



North Platte Racial Incident: Black-White Confrontation, 1929

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Article Summary: A Black man, Louis Seeman, shot and killed a popular North Platte police officer, Edward Green. Seeman died, perhaps shot by a police officer or a posse member. A group of local men went to all the Black households in town, telling people to get out of town by 3 p.m. Black residents fled. None of the White men were convicted of a crime. The author argues that sensationalized media reports mischaracterized the incident as a riot.

Read a 2020 discussion of this article at the History Nebraska blog: <https://history.nebraska.gov/blog/no-mob-no-riot-what-really-happened-when-north-platte-forced-black-residents-flee>

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Photographs / Images: Governor Arthur J Weaver; Attorney General C A Sorensen; John Adams Jr, attorney, and John A Singleton, dentist, both from Omaha, who called on Governor Weaver on behalf of black residents of North Platte; roundup parade, North Platte, 1932

NORTH PLATTE RACIAL INCIDENT: BLACK-WHITE CONFRONTATION, 1929

By David G. Dales

On Saturday morning July 13, 1929, in North Platte,¹ a white police officer was shot and killed by a Negro he was trying to arrest. The slain officer was Edward Green, a well-known former acting chief of police, and one-time professional baseball player.² The black man was Louis (Slim) Seeman, operator of the Humming Bird Inn, a chicken-dinner lunchroom located in his home on West 7th Street.³ Shortly afterward Seeman, too, was dead, either by his own hand or as result of police gunfire. Following the shooting deaths, a small group of whites threatened the city's black citizens, most of whom had fled by late afternoon.

This incident, commonly known as the North Platte Race Riot, can be better understood through application of historian Richard Hofstadter's definitions of violence and force: "Acts of *violence* . . . are those which kill or injure persons or do significant damage to property. Acts of *force* are those which prevent the normal free action or movement of other persons, or which inhibit them through the threat of violence."⁴ The shooting deaths of both Green and Seeman (whether Seeman's was self-inflicted or not) are beyond question examples of violence—individual violence, involving no more than one or two people in a direct way.

But, can the intimidation of Negroes by the North Platte mob (a crowd in action) be characterized properly as a riot?⁵ It is indeed doubtful that it can be. A riot is an "offense against the public order involving three or more people and the use of violence, however slight."⁶ Strong evidence confirms the mob's use of force, but no concrete evidence exists that violence was committed against any of North Platte's black residents. This interpretation is by no means intended to lessen the gravity of what did occur, but it is a clarification of what has become a distorted view of the incident, a view that originated at least par-

tially in sensationalized newspaper stories published in Nebraska and circulated by the wire services throughout the nation.

On Friday, July 12, Slim Seeman had agreed to leave town in lieu of paying a \$100 fine for beating Ada Miller, a black woman who resided with him at his chicken hut.⁷ Late Friday night or early Saturday morning, Officer Vern Hedrick had put him on a west-bound train. Apparently, Seeman had jumped off the train when it was at a near standstill during an air-brake test made on the edge of the city.⁸

Early on Saturday morning, July 13, after discovering that Slim Seeman was still in the city, Ada Miller fled the chicken hut and notified the police. Officers Edward Green and George S. Fitzgibbons went to the Humming Bird Inn to apprehend him. After entering the house, Green ascended the stairs to search the upper story; Fitzgibbons searched the downstairs. Finding no sign of Slim Seeman in the rooms of the lower floor, Fitzgibbons was about to go upstairs to assist Green with the search when he heard the report of a shotgun. He looked up and saw Green fall to the floor at the head of the stairs.¹⁰

Unarmed at the time, Fitzgibbons went outside to summon neighbors to post a guard and to go for additional help. Within a short time armed citizens, police officers, firemen, and members of North Platte's Nebraska National Guard unit gathered outside the Humming Bird Inn. They approached the building cautiously, not anxious to enter if it meant confronting the gunman. After failing at efforts to convince Seeman to come outside to surrender, a group of men carefully entered the house.¹¹

At first they believed Seeman was hiding in the attic. They ascended the stairs cautiously and carefully removed Green's body. Not having tear gas, the men attempted to smoke Seeman out of the attic by igniting rags saturated with formaldehyde and throwing them through the opening in the ceiling. After this failed a search of the attic was undertaken. Albert A. Hastings, about whom more will be said, later took credit for being the first member of the posse to look up into the attic.¹²

After this search a police officer named Jones accidentally discovered a trap door covering a space under the ground floor of the house.¹³ Slim Seeman was located there, but he refused to come out. Attempting to scare him into giving up, the men

poured gasoline over his position and ignited it. According to the *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, it was then that a shot was heard, and Slim Seeman was dragged, wounded and dying from the cellar. The news article, implying that Seeman had taken his own life, says, "Seelman [sic] was found shot through the heart, still gasping. The sawed off shot-gun was lying at the tip of his fingers."¹⁴

Divergent opinions exist concerning Seeman's death. Wilfred Hopkins and Dolly Ross, two long-time black residents of North Platte, indicate that it was rumored among members of the black community that the death was not a suicide and that one of the officers present at the scene shot him.¹⁵ Charles C. Galloway, editor of the *Omaha Guide*, a black newspaper, said at the time of the incident that he doubted that Seeman had shot himself.¹⁶ Generally not much credence can be placed on rumor as evidence in situations such as this where there is so much ambiguity.¹⁷

In a later investigation it would appear representatives of the Nebraska attorney general were not overly concerned with the nature of Seeman's death. While they had heard rumors that it was not a suicide, they accepted the testimony of William R. Maloney and Vernon E. Kuhns, the two morticians in charge of the bodies following the shootings. Maloney and Kuhns said that Green had been murdered and that Seeman had shot himself. In addition, local officials told the investigators that Seeman had stolen the shotgun and six shells and that four of the shells had been found on his body.¹⁸ There was no effort on the part of the state to exhume Seeman's body in order to confirm the reports of the local officials.

