The New York Times

In a Small Arkansas Town, Echoes of a Century-Old Massacre

By The Associated Press

July 25, 2019

ELAINE, Ark. — J. Chester Johnson never heard about the mass killing of black people in Elaine, a couple hours away from where he grew up in Arkansas. Nobody talked about it, teachers didn't mention it in history classes, and only the elderly remembered the bloodshed of 1919.

He was an adult when he found out about it. By then, his grandfather, Alonzo "Lonnie" Birch, was dead — perhaps taking a secret to his grave.

Johnson believes Birch took part in the Elaine massacre. And now he's bent on telling the story of one of the largest racial mass killings in U.S. history, an infamous chapter in the "Red Summer" riots that spread in cities and towns across the nation.

"I feel an obligation," said Johnson, who is white. "It's hard to grow up in a severely segregated environment and for it not to affect you. If you don't face it and deal with it in various ways, it becomes undiscovered."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Hundreds of African Americans died at the hands of white mob violence during "Red Summer" but little is widely known about this spate of violence a century later. As part of its coverage of the 100th anniversary of Red Summer, AP will take a multiplatform look at the attacks and the communities where they occurred. https://www.apnews.com/RedSummer

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Johnson, who now lives in New York City, is co-chair of a committee overseeing construction of a memorial honoring those killed in 1919. He and others are hoping the structure, being built in a park across from the Phillips County Courthouse about a half-hour drive from Elaine, will bring attention to the massacre. Others say plans for a monument are a folly — starting with its location — and want commemoration efforts to focus instead on reparations to account for what they say was theft of black-owned land in the wake of the killings.

"It was literally a war on this area. People wanted the property that was almost all black-owned," said Mary Olson, who is white. She is president of the Elaine Legacy Center, a red-brick community center that works to preserve the area's civil rights history. It bears the sign, "Motherland of Civil Rights."

The violence unfolded on the evening of Sept. 30, 1919, as black sharecroppers had gathered at a small church in Hoop Spur, an unincorporated area about 2½ miles north of Elaine. The sharecroppers, wanting to be paid better and treated more fairly, were meeting with union organizers when a deputy sheriff and a railroad security officer — both white — arrived.

Fighting and gunfire erupted, though it's still not clear who shot first. The security officer was killed and the deputy wounded.

White men frustrated that the sharecroppers were organizing went on a rampage. Over several days, mobs from the surrounding area and neighboring states killed men, women and children.

More than 200 black men, women and children were killed, according to the Equal Justice Initiative, a Montgomery, Alabama-based nonprofit that has documented more than 4,400 lynchings of black people in the U.S. between 1877 and 1950. Five white people were killed. Hundreds of black people were arrested and jailed, many of them tortured into giving incriminating testimony. Some were forced to flee Arkansas and, according to the Legacy Center, had their land stolen.

Johnson said his grandfather, Alonzo "Lonnie" Birch, was a member of the Ku Klux Klan and worked for the Missouri Pacific Railroad, the same company that employed the railroad security officer who was killed at the Arkansas church where the black sharecroppers had gathered to organize. Once the violence started, Johnson said, railroad officials urged workers to join the fighting. He said his grandfather likely responded to the call.

Narratives about the killings differ and records are not easy to find, said Brian Mitchell, an assistant professor of history at the University of Arkansas-Little Rock. "You have to understand that everybody that had some degree of power in the state was a part of the process of the massacre, so the people who would control all the records (were) actively suppressing the records," Mitchell said.

Some residents think the death toll is highly exaggerated.

Poindexter Fiser, the mayor of Elaine from 1985 to 2007, said the accounts of a massacre are "somebody trying to make something out of nothing much to talk about." Fiser, who is white, said his late father-in-law put the number of those slain at only "about 25 people."

Kyle Miller, director of the Delta Cultural Center in Helena-West Helena, Arkansas, said for many years, the violence "was not really acknowledged ... it was something that was only talked about behind closed doors." Miller is a descendant of the Johnston brothers, four wealthy, black siblings who he said were pulled off a train on their way back to Helena after a hunting trip and killed during the massacre.

