

October 2020

They Stole Him Out of Jail: Willie Earle, South Carolina's Last Lynching Victim

Tamara Law
Francis Marion University

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Recommended Citation

Law, Tamara (2020) "They Stole Him Out of Jail: Willie Earle, South Carolina's Last Lynching Victim," *South Carolina Libraries*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/scl_journal/vol4/iss2/3

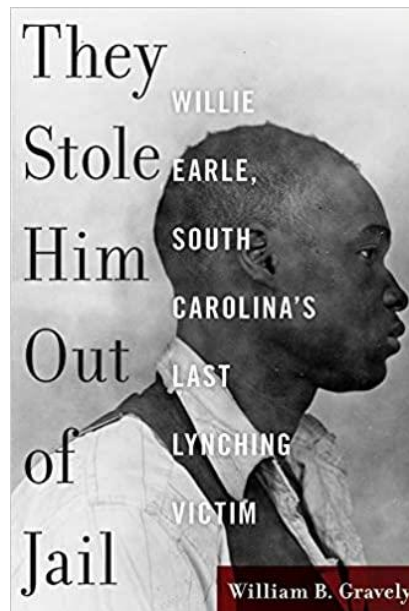
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Abstract

Tamara Law reviews *They Stole Him Out of Jail: Willie Earle, South Carolina's Last Lynching Victim*, by William B. Gravely.

They Stole Him Out of Jail: Willie Earle, South Carolina's Last Lynching Victim



William B. Gravely

The University of South Carolina Press, 2019, \$29.99

ISBN: 978-1-61117-937-8

ebook ISBN: 978-1061117-938-5

In *They Stole Him Out of Jail*, author William B. Gravely tells the story of South Carolina's last lynching victim, Willie Earle, a 24-year old black man lynched by a mob of 31 white men after he was arrested for the killing of white taxi driver Thomas W. Brown on February 17, 1947. Arrested on mere circumstantial evidence and held in a Pickens County jail, Earle was kidnapped by the mob, many of whom were Brown's fellow taxi drivers, taken across county lines into Greenville, and was beaten, stabbed and shot to death.

Government officials, including then Governor Strom Thurmond, quickly denounced the lynching, declaring South Carolina a "law and order state" and vowed that vigilante justice would not go unchecked. For centuries prior to this, white supremacists could lynch blacks without fear of legal consequences, but the Earle case happened during a time when lynchings were on the decline, and the state's vigorous investigation and prosecution of the accused was evidence of society's changing attitudes towards it.

Gravelly, a Pickens County native, takes us into 1947 South Carolina. The book goes into exhaustive details of the case, which attracted national attention, covering the 9-day trial through news articles, pictures, witness testimonies, reactions of civil rights leaders and the effects this case had on federal action on civil rights issues in the coming years. Readers get an inside look into the state's investigation, which, with assistance from the FBI, resulted in 26 confessions out of the 31 accused.

This book is an important read not only because it covers a crucial part in South Carolina's racial history, but also because it is vital to learn how lynching was used as a brutal tool to keep white supremacy in power. And, while it was significant racial progress to get this case to trial in the first place, the fact that it resulted in an acquittal by an all-white jury serves as a stark reminder that this was still the Jim Crow South.

After finishing the book and pondering on the evils of white supremacy and lynching, I couldn't help but think how these 26 white men received what they denied Earle: to be innocent until proven guilty, to have his day in court, and to be tried by a jury of his peers. In just merely being accused of killing a white man, his fate was sealed. This mob of white supremacists decided that the loss of white man's life meant a black man needed to die, without concern about whether they really had the right guy or not. White accusation meant black guilt; they would serve as his judge, jury and executioner. In light of today's protests on police brutality and calls for criminal justice reform, this book serves as a stark reminder of how far we've come in our justice system in the treatment of black people and how much farther we still need to go.

Tamara Law is a Reference Librarian and Instruction Coordinator at James A. Rogers Library at Francis Marion University.