The rumor of Seeman's shooting could be easily ignored if information gained through interviews did not indicate that there is substantial reason to question Seeman's having taken his own life. Lowell V. (Jack) Hedrick says that his father, Vern, was among the men who entered the Humming Bird Inn on that Saturday morning. Years ago Jack asked what had happened inside the house. He says his father told him that one of the men opened the trap door and that Seeman was lying flat on his back with the sawed-off shotgun pointing out the opening. According to the elder Hedrick, one of the posse immediately shot Seeman. Jack says that his father never identified who it was who did the shooting.¹⁹

Additional evidence comes from Joseph A. McNeel, whose curiosity led him and some of his young friends to the W.R. Maloney funeral parlor. McNeel says he saw both Green and Seeman's bodies on the slab. According to McNeel the hit on Green had blown away one side of the face and part of the jaw. Seeman's wound, he says, was small by comparison and was located "directly over where you assume the heart is." McNeel expresses strong doubt that the same weapon (the sawed-off shotgun) killed both men.²⁰ Given the above evidence from Hedrick and McNeel, it seems reasonable to doubt that Seeman's death was suicide.

Also subject to conjecture is what happened outside the house during the time that the posse was inside, what happened after they came out, and what happened in the afternoon following the dispersal of the crowd at the Humming Bird Inn. Some differences exist in what was reported by the press, discovered by state investigators, and observed by eyewitnesses at the scene.

The first point of disagreement is on the size of the crowd outside the house. Omaha and Lincoln papers reported that the crowd numbered in the thousands. Eyewitnesses (Pat Hedrick, Joseph McNeel, and Warren Groves) say that the crowd may have included several hundred persons, but that there was nowhere near a thousand people.²¹

A second point of conjecture is the crowd's attitude. The *Telegraph* reported that there was talk among the crowd members of possible violence being done to the remaining black population of the city.²² The previously mentioned witnesses have no recollection of this. They say that the crowd was puzzled, watchful, and solemn—not particularly angry.²³

Contrary to folk versions of the incident, Seeman's body was not dragged behind a car through the streets until it fell apart.²⁴ According to Pat Hedrick, Slim Seeman was carried outside and leaned up against a utility pole; still gasping at the time, he was dead in a matter of minutes.²⁵ His body was taken without incident to the Maloney funeral parlor. The crowd dispersed a short time later. The official state report said that former Governor Keith Neville expressed this view, and police and officers of the National Guard "saw no evidence of a riot or undue disturbance to that time or until after the bodies were removed. In fact they saw no disturbance."²⁶

Some disturbance did occur later, however. The *Telegraph*

reported that "many of the negroes were warned that their presence would not be tolerated after 3 o'clock."²⁷ According to the state report a small group of men and boys went to the homes of black residents, giving the order to leave town immediately. The report says:

With but a few exceptions all left town. Lou Mitchell says she hid in a corn field back of her sister's place Saturday night. Her mother, living at another place very aged, was undisturbed. William Harris remained out of sight Saturday night and Sunday. Generally speaking there was an exodus. Some left after asking advice of officers but stated they merely asked advice and no threat accompanied it. Others heard about the trouble and left without waiting for more.²⁸

In 1973 John McNeil interviewed Ada Ryan for an article for the *Telegraph*. According to this article Ada said Ben Perkins, the owner of the house where the shootings occurred, came to her and told her the trouble was brewing and that the sheriff thought that the blacks should get out of town before it was too late. She said she and her husband Sam were not threatened by anyone directly, but they were both extremely frightened. With their two children and only the clothing they wore on their backs, they left for Grand Island, leaving home and possessions behind. In Grand Island Sam found employment in a theater, where later he found out that it was safe to return to North Platte. It was flashed on the movie screen that "the colored people could go back to North Platte." They returned to that city shortly thereafter.²⁹

A similar story is told by Wilfred Hopkins. He had arrived in North Platte only a few weeks before the incident and was employed at the Buick garage. He says that Ada Miller came to him on the morning of the shootings and told him that there was trouble on West 7th Street. Around noon a black man came and told him that he thought it would be a good idea to get out of town. Hopkins says that he and two other black men received a ride from a white man to Grand Island. There they boarded a train bound for Lincoln.

In Lincoln, Hopkins was interviewed by the attorney general concerning events in North Platte, but he does not recall much about it. A few weeks later, he says, he was contacted in Lincoln by his employer in North Platte, and it was arranged for him to drive a new car back to North Platte, where he resumed his work. Hopkins says he left North Platte, not so much because he was afraid of what would happen to him, but because he did

not want to become involved in a situation with which he had nothing to do. In his case, as in many others, it appears that rumor contributed to his leaving.³⁰

News of the shootings and the eviction order reached the Lincoln and Omaha newspapers Saturday night. The *Sunday Lincoln Star* headlines read, "Negroes Leave North Platte—Feeling Runs High Following Killing of Policeman—Thousands Witness Battle During Which Two Die."³¹ The *Sunday World-Herald* was bannered, "Negroes Flee Mob Wrath."³² On the *World-Herald* front page an Associated Press story reported that between 150 and 200 blacks had left town following the wielding of clubs and shouts of "Lynch them all!" and "Get them out of town quick!" The story further describes the situation:

All of the colony were given time to get personal belongings they had. A few owned their houses, but that meant nothing to the mob. The Negroes, gathering up what belongings they could carry, "hit the road," others walked the railroad tracks, while the more fortunate left in their autos, and some bought railroad tickets. Soon there was a general movement of all Negroes outward bound, and the North Platte populace looked on with watchfulness, lest some of the Negroes go a short distance and then turn back, seeking to return to their homes.