"I'm really hoping (the memorial) is going to spark some conversations. That people will look at it and begin to ask questions and be able to learn some history of our community," Miller said.

The memorial is set to be unveiled in September.

Not everyone supports it. Members of the Legacy Center say the monument belongs in Elaine.

"If you said '1919,' what do you think of? Elaine," said James White, director of the Legacy Center. "You don't think of Helena."

White and others with the center said any commemoration efforts should have some focus on the theft of black-owned land. Some residents are calling for descendants of the victims to receive compensation for what their families lost.

Miller and other memorial organizers say Elaine doesn't have enough resources to sustain what they envision will become a civil rights tourist destination. And to them, the massacre story is bigger than Elaine: The Phillips County Courthouse in Helena was where hundreds of black men were jailed and tortured following the violence.

The effects of the violence and aftermath endure today. Elaine is still highly segregated: White residents live predominantly on the south side and black residents on the north side. About 60 percent of its 527 people are black.

"It's a quiet town, but there's still racial tension here because we're still divided," said White, a black Elaine native whose grandmother told him about black residents hiding in swamps to escape.

White said he welcomes efforts to learn about the massacre but questions who gets to tell the story and who benefits from sharing it.

"One hundred years later, it's the same old game, just a different day," he said, reflecting on the disparity between those that hold power in Phillips County and the poor black residents of Elaine. "It's hate in this town ... and black people are still afraid" of talking about the massacre.

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Associated Press writer Ken Miller in Oklahoma City contributed.

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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U.S.

Arkansas Group Planned Monument to Racial Unity; It Isn't Going as Planned

Elaine Massacre Memorial is going in wrong place, for wrong reason, some residents say

The Elaine Massacre Memorial, which honors victims of antiblack violence, is set to be unveiled in late September in Helena, Ark. **PHOTO:** NOREEN NASIR/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Cameron McWhirter

Sept. 14, 2019 5:30 am ET

The memorial was meant to help a rural Arkansas community heal longstanding wounds from one of the bloodiest episodes of racial violence in U.S. history. Instead, it is fueling tensions among white and black people.

The monument, which is set to be unveiled in late September near a courthouse in downtown Helena, marks the centennial of what has become known as the Elaine Massacre. In late September and early October 1919, white posses who believed black sharecroppers were organizing a revolt killed more than 100 African-Americans—and some historians have said it could have been many hundreds.

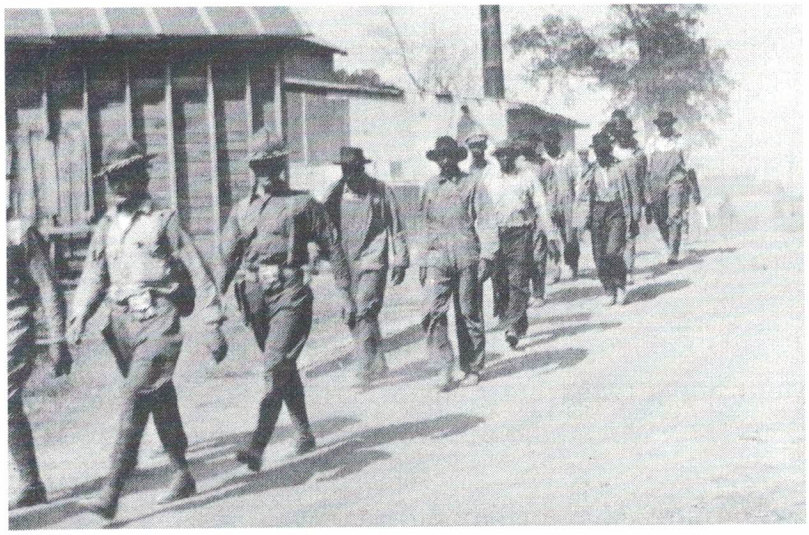
Some Arkansas residents are angry about the monument's location in the Phillips County community where white leaders planned the attacks, rather than about 25 miles southwest in

Elaine, near where the violence erupted. Helena, they say, is co-opting a bloody history it long suppressed to promote tourism, harming smaller Elaine a second time.

