

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

HOUSTON.

AN N. A. A. C. P. INVESTIGATION

By MARTHA GRUENING

THE primary cause of the Houston riot was the habitual brutality of the white police officers of Houston in their treatment of colored people. Contributing causes were (1) the mistake made in not arming members of the colored provost guard or military police, (2) lax discipline at Camp Logan which permitted promiscuous visiting at the camp and made drinking and immorality possible among the soldiers.

Houston is a hustling and progressive southern city having the commission form of government and, as southern cities go, a fairly liberal one. Its population before the Negro exodus, which has doubtless decreased it by many thousands, was estimated at 150,000. Harris County, in which it is situated, has never had a lynching, and there are other indications, such as the comparative restraint and self-control of the white citizens after the riot, that the colored people perhaps enjoy a greater degree of freedom with less danger than in many parts of the South. It is, however, a southern city, and the presence of the Negro troops inevitably stirred its Negrophobe element to protest. There was some feeling against the troops being there at all, but I could not find that it was universal. Most of the white people seem to have wanted the financial advantages to be derived from having the camp in the neighborhood. The sentiment I heard expressed most frequently by them was that they were willing to endure the colored soldiers if they could be "controlled." I was frequently told that Negroes in uniform were inevitably "insolent" and that members of the military police in particular were frequently "insolent" to the white police of Houston. It was almost universally conceded, however, that the members of the white police force habitually cursed, struck, and otherwise maltreated colored prisoners. One of the important results of the riot has been an attempt on the part of the Mayor and the Chief of Police of Houston to put a stop to this custom.

In deference to the southern feeling against the arming of Negroes and because of the expected co-operation of the city Police Department, members of the provost guard were not armed, thus creating a situation without precedent in the history of this guard. A few carried clubs, but none of them had guns, and most of them were without weapons of any kind. They were supposed to call on white police officers to make arrests. The feeling is strong among the colored people of Houston that this was the real cause of the riot. "You may have observed," one of them said to me, "that Southerners do not like to fight Negroes on equal terms. This is at the back of all the southern feeling against Negro soldiers. If Corporal Baltimore had been armed, they would never have dared to set upon him and we should not have had a riot." This was the general feeling I found among the colored people of Houston.

Several minor encounters took place between the military and civil police shortly after the troops arrived. As a result, Chief of Police Brock issued an order calling on his men to co-operate with the military police, to give them full assistance, and to refer to them as "colored" and not as "nigger" officers. Chief Brock is a northern man and though apparently sincere and well-meaning, does not seem to have the full confidence of all his men for this and other reasons. The order was obeyed in a few instances and more often disregarded.

On the afternoon of August 23, two policemen, Lee Sparks and Rufe Daniels—the former known to the colored people as a brutal bully—entered the house of a respectable colored woman in an alleged search for a colored fugitive accused of crap-shooting. Failing to find him, they arrested the woman, striking and cursing her and forcing her out into the street only partly clad. While they were waiting for the patrol wagon a crowd gathered about the weeping woman who had become hysterical and was begging to know why she was being arrested. In this crowd was a colored soldier, Private Edwards. Edwards seems to have questioned the police officers or re-

monstrated with them. Accounts differ on this point, but they all agree that the officers immediately set upon him and beat him to the ground with the butts of their six-shooters, continuing to beat and kick him while he was on the ground, and arrested him. In the words of Sparks himself: "I beat that nigger until his heart got right. He was a good nigger when I got through with him." Later Corporal Baltimore, a member of the military police, approached the officers and inquired for Edwards, as it was his duty to do. Sparks immediately opened fire, and Baltimore, being unarmed, fled with the two policemen in pursuit shooting as they ran. Baltimore entered a house in the neighborhood and hid under a bed. They followed, dragged him out, beat him up and arrested him. It was this outrage which infuriated the men of the 24th Infantry to the point of revolt. Following is the story of the arrest as given by its victim, Mrs. Travers, and by eyewitnesses whose names are in the possession of the Association, but are withheld for their protection.