Police were assigned to watch the depopulated Negro colony through the night, and members of the mob returned to watch the roads and railroads for any who might return.³³

An Associated Press article in the *State Journal* was even more graphic: "The first act of near violence was reported when some men captured a negro Saturday night, "took him for a ride" to the city limits and ran him out of town firing revolvers at his heels."³⁴

That these accounts from Omaha and Lincoln papers are exaggerated is certain. First, reports that North Platte's population included 150 to 200 blacks are inaccurate. The 1920 US Census reports that there were 71 black residents in Lincoln County (53 males and 18 females).³⁵ The 1930 US Census shows 35 black residents in North Platte (19 males and 16 females).³⁶ The state investigation revealed that "Only about thirty colored people lived in North Platte although there were some transients in town."³⁷ At the time of the incident, Leroy Lewis, a black mechanic, had said that the number of blacks living in North Platte had been greatly exaggerated by Nebraska's urban newspapers. Lewis said that he knew of no more than about 20 black residents.³⁸ Dolly Ross says that there were no more than

60 black residents at the time, probably fewer.³⁹ Wilfred Hopkins estimated there were from 40 to 60.⁴⁰

Second, incidents of violence as described in the Omaha and Lincoln newspapers could not be confirmed. Neither the blacks nor the whites interviewed for this study could recall hearing the story of one Negro having been driven out of town with gunshots at his feet.⁴¹ Nor did the state investigation substantiate reports of violence.⁴²

Last, neither Wilfred Hopkins nor Dolly Ross could remember any black infants in North Platte at the time of the incident.⁴³ This contradicts charges (reported later by the urban dailies) made by black leaders in Omaha that "among those driven from North Platte, were five mothers with infants less than a month old."⁴⁴

Wilson Tout, editor of the *Lincoln County Tribune*, later blamed the distortion on an unnamed Omaha reporter. In an editorial, he says: "The lurid imagination of the Omaha reporter who sent out the first dispatches from North Platte are responsible for the falsehoods."⁴⁵ The *Nebraska State Journal* presented another view. It says in part:

If the people were misinformed concerning the extent of this affair in a Nebraska town, who was to blame? The stories concerning the mob and its actions, concerning the attitude of peace officers there, came from North Platte. They had their origin in that city, and they were broadcast to the world.

It would seem that North Platte has more cleaning up to do than merely controlling its lawless citizens. It should see that situations that arise in the future are not exaggerated, as they seem to have been in this most recent instance.⁴⁶

James W. Kirkman, former publisher of the *Telegraph*, an employee at the time of the incident, offers possible explanations for the exaggerated accounts. He says that the stories in the *Telegraph* probably were written by Louis B. Kelly, editor at the time. Kirkman says that these stories most likely were read over the telephone by Kelly to reporters in Omaha and Lincoln. It is possible, he says, that these reporters embroidered upon the original stories. It is also possible, according to Kirkman, that Kelly spiced up the stories himself in order to bring attention to the events and to set up a state-wide battle among the papers.⁴⁷

It has not been possible to determine who actually was responsible for sensationalizing the accounts. Perhaps the distortion was not intentional. Even with the best intentions it is difficult for a reporter or copywriter to escape some distortion.



Nebraska governor Arthur J. Weaver. . . (Right) Attorney General C. A. Sorensen.

He is usually not on the scene when the news occurs and has to rely on eyewitnesses and other sources that are sometimes two or three times removed from the event about which he is writing. Distortion also occurs because of a reporter's personal bias. In any case the farther he is from the event, the more likely a news story is to be distorted.⁴⁸ With this in mind it is most likely that Kelly's original accounts were distorted by writers in Omaha and Lincoln. This distortion was to have dramatic consequences.

'It was to these inaccurate accounts that state officials first reacted. On Saturday evening State Sheriff W. C. Condit told reporters that he would not act in the matter unless so ordered by Governor Arthur J. Weaver or unless called upon for help by North Platte or Lincoln County officials. Condit said, "Running the Negroes out of town probably is an injustice to many of them who are innocent of wrong doing, but no doubt they are better off if they do leave town at least for the time being."⁴⁹

Governor Weaver was not able to act in the matter until Monday morning, July 15. He had been in Falls City for the weekend, surveying damage to his farms and orchards following a recent storm, and he did not hear of the trouble in North

Platte until reached by reporters on Sunday. That evening he returned to Lincoln and made a vain attempt to telephone North Platte's mayor, F. L. Temple.⁵⁰

Governor Weaver and Attorney General Christian A. Sorensen met Monday morning and decided that something had to be done in the matter to encourage local officials in North Platte to prevent further intimidation of the city's black residents. Local officials would be ordered to protect returning blacks and to see to it that installment-purchased furniture be returned to their homes (some had been repossessed after the eviction). There would be a thorough investigation by the state sheriff and the attorney general. Said Weaver in a statement released to the press, "I shall call upon the officers of North Platte and Lincoln county to arrest and cause to be prosecuted all those who have been responsible for the outrage of driving innocent and law abiding citizens from their homes."⁵¹

Shortly after that morning's meeting between Weaver and Sorensen, a delegation of black leaders from Omaha and Lincoln called on the governor. The group included the Reverend Henry W. Botts, the Reverend J. C. Wiggins, the Reverend C. G. Giaspie, W. R. Colley, Luther Allen, the Reverend Trago McWilliams, and Dr. A. B. Moss, all of Lincoln. The Omahans in attendance were the Reverend John Adams, John Adams, Jr., Dr. J. A. Singleton, E. W. Killingsworth, and H. J. Pinkett. They told Weaver that they hoped he would make a complete investigation of the situation in North Platte. When he told them that he had ordered the attorney general to do so, they were pleased. Also that day telegrams from Omaha came to the governor from two additional black leaders, Dr. Herbert Wiggins and Paul S. Holliday.⁵²

Attorney General Sorensen's statement, issued later in the day, blamed local officials for the whole affair: "The Negroes weren't to blame. Responsibility rests with those local officials who permitted dives to operate. If there had been no dives there would have been no shooting."⁵³ In March of 1929, prior to the city elections, Sorensen had ordered Mayor F. L. Temple to clean things up or resign. An undercover agent's investigation had revealed nine houses of prostitution, 25 bootlegging joints, and one gambling house "running wide open."⁵⁴

Temple had argued that the charges were false and an attempt to discredit him as a candidate for reelection. Raids carried out