"This is white folks using white privilege to demonstrate a 21st-century version of polite white supremacy, " said Arkansas Circuit Judge Wendell Griffen, an African-American leader and pastor.

Tensions over the memorial are part of a broader debate taking place nationwide, as communities consider erecting new markers to long-ignored events such as race riots and lynchings.

The Elaine Massacre was the bloodiest incident of the "Red Summer" of 1919, when antiblack riots, lynchings and other violence swept the nation. Events are planned throughout the U.S. this year to mark the centennial.



Federal troops escorting African-Americans to the schoolhouse in Elaine, Ark., in 1919. PHOTO: ARKANSAS STATE ARCHIVES

Supporters of the Phillips County monument say it is intended to raise historical awareness and promote racial harmony, while bringing more tourists to a struggling area between Memphis and Little Rock, two leading civil rights sites.

"Honoring all the people who died, it was the right thing to do," said David Solomon, a 74-year-old retired information-technology executive who spearheaded the effort and is paying the bulk of the monument's cost.

Mr. Solomon, who is white, grew up in Helena but now lives in New York. Generations of his family lived in Phillips County, and they still own land in the area.

Phillips County, once a cotton-producing powerhouse on the Mississippi River, had a population of about 18,000 people in 2018, a 17% drop from 2010, according to the census. About 62% of the county is black, and about 36% is white.

The Rev. Mary Olson, who is white and president of the Elaine Legacy Center, said her group and Elaine residents weren't consulted and want a memorial there. The group, made up of blacks and whites, is considering possible legal action, she said. Her group plans to hold an event in Elaine at the same time the other group holds its event in Helena, she said.

The legacy center planted a weeping willow tree in Elaine in April honoring those who died during the 1919 massacre, but someone recently cut the tree down, Rev. Olson said. State officials are investigating, she said.

The Helena memorial idea arose in 2013, when Mr. Solomon heard of the massacre from a friend, J. Chester Johnson, 74, a white writer who grew up near Phillips County, Mr. Solomon said. Both men believe they had relatives who were involved in the violence or supported it, and they said they hope a monument would help the community start to heal.

Then-Arkansas Gov. Charles Hillman Brough addressing a crowd in Elaine, Ark., after the Elaine Massacre in 1919. **PHOTO:** ARKANSAS STATE ARCHIVES

Several years ago, a group of civic leaders—black and white—gathered for numerous meetings to hash out what would be the best way to memorialize those who died. One early idea was displaying representations of dead bodies, Brian Miller, an African-American U.S. district judge who served on the group, told a gathering last year.

After many discussions, the group decided on something simple "that will appropriately memorialize our fallen," Judge Miller said. The memorial bears the words: "Dedicated to those known and unknown who lost their lives in the 1919 massacre," along with a biblical quote urging unity.

"We are uncovering a wound that never healed," said Sheila Walker, 71, of Wilmington, Del., an African-American who backs the monument in Helena and who says two of her relatives were shot by white people in the attacks.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What do you think is the best way to commemorate this and other moments of racial violence in the country's past? Join the conversation below.

In the fall of 1919, black sharecroppers and a group of white people opened fire on each other in a remote area near Elaine. Afterward, white people organized posses and brought in groups of soldiers, which committed "helter-skelter killing" throughout the county, according to Robert Whitaker, author of "On the Laps of Gods," a book about the event. No official investigation ever took place, he said.

White mobs rounded up hundreds of black people, and all-white juries convicted many after brief trials. Lawyers for 12 men sentenced to death argued up to the U.S. Supreme Court that the men weren't given fair trials. In 1923, the Supreme Court agreed, and the ruling set a precedent for defendants' rights in state trials.

Mr. Johnson, the writer who helped develop the Helena monument, said he is thrilled that the important event is finally getting a public marker and isn't bothered by the complaints.

"It's not bad for people to disagree about this memorial," he said, "because it starts the discussion."

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