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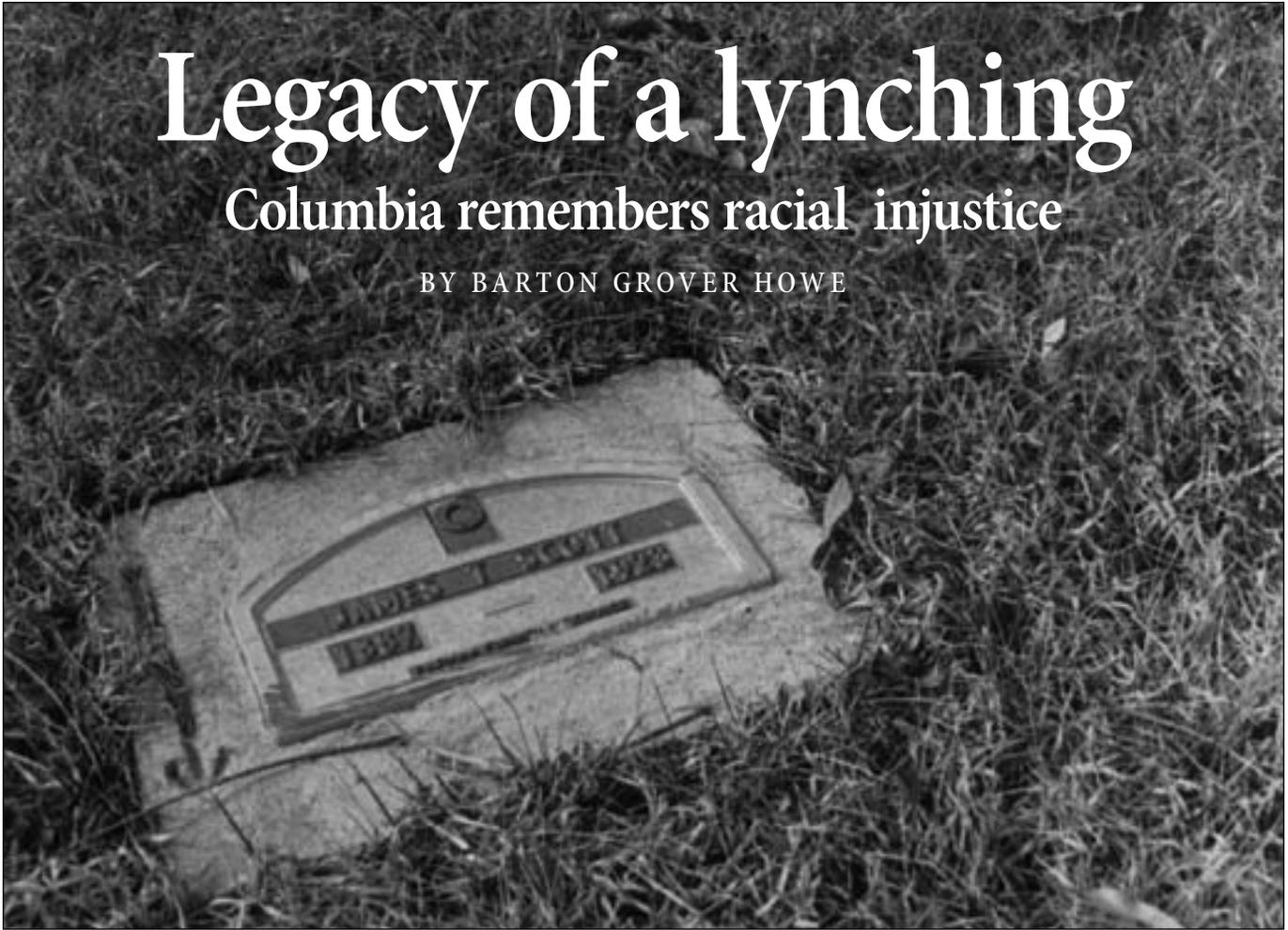
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## Legacy of a lynching

Columbia remembers racial injustice

BY BARTON GROVER HOWE



## 5-part series

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# An attack in black and white

**J**ames T. Scott looked at the crowd gathered on the Stewart Street bridge. Screaming, yelling, they wanted justice.

Amazingly, he was surrounded by other community leaders. Next to him was a

former city councilman, nearby, a banker. There were even a few fellow veterans of the Great War gathered. They, too, were calling for a killing.