Mrs. Travers, an evidently respectable, hardworking colored woman, said:

"I was in my house ironing. I got five children. I heard shooting and I'd run out in my yard to see what was happening. Sparks he came into my house and said, 'Did you see a nigger jumping over that yard?' and I said, 'No, sir.' He came in the house and looked all around. Went in back. Then Daniels, the other policeman, he came around the corner on his horse. I called to Mrs. Williams, my friend that lives across the street, and asked her what was the matter. She said, 'I don't know; I think they were shooting at crap-shooters.'"

"He (Sparks) came in again just then and said, 'You're a God damn liar; I shot down in the ground.' I looked at her and she looked at me and he said, 'You all God damn nigger bitches. Since these God damn sons of bitches of nigger soldiers come here you are trying to take the town.' He came into the bedroom then and into the kitchen and I ask him what he want. He replied to me, 'Don't you ask an officer what he want in your house.' He say, 'I'm from

he ran in, and then Sparks said to him, 'I slapped her and what shall we do about it?' Daniels says, 'Take and give her ninety days on the Pea Farm 'cause she's one of these biggety nigger women.' Then they both took me by the arm and commenced dragging me out. I asked them to let me put some clothes on and Sparks says, 'No, we'll take you just as you are. If you was naked we'd take you.' Then I take the baby in my arms and asked him to let me take it. He took it out of my arms and threw it down on the sidewalk. Took me with my arms behind my back and Daniels, he says, if I didn't come he'd break them. They took me out on Tempson Street. He rung up the Police Department. Whilst I was standing crowd began a-coming (all I had on was this old dress-skirt and a pair panties and a ol' raggedy waist. No shoes or nothing)—crowd and a colored soldier man came. [Private Edwards.] Sparks, he says to me, 'YOU STAND HERE,' and I did and a lady friend brought me shoes and a bonnet and apron and he (Sparks) says, 'Stay here,' and went over, and before the soldier could say a word he said, 'What you got to do with this,' and he raised his six-shooter and he beat him—beat him *good*. He didn't do a thing but just raise his hand to ward them off. Didn't even tell them to quit, nor nothing. Then another soldier, this Sergeant Somebody, came, and the first one called to him and the policeman said to him, 'If you come here, we'll give you the same.' Edwards said, 'Must I go with them?' and the second one says, 'Yes, go with them and we'll come along after you.' I hear they shot that second soldier but I didn't see it, for they took me away. They take me to the Police Department and locked me up for using 'abusive language'—but they dismissed the case today.

"I ain't never been before no court of inquiry, no ma'am. Only just to the court when they dismissed the case against me, and there ain't no generals nor no one been out to see me or ask anything. I don't know why they don't come to me. They been to most everyone else around here, and I could tell them the truth. Seems like they might ask me, when I'm the one it happened to,

Fort Ben and we don't allow niggers to talk back to us. We generally whip them down there.' Then he hauled off and slapped me. I hollered and the big one—this Daniels—

and I'm not afraid to tell, even if Sparks do come back afterwards and do some more to me, but you're the only one yet that's come to ask me."

When interviewed a second time, Mrs. Travers added the following to her statement:

"I been down to the Prosecutor's office to-day. He asked me what did I know about the riot. I said, 'I don't know nothing about it. I was in bed with my children when it happened. Where else would I be at that time of night?' He said to me didn't I know beforehand that the soldiers were coming; didn't none of them tell me beforehand. I told him no, but I could tell him what happened before the riot to make it happen, and I started to tell him that Sparks came into my house and hit me. He say he didn't want to hear anything more about that and he sent me home. That's what I had to spend my carfare for."

