

The Story of Charles Miller

by Daylan Evans, Noelia Carrillo, Ryan Holmes, Cece Conway, and Regan Sanders

In Opelika, in 1932, an African American named Charles Miller was accused of a crime, hunted down by a mob, and was killed before being displayed in front of the courthouse, the place where he should have had a fair trial. If a scenario similar to this occurred in today's time, what would the world say? Would this demonstration of power and racism be looked down upon in our present society or would it be shrugged off like it was so many years ago? The modern-day stories of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor illustrate that this kind of violence is not relegated to the past; therefore, Charles Miller's story holds even more importance and implications for our day and age.

Charles Miller was a man raised modest and hard working. He grew up as a sharecropper in Opelika. Sharecropping was a legal arrangement in which landowners allowed tenants to rent land in return for a share of the crops produced on said land. The sharecropper rented equipment, seed, and housing from his boss and thus stayed in perpetual debt, no matter how successful his harvest. It was a kind of slavery, just a debt enslavement instead of chattel enslavement. Miller was a railroad worker and his wife, Rosa, worked as a cook. Miller also had a brother- and sister-in-law who would later come into play in many versions of Miller's story. "A good man", is how the sheriff described Miller leading up to the incident.

In the aftermath of Miller's lynching, it was reported that his wife Rosa had died from a slit throat. It was suspected that Miller had done this, though there was no investigation, and by that time, Miller had been lynched, so there was no way for him to defend himself in court. However, before the lynching, he went to his brother-in-law's, Taylor Matthews, house and fired

a shot into a wash basin with some of the buckshot lodging in his brother- and sister-in-law's hands. The intent was likely to intimidate because he never shot at them directly. Sheriff William "Buck" Jones was called to respond to the incident at Taylor Matthew's home and then decided to visit Charles Miller's home. Before leaving, the sheriff stated, "I know this fellow. He is a good fellow. He won't give me any trouble." Upon arriving to Miller's home, he opened the front door and was shot in the chest by Miller with a single barrel shotgun. When Miller saw that it was the sheriff, he exclaimed, "Oh, Mr. Buck. I didn't know it was you!" and fled his house out of the back door.

Newspapers reported on the incident with a variety of viewpoints, dates, and even how the entire case went down. Even with range of speculation, it is still clear to see that what happened to Mr. Charles Miller was not morally correct in the slightest. To be brutally murdered then displayed in front of the place where your verdict should be determined by a jury of your peers is a large slap in the face to his family, as well as the African American community. According to newspapers it only took a few hours for a posse of officers and citizens to form to hunt Miller down, however depending on which source you read, the size of the posse varies from twenty to around one hundred plus people. The variety of information presented in these articles is very over-exaggerated in an attempt to vilify Charles Miller and make the lynching seem justified to the public. One attempt at this was a report of Miller being under the influence of alcohol. Another way they did this was reporting that he had fired into the mob, while others say he had not. Even the number of times that he was shot by the mob varied depending on where you read it, the amount being anywhere between 50 to 160 shots into his body. Because of the obvious racial bias against Black people down south, the newspapers were quick to turn it

around and vilify the victims of these lynchings to make it seem like it was something that needed to be done, when obviously that logic is horrendously racist and disgusting.

This was an unjustified act since Charles Miller was disregarded of his rights and not offered a fair trial in court to testify and defend himself as to whether he was guilty or innocent of what many had accused him. This lynching was intended to scare African American members of Opelika and set an example for what would happen to them if they upset the social order established by the white community. Nearly after a hundred years after Charles Miller's death, similar instances of murder and unjustified violence against Black people still occur. It is important to acknowledge the injustice done to Charles Miller, just as it is important to recognize and grieve the injustice committed in our day.

Charles Miller was a victim of many injustices – he was not given a fair trial and he was a symbol of racist hate and southern discrimination of African Americans. The purpose of this video is to commemorate Charles Miller's whole life—all 13,860 days and not that final day for which he was condemned—as a part of Lee County's history, a past that should never be repeated.