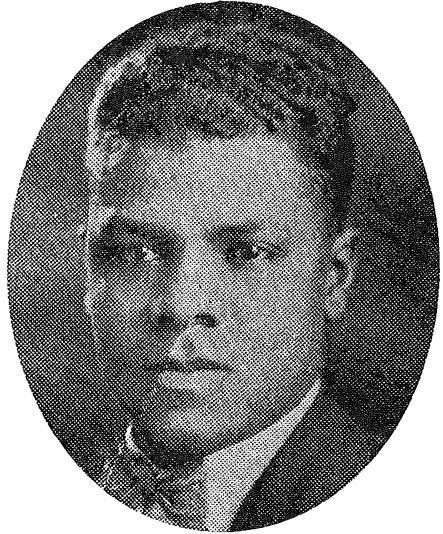
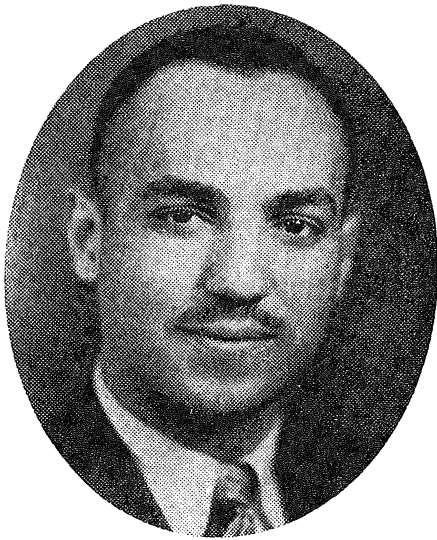
by state and local officials on the Saturday before the election, however, brought 13 arrests for a variety of offenses. Despite the bad publicity Temple defeated M. J. Forbes, a local undertaker, 1,861 votes to 843 votes. Forbes, newspaper reports said, suffered from past association with the Ku Klux Klan.⁵⁵ This association and his "dry" stand on prohibition were not popular with either city officials or the voters of North Platte. Thus, North Platte's reputation as "Little Chicago" was preserved.⁵⁶

Stories of the July 13 shootings, the eviction order, and the action of state officials were carried in all of the state's daily papers. Stories from Omaha and Lincoln papers were disseminated by the wire services to major newspapers throughout the country, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.⁵⁷ Local officials in North Platte acted to defend the reputation of their city against the editorial attacks of state and national papers.

The earliest statements from North Platte officials, however, were not helpful in this regard. Commenting on the black exodus, North Platte Police Chief James Dorram said, "If they return to live we will do our best to prevent violence, but it may not be possible."⁵⁸ Lincoln County Sheriff Arthur J. Salisbury said, "When they left it was with the understanding they were going to stay away. The idea is to keep them out."⁵⁹ On the day of the shootings, Ira Bare, in his *Telegraph* column, "A News Reel of City and County," came very close to Salisbury's philosophy:

Referring in general to the colored people who have been making North Platte their place of habitation, they have caused the police a lot of trouble. In times past a number of the more troublesome ones have been forced to leave town, and only yesterday further departures had been ordered. It is needless to say that in the future a much closer surveillance will be kept on these people and only by decent living will they be permitted to remain in town.⁶⁰

Salisbury, however, after having been contacted by Governor Weaver, appears to have changed his views. An article in the July 15 *Lincoln Star* quotes him as saying, "It is our duty to protect citizens of all races. We had nothing to do with the eviction order and we will protect all who have the courage to come back." The sheriff added that he had not yet initiated an effort to identify the leaders of the mob. His reaction to the forthcoming investigation by the Nebraska attorney general and the Nebraska state sheriff follows:



Black leaders calling on Nebraska governor Arthur Weaver on behalf of North Platte Negroes included attorney John Adams Jr. of Omaha (left) and dentist John A. Singleton of Omaha.

The state sheriff's office was well acquainted with the negro situation here. They were in the city on several occasions and aided in the raiding and searching of many of the negro dives. I am ready at any time to have state officers come into this territory and tell me that was wrong.⁶¹

Arguing that the accounts in the Omaha and Lincoln papers were sensationalized, Ed Kelso, secretary of the North Platte Chamber of Commerce, said that there had been no show of violence Saturday by the group that gathered outside the Humming Bird Inn. He reported that the crowd was well-behaved and at no time did the situation get out of hand. Kelso said, "While a group of men were said to have ordered all negroes out of the city, their action was unauthorized. It never has been the intention of officials of the people to keep any law abiding citizens out of the city."⁶²

On Tuesday, July 16, State Sheriff W. C. Condit, a deputy named Gates, a representative of the attorney general, Lloyd Dort, and an official stenographer, Dale P. Stough, left by automobile for North Platte. On their way they planned to stop in Grand Island and Hastings to interview any blacks who fled from North Platte.⁶³ By this time, however, many of the blacks had returned to North Platte.⁶⁴

In all but a few cases the state's newspapers supported the ef-

forts of Governor Weaver and Attorney General Sorensen. A July 16 editorial in the *World-Herald* is typical:

The minimum requirement for restoration of law, order and justice to the city of North Platte is return of the evicted Negroes under ample official protection, and investigation to determine the instigators and leaders of the mob and a vigorous prosecution of them.

This is the demand which Governor Weaver in effect makes and he has sent the state sheriff and a deputy attorney general to North Platte to see that it is carried into effect. The first part of this requirement should be fairly easy of fulfillment. Knowing that the power of the state will be marshalled, if need be, to protect the lives and the rights of the refugees the mob is little likely to reform in an attempt to prevent their return. If it does the means are at hand to deal with it and, under the leadership of the governor, they will doubtless be employed to maintain the majesty of law in that locality.

Attorney General Sorensen is right when he says that, "Nebraska must act promptly to rectify that outrage." The fact that the Negroes promptly submitted to the brute strength of the mob and that therefore nobody was hurt in the exodus makes the affair no less an outrage and one that demands speedy rectification. The good name of North Platte and the good name of Nebraska as a community and a state in which law and order prevail and whose citizens can depend upon their constitutional guarantees require prompt and vigorous action in this matter.⁶⁵

The *Omaha Bee* of the same morning said, "Mob rule has never achieved lasting good anywhere and least of all in Nebraska. Nor is the cause of justice and humanity benefited in any way by disorders among citizens."⁶⁶ Attempting to quash some of the criticism, Ira Bare struck out at state officials and defended the good name of North Platte in that night's *Telegraph*:

For the second time this year North Platte is receiving an unjust amount of sensational publicity. Much more than would have resulted had Governor Weaver and Attorney General Sorensen used that good judgment with which they have been credited, but which in this instance is lamentably lacking.