He'd seen a university professor beg them to stop, but they wouldn't. A local reporter had tried as well. But Scott watched as the mob continued.

As he watched, a pair of hands reached out and grabbed him.

They hoisted Scott to the rail of the bridge. What had begun under this very bridge eight days ago would be over in seconds, unless someone could stop those giant, white hands.



What has become an 80-year-old legacy of secrets kept and revealed began at about 3:30 p.m. April 20, 1923. Regina Almstedt was walking quickly west on Maple Street, which led to Stewart Road and the bridge over the MKT railroad tracks. A 14-year-old sophomore at Columbia High School, her music lessons were on the other side of town, closer to the university.

Her dress flapped lightly as she walked. The temperature was in the low 70s, and even though it hadn't rained for weeks, she carried an umbrella; in the spring, weather could be unpredictable.

She was only a few blocks from her home on Garth Street when a black man approached her. He said he needed her to come into the ravine because there was a baby down near the railroad tracks.

Regina was a baby sitter to many local children. She reasoned it might be one of the children she cared for, so she started down the slope into the 30-foot-deep ravine.

At the tracks, Regina still could see no one. She followed the tracks around the bend to the west but could still find nothing. By now, the man had come down into the ravine and seemed to be

following her.

She decided something was wrong and started to cross into the woods to the south rather than walk back up the tracks and pass the man. She began to climb the slope out of the ravine.

But it was too late.

The man grabbed her by the arm. He forced her farther into the woods. He told her, "A white man stole my wife, and I am determined to get even and made up my mind to ruin the first white woman I got a chance at."

With her umbrella, she smashed the man about the face and head, breaking the umbrella into pieces. But it was no use. He pulled a belt from his pant loops and tightened it around her neck, then punched her in the face several times. He then pulled a knife and told her he would use it if she made any noise.

On the tracks below, a small MKT railroad work crew passed by on a handcar. Despite the belt around her neck, Regina screamed to get their attention. Her assailant quickly stuffed a handkerchief in her mouth.

She continued to struggle. Hoping robbery was his true motive, she managed to free a 50-cent coin from her pocket and fling it to the ground. He told her he did not want the money but got up and took it anyway.

He asked her if it would be necessary to tie her to a tree or if she would wait there while he got away. She told him she would wait.

As soon as he was out of sight, she ran up through the woods, heading for her parents' house. Suffering from bruises and cuts on her head, face and body, she began to slip into shock. She is thought to have fainted twice along the way, a distance of four to five blocks.

When she finally arrived home, she told her parents what had happened. There was no doubt in their minds the assault had taken place; her injuries were obvious, and the state of shock she was in would have been hard to fake. But more than that, professor Hermann B. Almstedt had raised his daughters to tell the truth. It was inconceivable that

## Characters

### James T. Scott

Prominent black resident of Columbia, decorated for valor in World War I. He was accused of the attack on Regina.

### Regina Almstedt

14-year-old Columbia High School student. She was attacked under the Stewart Street bridge in April of 1923.

### Hermann Almstedt

University of Missouri professor of German from 1901 to 1942. Father of Regina, he tried to save the life of James T. Scott.

### Charles Nutter

University of Missouri student and Columbia Evening Missourian reporter. He covered Scott's lynching and tried to save Scott's life.

### George Barkwell

City contractor, businessman and former city councilman. He was accused of playing a larger role in the lynching.

**Editor's Note** This story of the people and events surrounding the lynching of James Scott in 1923 is based on newspaper accounts published at that time, written oral histories of people who recall the event, records from local history archives, scholarly research papers, interviews with people who remember the events and their surviving family members, and discussions with local historians. All quotes and dialogue used in the recreation of the event are from newspaper accounts written at the time of the incident.

she would lie to the famously stern professor.

■ ■ ■

Professor Almstedt had been a serious man as long as anyone could remember, a product of his Teutonic German upbringing.

He graduated from the University of Missouri in 1895, Phi Beta Kappa, and was the first valedictorian to speak in the new Jesse Hall. In 1901, he returned to the university to help build a new German studies department. Within six years, he was head of the department.