One eye-witness said:

"I didn't see them arrest Mrs. Travers. I don't know what happened in the house, but I saw her afterwards and I know she said they slapped her in the house and pinched her arms and threw her baby under the bed. They had her right outside here waiting for the patrol wagon. She hadn't on but two pieces of clothes—and she was hollering and asking what she'd done to be arrested. Then Private Edwards came up and asked if he could take her. I heard the policeman say, 'Stand back,' and landed him on the head with his six-shooter. Then Baltimore he came and asked him about the other soldier. They beat him, too, and he ran and they shot after him. I saw Sparks fire after him three times, myself. Daniels shot, too, but I don't know if it was more than once. Baltimore ran away around the corner, with them firing after him, and his head was bloody. I thought he'd drop any time, but he didn't get hit. They said afterward they fired at the ground—but they didn't. They shot right straight at him and (they fired) into a street full of women and children. They haven't found any bullet holes in the sidewalk either, and it wasn't there that they fired. It was at Baltimore, and no mistake."

A second eye-witness said:

"I drive a butcher wagon. I make deliveries all about here and I saw a lot of what happened about here before the riot. When Sparks and Daniels came along that day I was driving past where three boys were shooting craps at the corner of Felipe and Bailey Streets. They fired a shot to scare the boys and they ran. Then the officers

couldn't locate them. When I rode by again they had this woman, whose arrest was the cause of the riot, by the patrol box. She was insufficiently dressed to be out on the street and barefoot. There was a young soldier there (Private Edwards) who came up and asked the officers to let her put on shoes and clothes. The officers struck at him with their six-shooters. He put up his hand and blocked the first blow. The second hit him on the head and made him bloody. They followed that up and beat him to the ground. When he was down, one of them took the muzzle of his gun and punched him in the side, and Sparks said, 'That's the way we do things in the South. We're running things not the d—— niggers.'

"It was later—at the same spot—the policemen were still there when the military officer (Baltimore) came. I didn't hear what he said, but whatever was said between him and the police officers made him stop about half a block away and fold his arms, and at that one of the officers took out his revolver and commenced firing at him—right at him. He ran away around the corner of Mr. May's place. That's all I saw then."

When word of the outrage reached camp, feeling ran high. It was by no means the first incident of the kind that had occurred. A few days before a Negro had been beaten on a car by city detective Ed Stoermer, who, according to his own testimony before the Citizens Investigating Committee, cleared the car of its white passengers, telling them that he "might have to kill the nigger." I was reliably informed that on another occasion two colored soldiers were brutally beaten up by city detectives who boarded the car in which they sat from a Ford machine; that this machine drew up alongside of the car which was halted by the conductor long enough for the beating to take place, after which the detectives again got into the car and drove off.

Baltimore was popular among the men of the 24th Infantry, and for some time the rumor persisted that he had been killed. To quell the excitement Major Snow telephoned in to Police Headquarters to ascertain the facts and asked that Baltimore be returned to the camp immediately. At roll call that evening Snow addressed the men, telling them what had happened and stating that Sparks was to blame and would be punished. The men, however, were by that time beyond

his control. In this connection it has been pointed out several times that Sparks has been suspended and is under indictment for the assault on Baltimore and for murder for the shooting of another Negro. There is no reason to believe that this indictment is anything but a bluff, the purpose of which is to show that there was no excuse for the soldiers taking the law into their hands. Chief Brock, who throughout has given evidence of good faith, did his duty in suspending Sparks, but there is no reason to believe that Sparks will receive any punishment at the hands of a white jury, and if he is acquitted, he probably cannot be kept off the police force. "Of course, Sparks will be let off with a fine. Our policemen have to beat the niggers when they are insolent. You can't expect them to let a nigger curse them," one white man told me. The same man, in reply to my question whether Sparks did not have a reputation as a bully, replied, "Oh, no; at least only among the colored people." The feeling of the colored people in regard to Sparks and the police in general is best illustrated by the statement of another colored man whose name I was unable to learn:

"It's like this, lady—I could talk all right, but I'm afeard. I know a lot, but I live here, and my family lives here, and all I got—all my savings of a lifetime is here—and there's prejudice here—and you see how 'tis. I made up my mind—I took like an oath to myself I wouldn't say nothing. I just made up my mind that I didn't *know* nothing. Only that my friend here says you're all right, I wouldn't say this much—but I got confidence in him.