Personally, we do not uphold the action of a handful of men in notifying the colored people of North Platte to leave, even though fifty per cent of them with all charity can be classed as undesirables, but we do object to the fog-horn methods of the governor and the attorney-general when better results could have been obtained by actions minus grandstand utterances.

The governor says 200 colored people should not be made to suffer because one of their race killed an officer; but by the same line of reasoning should 14,000 good citizens of North Platte suffer humiliation by a nation-wide broadcasting of views of an incident in which those 14,000 people had no part?⁶⁷

Despite Kelso's and Bare's statements, criticism of North Platte continued. A July 17 editorial in the *Norfolk Daily News* entitled "Tribal Instincts" condemned the action taken by some North Platte citizens, saying, "The disgraceful affair at North Platte shows how thinly the veneer of our boasted Christian civilization is laid over our primordial instincts."⁶⁸ The gover-

nor and attorney general continued to receive support from most newspapers throughout the state, even from smaller weekly newspapers like the *Upland Eagle* of July 18.⁶⁹

Two central Nebraska newspapers, however, were a little less supportive. In an editorial the *Grand Island Daily Independent* argued that perhaps North Platte's officials were criticized too soon. It stated, "At all events sweepingly to condemn North Platte without hearing the other side and without weighing the other side, and without weighing all of the facts, might be a little premature."⁷⁰ An editorial in the *Kearney Hub* argued that Attorney General Sorensen's motives for the investigation were political. In part it said:

Attorney General Sorensen declares that he will prosecute "anyone and everyone" concerned in the expulsion of the negro population of North Platte. The first obstacle of course is to get testimony from white citizens. It will be the word of a few colored people against the entire white population. The colored population of Omaha will however be properly impressed and can safely be counted on as a political asset the next time Sorensen goes to the polls.⁷¹

On Wednesday and Thursday, July 17 and 18, there was little news concerning the state investigation or further reactions of people from throughout the state or North Platte. By Friday, July 19, however, comments were coming from all over. The *World-Herald* "Public Pulse" for that day provides a sampling of popular opinion.

J. Harvey Kerns, executive secretary of the Omaha Urban League, a predominantly Negro service organization, was critical of the newspaper coverage given the North Platte story. He wrote, "A criminal is a criminal regardless of race and is a menace to society."⁷² He resented the fact that race had been injected into the issue. A Lincolnite with another view wrote: "Not one of those colored folks was harmed in any way. They just got a little scare that will make them better citizens and teach them law and order. The Klan boys in Lincoln county (North Platte) will clean up that community and clean it up right if they are let alone."⁷³

A North Platte resident added:

This talk about Mob Violence is all Bunk, pure and simple, and, I think & feel that there is not a bit of ground for criticism, and, that while the White Population of North Platte who patronized these Negro Dives are responsible for their being here, yet, if the Negro Question was properly understood, that it would be the general Verdict that the Negro would be far better off Down South.⁷⁴

In a slightly more dignified manner, North Platte's officials continued their defensive measures. Being particularly angry with the reports published in the *Omaha World-Herald*, on Friday, July 19, the following wire was sent:

World Herald, Omaha, Nebraska

Investigation of alleged riot in North Platte in progress, kindly furnish undersigned names of witnesses and evidence upon which recent articles appearing in your paper, based.

C.S. Beck, Co. Attorney
A.J. Salisbury, Sheriff⁷⁵

A day having passed without the county attorney and the sheriff receiving a reply to their wire, Ira Bare could not resist a comment: "It has now been well established that the lurid, sensational accounts published by the World-Herald relating to the so-called 'race-riot' in North Platte were 'manufactured' in the World-Herald offices . . . it had no evidence that justified its published statements."⁷⁶

On Sunday, July 21, Omaha's black leaders held a mass meeting to discuss the North Platte situation. H. J. Pinkett described the events at North Platte as the "most serious attack that had been made on the colored people of the North." He said further that "America in this instance wandered from her ideals and deserted her standards."⁷⁷ On Monday, July 22, Charles G. Galloway, who had attended the meeting, published an editorial praising Attorney General Sorensen. He said Sorensen was "a man, capable, honest, sincere in his efforts to keep the promises made to the voters of Nebraska."⁷⁸

The papers of July 23 and 24 carried reports of the state investigation. Condit and Dort found no evidence of physical violence, but determined that a group of men and boys, many under 20 years old, had gone from residence to residence telling blacks, "Nigger be gone by 3 o'clock and we don't mean maybe."⁷⁹

Seventy-three persons, both black and white, were questioned during their inquiry, and three others gave their statements to Attorney General Sorensen in Lincoln. In the statement released by Dort, he said that over 500 pages of testimony had been taken, but that Stough was going to transcribe only the testimony that would be needed in the prosecutions. Also, Stough would abstract information concerning opinions on the "Negro question" and additional law violations in North Platte.⁸⁰

According to Dort's statement, many persons made reference to the liquor problem in North Platte. They mentioned in particular the violation of prohibition laws in connection with the running of the various "chicken huts."

