

*“Frenzied Thousands Join
in Orgy of Blood and Fire”*

*Omaha World-Herald
September 29, 1919*

Who Was to Blame?

When it was all said and done, three people — starting with Will Brown — were dead, the courthouse had sustained thousands of dollars in damage, irreplaceable records were destroyed, and the Smith administration had been thoroughly discredited by the lynching.

The Army confiscated photographs of the riot from the public and began identifying and arresting 100 men accused of taking part. They were arraigned on a variety of crimes from arson to murder. The police compiled their own list of 300 alleged participants. One of the names high on the list was Milton Hoffman, who had worked as Dennison's secretary. Hoffman was accused of leading the mob from south Omaha to the courthouse and whipping them into a frenzy. Dennison got Hoffman out of the city to Denver before he could be arrested, where he worked for another gambler for seven years before returning to Omaha.

A beleaguered city council decided not to order a special investigation of the police. So, on October 8 — within two weeks of the riot — a grand jury was convened to investigate. After a six-week session, the grand jury issued a report that criticized the Smith administration for ineffective leadership and police incompetence. According to some witnesses and the Army, proper police leadership could have dispersed the mob between 3:00 and 6:00 p.m. But the police chief and commissioner weren't at the courthouse at critical moments. However, the grand jury said the immediate cause of the riot was the raping of white women, and that the situation was made worse by "undue criticism given to courts, police, and public officials by the press of the city."

"The press", of course, was widely interpreted to mean the *Bee*, which practiced sensational reporting and was relentless in its attacks on the police department.

The foreman of the grand jury, a Mr. Towle, went even further than the official report. He charged that:

" . . . a 'certain Omaha newspaper' had set out to discredit city government and the police department. Several reported assaults on white women had actually been perpetrated by whites in blackface."

Towle said the riot was planned and begun by "the vice element of the city." The riot:

" . . . was not a casual affair; it was premeditated and planned by those secret and invisible forces that today are fighting you and the men who represent good government."

Despite the grand jury's words, and despite several photographs clearly showing the faces of participants, all of those arrested by the Army were eventually released

For his part Police Commissioner Ringer issued a statement one week after the riot defending the police against the *Bee*. He stated, "The crystallization of mob spirit . . . by vicious, unprincipled and false newspaper criticism of the police department" was a direct cause of the riot.

Ringer also felt that the criminal element in the city (many of whom Ringer associated with Dennison) had taken part in the riot and was gratified to see a weakening of the Smith administration.

Reverend Titus Lowe echoed Ringer's words and bluntly proclaimed the lynching was the result of calculated planning by politicians of the "old gang." Those calculations were understood to include the *Bee's* campaign of sensationalism and the actions of Dennison's political machine.

In addition, Major Gen. Leonard Wood had announced within days of arriving at Omaha that the attack could be traced to "the old criminal gang" and one newspaper. As his investigation continued, Wood claimed the riot was an organized effort, with alcohol distributed freely and "a regular taxi cab service was maintained to bring men to the scene of the riot."

Were Tom Dennison and his political machine responsible for the riot? Or was it just a bunch of young "punks" who initiated the riot? It was no secret that Dennison, Dahlman, and Rosewater were obsessed with the desire to regain political control of the city and stop any additional reform efforts. But were they responsible?

A nephew of the 'old Man' Dennison, who served many years with the fire department, maintained that the Dennison machine had no role in instigating the mob; it was kids who really were responsible for setting the affair in motion. "Maybe there was some help from the organization," he suggested, "but Tom didn't know about it."

Old-time machine worker William "Billy" Maher said Dennison was not responsible for the riot. "That's the silliest thing in the world, for anybody to ever dream that." Sheriff Mike Clark was one of Dennison's best friends, and Dennison would not have placed Clark's life in danger. "Tom Dennison would have no more tolerated any of his outfit having anything to do with hurting Mike Clark than he would of putting a gun to his own head. There were no Dennison men up there ... they were not leading anything."

There doesn't seem to be any firm evidence that the Dennison machine actually instigated the specific events of September 26-28, 1919. However, it does seem clear that Dennison and the *Bee* helped create conditions that were ripe for the outbreak of racial violence. Will Brown may well have been the victim of impersonal political machinations.

The Smith administration was never able to recover from the scandal, even though they added 100 new officers to the police department and ordered riot guns and machine guns. In the next election, the reform administration was voted out, largely as a result of the courthouse riot. The "Old Man" was a central figure in Omaha political life for another decade.

The *World-Herald* earned a Pulitzer Prize for an editorial it ran titled, "Law and the Jungle." The story drew attention to the city's disgrace, humiliation, and the consequences of inefficient government. Reliance on the authorities to maintain order had been misplaced, said the editorial, and Omahans would henceforth seek a stronger police force and more competent leadership.

"There is the rule of the jungle in this world, and there is the rule of law. Under jungle rule no man's life is safe, no man's wife, no man's Mother, sisters, children, home, liberty, rights or property. Under the rule of law, protection is provided for all these, and provided in proportion as law is efficiently and honestly administered and its power and authority respected and obeyed." Omaha has had an experience in lawlessness. We have seen, as in a nightmare, its awful possibilities. We have learned how frail is the barrier which divides civilization from the primal jungle — and we have been given to see clearly what that barrier is. It is the law! It is the might of the law, wisely administered. It is respect for the obedience to the law on the part of the members of society! May the lesson sink deep!"

— Morning *Omaha World-Herald* September 30, 1919