He married a woman from England in 1906, and they started a family the next year. Within 10 years, their family had expanded to six, with daughters Ruth, Regina, Margaret and Elsa. As in his own upbringing, professor Almstedt brought discipline to the household.

Sitting at the head of the dinner table, he would issue orders: "Knees runter," knees under the table; "Ellbogen vom Tisch," elbows off the table.

But if there was a severe, academic side of professor Almstedt, there was also a softer one. He loved music, and he ran the university's informal program until the 1920s, when the music program became official. He played the organ at the Calvary Episcopal Church on Ninth Street most every Sunday.

He passed this love on to his children. His two oldest daughters, Ruth and Regina, were both involved in glee club and other musical organizations at high school. Both took music lessons after school.

Frequently, the neighborhood children visited the Almstedt home at 211 S. Garth St. They came to see Regina — their baby sitter — and to listen and talk to her mother.

The doctor checked Regina for injuries; she was fine other than minor cuts and bruises and the immediate trauma. Regina's attempts to fight off her attacker had been successful, and other than the rips and tears in her dress, the rest of her clothes had not been touched.

As that warm spring day ended, professor Almstedt thought of what had almost happened to his beloved "Denie." Clearly, he felt,



Photo courtesy of State Historical Society of Missouri.

**Regina Almstedt in her senior photo from Hickman High School. Two years earlier, she was attacked near the Stewart Street Bridge.**

God had intervened and helped her fight off the attacker.

■ ■ ■

That the attack had not ended in rape mattered little to many of the people of Columbia. In hushed tones, people talked about what had happened to the Almstedt girl. They tried to warn their children, trying to say something without saying everything.

But the words were so cloaked in hidden meanings, many children ended up knowing just enough to be terrorized.

After talking with professor Almstedt and his daughter, the police started an all-out search for the perpetrator. They also brought in dogs, which managed to trace the attacker's scent down the tracks. But they stopped at the edge of Columbia's black district, Sharp End.

The white citizens of Columbia knew little about Sharp End and saw even less. Brick row housing with drying laundry hung between the buildings, dirt streets with water running down the sides, small homes with small windows — this was what many of them saw, and it was all they needed to see.

But inside Sharp End, a thriving community was developing.

Restaurants, churches and even a theater opened in and around the area. The Frederick Douglass School opened a new building in 1916. By the 1920s, more than half of Columbia's black population owned their own homes.

For many of the older black citizens, times had certainly changed. A former slave owned a blacksmith shop in Columbia in the 1920s and marveled at the improvements in his world.

But if the early 20th century had proven a leap forward for the black residents of Columbia, the end of April 1923 marked a giant step backward. Even though Columbia's black population let the newspapers know they were outraged at the attack, the pursuit of justice nearly brought Sharp End to a standstill.

Rain, which had been absent that spring, made a return the day after the attack, pouring all day April 21. The attacker's path from the ravine to Sharp End was awash, and any attempt to get beyond the edge of it was impossible. Other means of investigation would be required.

