriff of Troup county, with two officers from Harris county, appeared at the Gilbert home at 4:30 in the morning. They arrested him on a warrant charging him with aiding and abetting the escape of Gus Davidson, despite the fact that a short time before Gilbert had had Davidson arrested and jailed for creating a disturbance in the church. Davidson, his father, Lovett Davidson, and their white employer, Luke Sturdevant, had all told Gilbert that they'd get even with him. The officers drove away with Gilbert just as it was getting light.

And that last glimpse of him in the early dawn, three gun-hung white men shepherding him into their car was the last time Carolyn Gilbert was ever to see her husband alive. He'd be dead "when the white folks gave him back."

For the next 10 days Henry Gilbert drops out of sight while Georgia law drags him from jail to jail. Early Monday Mrs. Gilbert hurried to Hamilton. She was told her husband had been "carried" to Columbus where "the FBI wanted to talk to him." Not until May 29 did Mrs. Gilbert get any definite word as to where her husband was being held. That afternoon two of her uncles, Jesse and Cicero Davenport, told her that Henry was back in Hamilton jail, that they had talked to him through his cell window.

Happy to Hear News

Friday morning, "happier than I could tell you, Mr. Crawford," at the news that her husband was alive and well, she bustled through breakfast and got ready to go to Hamilton to see the husband she had feared was dead.

She was all dressed and was waiting for a neighbor to drive her into town when another neighbor, Willie B. Andrews, came in.

A white man, Mr. Louis Booker, had given Willie word to carry to Mrs. Gilbert. Her husband was dead. She'd find his body in a Hamilton undertaker's rooms.

Thursday night County Policeman Willie H. Buchanan had gone into Henry Gilbert's cell. "To get a confession," he said afterwards.

"The nigger drew a chair on me and I had to kill him," he explained.

Here is what the undertaker found when he fixed Henry Gilbert's body up for burial:

His skull was crushed to a pulp both in front and the rear. One leg and one arm were broken. All the ribs on one side were smashed into splinters. He was riddled by five bullets fired at close range. That is what Georgia justice officially describes as "justifiable homicide in self-defense." And Willie Buchanan, wanton killer, is "man of the year" in Harris and Troup counties.

The white folks gave Carolyn Gilbert less than a month to mourn her murdered husband in peace. Then comes Sheriff Hilyer again with another "aiding-abetting-escape" warrant and Carolyn goes to the same jail where her husband was murdered. She's only there 24 hours, however, before Attorney Dan Duke has her out on \$1,000 bail.

Don't Understand

"I just don't understand those white people," says Mrs. Gilbert. "If Henry had an enemy in the world it was Gus Davidson. He was a bad man. He came into our church with a gun and threatened one of our deacons. Henry had him jailed for that. And right then Gus Davidson told

Henry he'd get even. So did his father, Lovett Davidson, and so did Lovett Davidson's white man, Luke Sturdevant."

At Mrs. Gilbert's preliminary hearing when she was held for court, Davidson testified he had seen his fugitive son eating breakfast in the Gilbert home.

"Why I wouldn't have let Gus Davidson sit at my table. I wouldn't have let him come into my house at any time -- let alone when he was being hunted for murder," declared Carolyn. Sheriff Hilyer himself pinned perjury on both Davidson and Sturdevant, but a justice of the peace held Mrs. Gilbert for trial.

Now word from Harris county is that the white folks want to drop the case against Mrs. Gilbert and just forget the whole thing. It won't make much difference to the dry-eyed, huddled woman in the chair across from me. Her life is finished. And the life that Henry and Carolyn Gilbert had built out of toil and struggle through the years is finished, too.

Married for 22 Years

"Twenty-two years we were married before the white folks killed him," she says, and there is not a sign of emotion in her voice. "We share-cropped two years and I worked with him in the fields from the day we were married. Then we saved enough to buy us a little old mule and we went to rentin'. We worked 17 years on our rented farm and saved our money until we had \$1,350. So we bought us a farm a few miles out of Chipley. It was 111 acres and run down pretty bad. But we built it up, Henry and me, working from daylight to dark.

"Henry borrowed \$1,000 from the man at the bank and he let Henry have it just on his note. We had the whole farm wired in. We had nine cows and four big hogs and two mules. Henry worked one of the mules and I worked the other. But we didn't let the girls work in the cotton. Henry wanted learning for them. So they all went to high school in La Grange. Two of them go to high school here now and the other one graduated and works in Mr. Rich's store.

"Henry paid back the thousand dollars he borrowed and the bank man lent him \$600 more. Henry worked on the house, too. We had five rooms -- big rooms and screens on every window and he screened in the whole back porch too."

All of this, the murder of her husband, the simple story of her life, without a tear, without a tremor in her voice.

Suddenly she drops her head in her hands and sobs shake her.

"Every night I keep asking God to help me. But I don't know what he could do. Help me pray. Pray for me."

Me, a white man -- even though she thinks I'm black -- pray for Carolyn Gilbert. Who would listen?