The report read: "Certain North Platte citizens, white and some colored, stated that the patronage of white persons made it possible for the negro places to operate. Some blamed the white people for conditions existing and some stated that the negroes were law breakers."⁸¹

Dort stated that he believed he had sufficient evidence to prosecute four unnamed persons who had participated in the issuance of the eviction demand, but that he had not yet determined which criminal statutes would apply. He urged that the effort to gather evidence be continued. He asked those having pertinent information to come forward immediately.⁸²

Several weeks went by without much mention of the North Platte affair in the state's newspapers. It was not until August 6 that charges were completed. Complaints were filed on Tuesday by Special Prosecutor Lloyd Dort against Albert A. Hastings, a realtor; James E. Miller, an insurance salesman; John H. Campbell, a teamster; and Edward Supanchick, described as a "young man about town." All four were charged with unlawful assembly and disturbing the peace, an offense carrying a maximum penalty of 30 days in jail and a \$100 fine. Bond was set at \$100.⁸³

Upon being charged with the above offense, Albert A. Hastings told the *Telegraph* that he could not believe that a jury in his own community would convict him.⁸⁴ Hastings was a power (he liked to think) in the local Democratic Party. He was a personal friend of former Governor Keith Neville and of Ray Langford, a local bank president.⁸⁵

On Thursday, August 8, a jury of six men was selected to consider the case against Edward Supanchick. The jury included Charles Leth, H. J. Rathman, A. F. Beeler, Fred L. Burke, Louis F. Schulz and Austin S. Gregg, Jr. After Dort consulted with several of the witnesses for the prosecution, he moved to have the charges dropped. Apparently Supanchick had been mistakenly identified as the person accompanying the other defendants to the black residences. Supanchick was said to have been hauling sand at the time the threats were being carried out.⁸⁶

The cases against Hastings, Miller, and Campbell were heard

on Monday, August 12, after several attempts on the part of the defense to delay the trial. Fifteen witnesses testified that they observed or were approached by a group of men and boys numbering from 25 to 40 following the violence of the morning of July 13. Negro witnesses said they were ordered to get out of town by 3 o'clock, but none testified to acts of violence or threats of physical abuse. Nevertheless, they said, they fled in terror.⁸⁷

Several of the witnesses testified that John Campbell and Albert Hastings followed the group from house to house in Hastings' car, but no one testified to James E. Miller's presence during any of the events. Miller took the stand on his own behalf and testified to his acts from the events of the morning through his attendance of an afternoon performance of the John Robinson Circus. Counsel for the defense requested that charges be dropped, but Prosecutor Dort said he would leave that to the jury.

Al Hastings took the stand and explained how he had aided the police in the attempt to capture Slim Seeman. Charles Smith, acting chief of police, testified he had asked Hastings to keep an eye on the crowd after the bodies had been removed from the house that morning and to report acts of violence.

Campbell explained he also had assisted the police in their effort. He told the court that after the bodies had been taken away he had left the scene to take his gun home, and later he had joined Hastings, who was in the process of following the crowd.

After all the witnesses appeared, the case was argued by the attorneys. Lincoln County Attorney C. S. Beck, opening for the prosecution, explained the law in an instance of unlawful assembly. He made no comments on the merits of the case against Hastings, Campbell, or Miller.

Beck was followed by attorney George N. Gibbs, who spoke on behalf of the defendants. Gibbs charged that the only reason the state had for prosecuting the North Platte men was C. A. Sorensen's personal dislike for the city. Attorney Robert H. Beatty followed Gibbs, also speaking for the defendants. He argued that the charges against Hastings, Campbell, and Miller were as unfounded as the news stories from Sorensen's office saying that a mob had chased mothers with newborn babies out of town in the rain, and that armed citizens ran the blacks out of

town. He said all charges were as unjustified as those made against Edward Supanichick.

In his closing statement to the jury, attorney Lloyd Dort argued the case from a legal stance. He said that the state was not labeling these men as hardened criminals, but he felt the misdemeanor charges of unlawful assembly should be sustained.

It took a five-man jury (Carl Rippen, Harold Cox, Clyde McMichael, Al Kunkle, and H. J. Rathman) only 10 minutes to decide the case. B. O. Callender had been selected as the sixth man for the jury, but for some unknown reason he did not appear for the trial. Both parties, however, had decided before argument had begun to put the case before five jurors. The jury declared that Albert A. Hastings, John H. Campbell, and James E. Miller were not guilty of the charge of unlawful assembly. The state made no further effort to prosecute the case.⁸⁸

The next afternoon the very vocal Ira Bare published the following editorial:

The dismissal of Supanichick [sic] and Miller and the acquittal of Hastings and Campbell is probably the last echo of the episode of July 13th so far as undesirable publicity is concerned. While exaggerated newspaper reports blackened the good name of this city and brought humiliation to its good citizens, the community will quickly outlive the slurs cast upon it and will continue to be sought as homes by those desiring to live in the environments of progressiveness, splendid churches, good schools, home ownership and an unusually high percentage of law-abiding citizens.⁸⁹

But were Hastings and Campbell really innocent? Hastings published a long statement explaining his actions on July 13 in the August 15 *Telegraph*. He seems to have had a need to justify further what he had done. In his statement, he said of Ed Green, "Edward Green was a good friend and a square, honest, upright peace officer, one that I had learned to admire through his years of faithful service as a policeman for North Platte."⁹⁰ Hastings described his activities after he was given an order by Officer Charles Smith to observe the crowd:

Catching up with the crowd as it left Lulu Mitchell's place and following it from there to Nobel Simmon's chicken hut, and thence to Simmon's other residence, where his wife lives, and as the testimony of the state as well as the defense showed, I had not said a single word to one negro, or agitated in any way to run them out.⁹¹

Hastings said that John Campbell and William Ritner rode in the car with him. He wrote of his pre-trial conference that no

jury of North Platte residents would convict him. Most of the remainder of the statement is an attack on Attorney General Sorensen. He concluded:

Permit me to say, that I do not regret a single act on my part on the day of the murder of one of our policemen, neither do I feel called upon to apologize for a single thing that I said to any of our colored colony. I wonder if Mr. Sorensen can say, down in his own heart, that he likewise has no regrets and does not feel that an apology is due.⁹²

Jack and Pat Hedrick state that—on the basis of hearsay only—they believe Hastings was the man primarily responsible for the blacks being ordered out of town. They say they heard long ago that Hastings had taken a group of young men through the black community and that the young men had issued the command to leave.⁹³

Hastings certainly had a motive to have been involved in a case of spontaneous vigilantism, “an act of retribution and an attempt to ensure that the incident does not reoccur.”⁹⁴ He viewed the Green murder as a threat to his conception of a safe life in North Platte, and he viewed himself as a community leader. It was clear to him who was to blame for the incident—North Platte’s black population. He probably did not have much difficulty getting others in his crowd to agree. In spite of the fact that those interviewed for this study, black or white, did not mention racial tension prior to the incident or

North Platte, 1932, including roundup parade.



since, it is believable that an intensely emotional situation like the Green murder could polarize the community on the basis of race.⁹⁵ That being the case, as R. Lance Shotland writes, "The aggression will be displaced to victims of spontaneous vigilantism or lynchings because they hold less favorable and protected positions in society and are less likely to be able to mete out punishment."⁹⁶ That this happened in the North Platte situation seems clear.