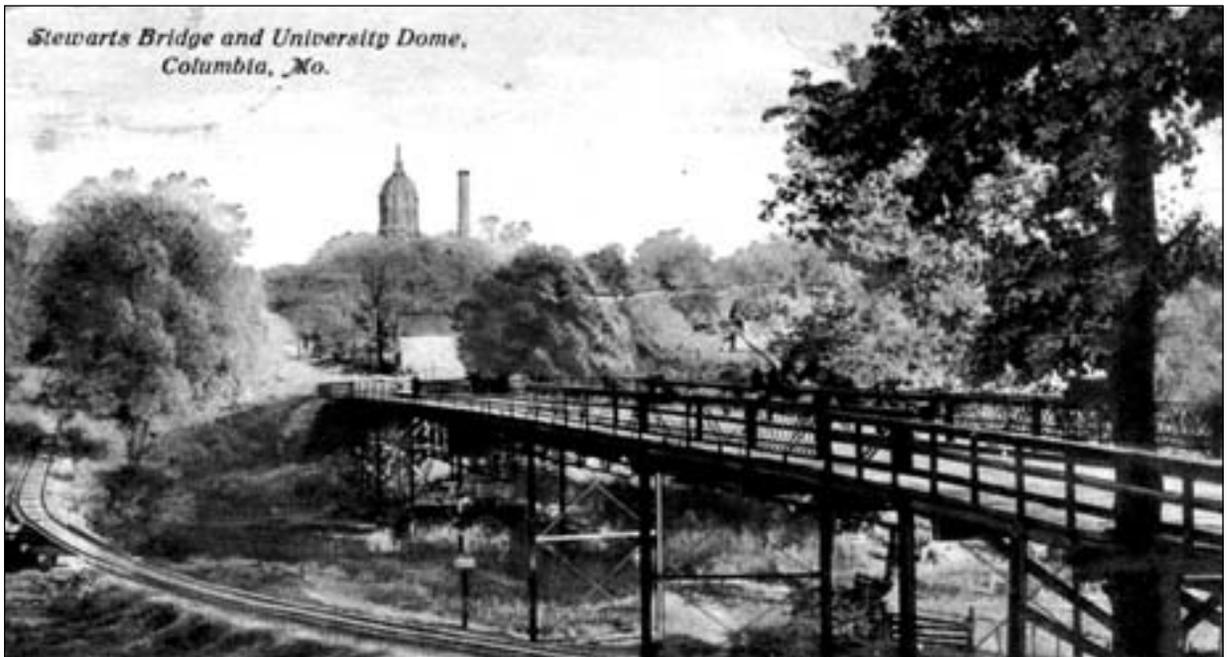
Some 1,900 black people lived in Columbia in 1923, a sizable portion of Columbia's 10,392 people. Police crashed through their homes with little warning, brandishing clubs and guns. The residents of Sharp End were besieged.

To the white police, nothing was going to interfere with the pursuit of their suspect: a black man, between 25 and 30 years old, wearing brown trousers, a dark coat and cap.

But among the general descriptors was one distinguishing feature The assailant was said to have a Charlie Chaplin mustache.

Like the one worn by James T. Scott.

**“Nothing was going to interfere with the pursuit of their suspect...”**



Courtesy of Boone County Historical Society

**The Stewart Street Bridge over Flat Branch and the MKT railroad tracks. Regina Almstedt was walking down the hill from campus when she encountered a black man near the eastern end of the bridge.**

## Different definitions of justice

**U**nlike many of the black residents of Columbia, Scott had never lived in an area bound by Southern traditions, as mid-Missouri was in the 1920s

Born in 1887 in New Mexico, he eventually settled in Chicago. There, he was presumably a widower. He was the father of three children.

About 5 feet 4 inches tall, and weighing 135 pounds, he was not a large man. With a soft-spoken voice, he probably was not the first man people would single out as a leader.

In his time in Columbia he would become one. A veteran of the Great War, he had been decorated for valor, and when he returned to America he sought out a better life. He came to Columbia from Chicago to join his parents sometime around 1920, leaving his children with his brother.

He found a job at the University of Missouri as a janitor. At a time when most black men were not fully employed, his full-time status at the University Medical Building was prestigious and made him stand out in the community. More than that, it provided him with a standard of living above his peers.

Making \$65 a month, about 40 percent more than seasonal black workers could make even when they had a job, he could afford things most black men in Columbia, and many white men, could not. He was particularly proud of his Hupmobile, bought almost new for \$600.

His friends called him "Scottie." He married Gertrude Carter, daughter of a local family, in 1921. She was a first- and second-grade teacher at the Frederick

Douglass School.

Their affluence and jobs made them pillars of the black community.

They lived just two blocks from the Douglass School in a black middle-class neighborhood full of teachers. Their home, at 501 N. Third St., what is now Providence Road, was an easy walk for both of them to work.

If the idea of being a janitor, forced to burn the carcasses of animals used in medical experiments, bothered him, he didn't show it. James T. Scott sauntered to work each day, knowing life was looking good.

On Wednesday, April 25, a witness said he had seen Scott on one of those walks. Coming forward to claim a \$1,125 reward posted by local business leaders, an unidentified informant said he had seen Scott near the corner of Fourth and Cherry streets at about 4:15 p.m. Scott, the informant said, was walking toward the university with a bundle under his arm.