"There's been a lot of dirty work here. I'm not saying nothing, but you find out who it was killed that colored man who was drafted into the army on Washington Street, and who shot that colored man, Williams, in the back, they say was killed in a crap game on Dallas Avenue. They can't find out that no one did it—but we *know* Sparks was in the gang that did the shooting. And that soldier man—the police shot him running—I saw *him* and he was hit in the back of the neck. And, what's more, I've seen three more colored men beat up without any cause by the police since the riot. There's a lot more I *could* say, only I'm afeard."

It is the Negro mentioned in this statement, Williams, for whose murder Sparks has been indicted. While I was in Houston

the other Negro fugitive mentioned, who turned out to be an enlisted man under the selective draft law, was shot by a city detective simply for refusing to halt. The detective was "amicably" arrested by the Chief of Detectives and almost immediately released on a five hundred dollar bond. Sparks is also at liberty and although without the prestige given him by his position on the police force, was, at last report, using that liberty to further molest the colored people. About a week after the riot he entered the house of a respectable colored physician on Robbin Avenue early in the morning while the latter was in his bath and his wife partly dressed, on the pretext of looking for a fugitive, insulted and bullied them both when they protested, and threatened them with a drawn gun. On the same day he threatened a colored woman that he would "blow her damned head off" because he thought she had laughed at him. It was in pursuit of this woman that he entered several colored houses in this block, threatening and cursing the colored people.

When investigation made it apparent that the police were to blame for the beginning of the riot, a systematic attempt was made to shift the blame for this also on to the colored people. Strange stories began to be circulated in the papers and by word of mouth as to the real cause of the friction between the soldiers and the police. It was again the insolence of the Negro soldiers which in this case took the form of ignoring the "Jim Crow" regulations of Houston, particularly on the Houston Street cars. Testimony to this effect, which was obviously absurd, was given and reported apparently in all seriousness before the Citizen's Board of Inquiry. Several motormen and conductors were subpoenaed to testify to this effect, and one of them told a pathetic story of one occasion on which his car was boarded by a number of Negro soldiers (unarmed) who threw the "Jim Crow" screen out of the car window, over ran the car, forcing white passengers to get up and give them their seats, and who escaped unscathed to tell the tale. He was unable to give the names of any witnesses to this occurrence, although he stated that many of the white passengers left the car in great anger threatening that he would be reported and lose his job. The legend continued to the effect that white police officers were finally called in to deal with the Negro soldiers

who were terrorizing the peaceable white citizens and demoralizing colored civilians, and that the former by merely doing their duty won the undying enmity of the colored soldiers.

Another outrageously false impression which was deliberately given by the white press was that Mrs. Travers was a woman of the underworld and that her arrest was the result of drunken and disorderly conduct. Mrs. Travers is unmistakably a hard-working, respectable woman. She had no connection with either Edwards or Baltimore, whom she had never seen before the day of the riot. The story, however, was never denied, and was still being circulated while I was in Houston, although so many white people who had employed her testified to her good character that it was necessary to acquit her at her trial for "using abusive language." She was also never called before the Citizen's Board of Inquiry.