Clem Supanchick, a brother of Edward Supanchick, says that he witnessed Hastings driving his car from black residence to black residence. A number of young men rode on the running boards, and these young men, he says, followed orders given by Hastings to tell the blacks to get out of town by 3 o'clock. According to Supanchick, many of the young men involved were conveniently out of town attending a Nebraska National Guard summer camp at the time of the investigation.⁹⁷ In retrospect, Hastings was probably more culpable than could be proved in the summer of 1929.

These general conclusions concerning the events of July and August, 1929, in connection with the alleged North Platte race riot appear to be valid. First, much of what was included in newspaper accounts published in Omaha and Lincoln and sent to newspapers throughout the nation was exaggerated. It is not possible to fix the blame for this distortion, but it did bring some undue criticism to the people of North Platte. The reports were accurate only in that blacks had been frightened from their homes. There is no evidence of any real violence to North Platte's black population, but there were implied threats. These threats in themselves were deplorable.

Second, the so-called "mob action" was more or less spontaneous. It was not the result of any long-term or deeply-rooted race hatred, nor was it the work of the Ku Klux Klan. Evidence suggests that Albert A. Hastings was the main instigator, but that his orders were actually given to the blacks by a group of young men who were never identified by the state investigators.

Third, the actions of state officials who became involved appear to have been sincere. With the exception of the investigation of Seeman's death, they were as thorough as was possible under the circumstances. There is no strong evidence that their actions were purely political, nor is there reason to believe that they were singling out North Platte for ridicule. This latter argu-

ment is due mostly to the efforts of North Platte leaders who resented what was justified criticism of the way things were handled on July 13, and of the town's wide-open policy allowing liquor, prostitution, and gambling that lent to North Platte's reputation as "Little Chicago."

Finally, there was no race riot or mob violence. A black man shot and killed a popular local police officer. That black man (more likely than not) was shot by one of the members of the posse called to capture him. A small group of young men led by a local business and political leader used implied physical threats to intimidate black citizens, and these black citizens fled from the city. The deaths of Green and Seeman were violent acts, and the intimidation of black residents was an act of force. But there was no race riot in North Platte, Nebraska, on July 13, 1929.

NOTES

1. Peter M. Bergman and Mort N. Bergman's *The Chronological History of the Negro in America* (New York: The New American Library, 1969), 444, places these events in Lincoln, Nebraska, rather than Lincoln County, Nebraska.

2. Edward Green played professional baseball with several American Association teams, including Toledo. See the *Lincoln Evening Journal*, July 17, 1929.

3. Louis Seeman's name is spelled variously Seeman, Semen, and Seelman in source materials. Records in the office of the Lincoln County Clerk indicate that Seelman was used in filing the death certificate. Seeman is used because it is found most frequently in articles published in North Platte papers.

4. Richard Hofstadter's "Reflections on Violence in the United States" in Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace (eds.), *American Violence: A Documentary History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 9.

5. See definition of mob in H. D. Lasswell and A. Kaplan's *Power and Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 40.

6. "Riot" in *Micropaedia Vol. VIII of The New Encyclopaedia Britannica in 30 Volumes* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1974), 595.

7. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, July 12, 1929. The chicken huts, as is revealed later in the essay, were fronts for bootlegging, prostitution, and gambling. Some reports speak of the relationship between Slim and Ada as a commonlaw marriage.

8. From a personal interview with Lowell V. (Jack) Hedrick, June 10, 1976.

9. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, July 13, 1929. Findings of the investigation carried out by the attorney general's office are reported in the *Nebraska State Journal*, July 24, 1929.

10. *Nebraska State Journal*, July 24, 1929.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, August 8, 1929.

13. *Nebraska State Journal*, July 24, 1929.

14. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, July 13, 1929.

15. From personal interviews with Wilfred Hopkins and Dolly Ross on June 9, 1976.

16. *Lincoln Star*, July 22, 1929. It was not possible to locate *Guide* coverage of the episode. The newspaper library at the Nebraska State Historical Society does not include issues of July and August, 1929. An unsuccessful attempt was made to locate issues in Omaha.

17. Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman's *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1947), 34. "The amount of rumor in circulation will vary with the importance of the subject to the individuals concerned, times the ambiguity of the evidence pertaining to the topic at issue."

18. *Nebraska State Journal*, July 24, 1929.

19. From a personal interview with Lowell V. (Jack) Hedrick, June 10, 1976.

20. From a telephone interview with Joseph A. McNeel, June 10, 1976.

21. From a personal interview with Pat Hedrick and telephone interviews with Joseph A. McNeel and Warren W. Groves, June 10, 1976.

22. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, July 13, 1929.

23. From interviews with Pat Hedrick, Joseph A. McNeel, and Warren A. Groves, June 10, 1976.

24. A telephone interview with Sam Diedrichs, former county attorney, indicates that this was the case. He says, however, he was not living in North Platte at the time and has heard only second-hand versions of the incident. John McNeil, "1929 Murder Resulted in Mass Negro Exodus," *North Platte Telegraph*, September 17, 1973, 11D.

25. From a personal interview with Pat Hedrick, June 10, 1976.

26. *Nebraska State Journal*, July 24, 1929.

27. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, July 13, 1929.

28. *Lincoln Star*, July 23, 1929.

29. *North Platte Telegraph*, September 17, 1973.

30. From a personal interview with Wilfred Hopkins, June 9, 1976.

31. *Sunday Lincoln Star*, July 14, 1929.

32. *Sunday World-Herald*, July 14, 1929.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Sunday State Journal*, July 14, 1929.

35. United States Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920. Population*, Vol. III (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1921), 600.

36. United States Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940. Population: Characteristics of the Population—Nebraska* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1941), 128.

37. *Lincoln Star*, July 23, 1929.

38. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, July 19, 1929.

39. From a personal interview with Dolly Ross, June 9, 1976.

40. From a personal interview with Wilfred Hopkins, June 9, 1976.

41. From personal interviews with Dolly Ross and Wilfred Hopkins, June 9, 1976.

42. *Nebraska State Journal*, July 24, 1929.

43. From personal interviews with Dolly Ross and Wilfred Hopkins, June 9, 1976.

44. *Lincoln Star*, July 20, 1929.

45. *Lincoln County Tribune*, July 30, 1929.

46. *Literary Digest*, 102 (August 10, 1929), 10.

47. From a personal interview with James W. Kirkman, June 28, 1976.

48. Allport and Postman, 186-189. Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History*, (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 41-42, 206.

49. *Sunday State Journal*, July 14, 1929.

50. *Lincoln Star*, July 15, 1929.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.* The group which called on Governor Weaver included some of the most distinguished black leaders in Nebraska. The Reverend John Adams, attorney and minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, served in the Unicameral,

1949-1961. John Adams, Jr., attorney, served in the Nebraska House of Representatives, 1935, and the Unicameral, 1937-1941. John A. Singleton, Omaha dentist, served in the Nebraska House, 1927. H. J. Pinkett, an Omaha attorney, was a graduate of Harvard University. Lincoln ministers included the Reverend Henry W. Botts, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and the Reverend Trago McWilliams, listed as pastor of the "Third Christian Church AME" by the *Lincoln Journal-Star*, February 25, 1979.

53. *Omaha World-Herald*, July 16, 1929.

54. *Grand Island Daily Independent*, March 28, 1929.

55. *Grand Island Daily Independent*, April 3, 1929.

56. North Platte was referred to as "Little Chicago" by some of the people who were interviewed, though the term does not appear in the press reports of the day.

57. See *New York Times*, July 16, 1929, and *Washington Post*, July 15, 1929. Also, for comments from Southern newspapers, see "Southern Remarks on Northern Race Riots," *Literary Digest*, 102 (August 10, 1929), 10. For an editorial by Publisher Wilson Tout of the *North Platte Tribune*, see issue of July 30, 1929. He attributes the "lurid imagination of the Omaha reporter" for the "falsehoods" which became magnified in the metropolitan press. He reprinted an editorial entitled "North Platte's Shame" from the *Los Angeles Evening Express* (circulated further by the *Literary Digest* of August 10, 1929), which he termed a "good editorial. . . founded on lies." Tout commented that "hoodlums of a city cannot bring shame on that city."

58. *Omaha World-Herald*, July 15, 1929.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, July 13, 1929.

61. *Lincoln Star*, July 15, 1929.

62. *Lincoln Star*, July 16, 1929.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Omaha World-Herald*, July 16, 1929.

66. *Omaha Bee*, July 16, 1929.

67. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, July 16, 1929.

68. *Norfolk Daily News*, July 17, 1929.

69. *Upland Eagle*, July 18, 1929.

70. *Grand Island Daily Independent*, July 17, 1929.

71. *Kearney Hub* quoted in the *Grand Island Daily Independent*, July 26, 1929.

72. *Omaha World-Herald*, July 19, 1929.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*

75. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, July 19, 1929.

76. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, July 20, 1929.

77. *Lincoln Star*, July 22, 1929.

78. *Omaha Guide*, July 22, 1929, from clipping in "Sorensen Family Papers," Nebraska State Historical Society, Box 59, Scrapbooks, Vol. 11, July 20, 1929, through September 26, 1929.

79. *Lincoln Star*, July 23, 1929, and *Nebraska State Journal*, July 24, 1929. Neither the official report nor the notes of the investigation are extant in the office of the Nebraska Attorney General or the Nebraska State Archives.

80. *Nebraska State Journal*, July 24, 1929.

81. *Ibid.*

82. *Lincoln Star*, July 23, 1929.

83. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, August 6, 1929.

84. *Ibid.*

85. From a personal interview with Milton Murphy, June 10, 1976, a telephone interview with Sam Diedrichs, June 9, 1976, and a personal interview with Earl E. Morgan, June 9, 1976. Also from interviews with Jack and Pat Hedrick, June 10, 1976.

86. From *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, August 7, 1929, a personal interview with Edward Supanchick, June 28, 1976, and *State of Nebraska v. Albert A. Hastings*. James E. Miller, John H. Campbell, and Edward Supanchick, (Criminal File 179, Lincoln County Court, 1929). This file is in the possession of the Lincoln County Historical Society at the Lincoln County Museum..

87. From *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, August 13, 1929, and *State of Nebraska v. Albert A. Hastings*, James E. Miller, John H. Campbell, and Edward Supanchick, (Criminal File 179, Lincoln County Court, 1929). According to this file witnesses for the plaintiff were 14 in number, including: Harold Hibbs, Ernest Groves, Charles Vanoy, Nobel Simmons, Dorothea Simmons, Lulu Mitchell, Mrs. Frank White, Milton Kinney, Harold Langford, William Landgraf, Martin Ellingson, Gertrude Groves, Mrs. Nobel Simmons, Mrs. Frank Collins. Witnesses testifying for the defendants include: James E. Miller, Charles J. Killian, Mrs. Charles J. Killian, Sidney Spilner, John Hahler, Francis McMurtry, Charles Dixon, Charles Smith, William Landgraf, William Hawley, Albert A. Hastings, John Campbell.

88. *Ibid.*

89. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, August 13, 1929.

90. *North Platte Evening Telegraph*, August 15, 1929.

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*

93. From personal interviews with Lowell V. (Jack) Hedrick and Pat Hedrick, June 10, 1976.

94. R. Lance Shotland, "Spontaneous Vigilantes," *Society*, 13 (March/April 1976), 31.

95. From personal interviews with Dolly Ross, Wilfred Hopkins, Lowell V. (Jack) Hedrick and Pat Hedrick. All stated they did not believe the Klan was active at this time in North Platte. Neither do they recall North Platte having a history of racial tension prior to the incident.

96. Shotland, 32.

97. From a personal interview with Clem Supanchick, June 28, 1976.