Police brutality and bad discipline among the soldiers led up to the riot, which cost the city of Houston eighteen lives. Among them was that of Daniels, the policeman who had taken part in the beating of Baltimore and Edwards. There is abundant testimony from both white and colored people that there was excessive drinking and immorality among the soldiers at the camp, and there is testimony by white people to the effect that Edwards was drunk when he was arrested. While this may have been the case, it does not seem to materially effect the situation, as Baltimore, who was sober, received even worse treatment at the hands of the police officers. It is also very probable that some of the leaders were inflamed with drink at the time of the outbreak. That outbreak, according to a statement made by Major Snow before he received orders not to talk, was not an out and out mutiny, although the men were undoubtedly guilty of repeated disobedience to orders before they left the camp. If they did, as is alleged, shoot at their officers, they did not kill or wound any of them, though they did wound a colored soldier who was guarding the ammunition supply and who later died of his wounds. When the soldiers left the camp their slogan was, "On to the Police Station," where their idea was to punish the police for their attack on Edwards and Baltimore. Even the white people of Houston do not believe that their

original intention was to shoot up the town. When on the way to the police station they met with opposition, they gave battle with terrible results. As in every riot, innocent bystanders were killed, one very pathetic case being that of a little white girl who was killed by a stray bullet which penetrated the room where she slept. The bitterness of the white people over this and other casualties is understandable, but the worst features of the Houston riot do not for one moment make it comparable with the massacre of East St. Louis. It was not a cold-blooded slaughter of innocents but the work of angry men whose endurance of wrong and injustice had been strained to the breaking point, and who in their turn committed injustices. There was no burning of women and children, no hanging, no torturing of innocent victims. The only atrocity reported being the bayoneting of Captain Mattes of the Illinois National Guard, spoken of by the Houston papers as the work of "black fiends," although bayoneting is not a practice discouraged by the United States Army.

All the men who are alleged to have taken part in the outbreak have been captured and are facing a court martial at El Paso. The one fact which admits of no uncertainty is that if they are found guilty they will be fully and sufficiently punished.

After the riot the white citizens of Houston behaved with unusual coolness and restraint and they have taken unto themselves full credit for so doing. The presence of United States troops undoubtedly assisted materially in keeping order. A half hour after the riot started Governor Ferguson had declared martial law which lasted for several days and order was restored without any lynching or other form of reprisal on the part of the white people. It was not to be expected that martial law or any other kind of law could be enforced impartially under the circumstances, and it was not so enforced. White citizens were given arms "to protect their homes" and the homes of Negro civilians were visited and their arms taken away from them. Many Negroes were also unjustly arrested, locked up for several days, and then dismissed without any charge having been made against them. That further disorder did not occur under such circumstances is one of the most remarkable things about the situation, and

credit for it should be given to both races. The *Houston Post* and the white people generally explained it as another illustration of the well-known fact that "the South is the Negro's best friend"; that race riot and bloodshed are really indigenous to northern soil; and that the relations between black and white in the South are highly cordial. The colored people of Houston, however, are migrating North, and to this more than to any element in the case I attribute the new restraint in the attitude of white Houstonians. While I was in Houston, 130 colored people left in one day. In June, one labor agent exported more than nine hundred Negroes to points along the Pennsylvania Railroad. The Houston Chamber of Commerce became so alarmed over the Negro exodus that it telegraphed to the head of the railroad asking that this exportation be discontinued. The railroad complied with this request, but the colored people continued to leave. Colored men and women in every walk of life are still selling their homes and household goods at a loss and

leaving because, as one of them, a physician, put it to me, "Having a home is all right, but not when you never know when you leave it in the morning if you will really be able to get back to it that night." White Houston, especially its business men, are beginning to realize this. For the first time they are showing some slight signs of seeking to make the South safe for the Negro. While the northern exodus of the Negroes, which began with the war, is largely responsible for this, occurrences such as the Houston riot must be admitted to quicken the sense of justice which has so long lain dormant in the white southern breast. However much the riot is to be condemned from the standpoint of justice, humanity, and military discipline, however badly it may be held to have stained the long and honorable record of Negro soldiers, however necessary it may be that the soldiers should be severely punished, it seems to me an undeniable fact that one of its results will be a new respect and consideration for the Negro in the South.