County prosecutor Ruby Hulen considered Scott's participation plausible. Co-workers had seen Scott at 3 p.m. and 5 p.m., but no time in between. If Scott had attacked Regina at 3:30 p.m., he could easily have walked the 1.7 miles from the bridge back to his home to change clothes and been at the intersection of Cherry and Fourth streets within 45 minutes. The bundle under his arm could have been incriminating clothes he was taking to the Medical Building incinerator, where he worked.

Scott was taken with some other detainees to the Almstedt home and paraded outside while Regina watched from inside. She identified Scott as her attack-

# No one listened.

er. On Friday, she went to the police station to look one more time at the man. This time, he stood on the other side of a pane of glass, with a bright light in his face.

"I never want to see him again," said Regina, with her mother at her side. "I never want to see his face again . . ."

She said Scott's voice matched her attacker's; also, her attacker had a strange smell, like one might pick up working with and disposing of dead animals.

As a black man accused of a crime against a white girl in 1923, Scott was in a bad position. But he continued to assert his innocence.

By Regina's own account, the attacker had been beaten fiercely about the face and head; Scott's face was clear of injury. Her attacker said a white man had stolen his wife; Scott was happily married.

Scott was charged with attempted rape, which carried a sentence anywhere from five years to death. Scott knew he would need an attorney for his arraignment. He hired one, who filed a plea of not guilty for his client. Scott was then led back to the county jail, just behind the courthouse.

To pay his legal bill, he gave his attorney the title to his 1920 Hupmobile. If that seemed a steep price to pay, Scott had no other choice. His belief in his fair depended on getting a fair trial.

He was wrong.

■ ■ ■

To this day, there are two stories of what happened beginning the night of Saturday, April 28. Both of them would be told in court months later, while different versions of each would be whispered about on the streets and in the homes of Columbia for years to come. Both of them, however, begin the same way.

About 10 p.m., men began to gather near the columns at Eighth and Walnut streets. Approaching the sheriff, they asked him to hand over Scott. He refused, and the men began to disband.

By 11 p.m. they had regrouped, and eventually returned to the main entrance, intent on smashing down the doors with hammers and chisels. By now, nearly a thousand people — businessmen, housewives, students, children, even a few blacks — had gathered to see what was going to happen next.

Calls were made to the governor and the National Guard to prevent Scott's removal from the jail. No one ever arrived.

They were asked by the sheriff and Hulen to stop. No one listened.

An estimated 500 men were crammed into the corridors, trying to get at Scott. Some of the most recognizable men in town, they included bankers, store owners, a relative of Columbia's chief of police, and even a former city councilman.

When the first of two steel doors proved impregnable to the ham-

mers and chisels of the mob, a call went out for an acetylene torch, and within minutes one arrived. Some thought they saw George Barkwell, the former city councilman, near the front of the mob, fiddling with the gas with his large, white hands.

■ ■ ■

Barkwell was a big man, standing well over 6 feet tall. He was born in Boone County in 1874, the son of longtime local family. He did not attend college and married when he was 19. By the age of 22, he had a daughter, Grace. His nephew later moved in with the family, and Barkwell considered him an adopted son.

By 1920 he was a leading resident of Columbia. He owned a successful coal and feed store and had also served as a city councilman. He was also a contractor with the city, and he and his daughter — one of the only female contractors in Missouri — had a good life.

Barkwell was also a leader of those who fought against black rights and equality. His views were well known. People knew he thought blacks should be kept in their place. Some even called him a radical.

By 12:30 a.m., Barkwell and the mob had cut down the first door. The second one fell quickly thereafter. Throughout it all, members of the mob called each other by their first names. Police and sheriff's officers looked on, doing nothing. Someone later called it "one

of the grossest examples of neglect of duty and cowardice ever laid at the door of Americans."

The leaders of the mob entered the cell. They wrapped a noose around Scott's neck and dragged him from the cell. Cheers went up from the crowd as he was brought onto the jail porch. Knocked from his feet, he regained his balance and saw the hundreds of people waiting to see him brought to vigilante justice.

He also saw one face that he thought could help him.

■ ■ ■

Charles Nutter never meant to be part of the story.

The 16-year-old son of a poor pig farmer, he had arrived in Columbia from Falls City, Neb. in 1918. With virtually no money, he had to work for two years before he could afford tuition to Missouri's School of Journalism.

Nutter eventually began writing for the Columbia Evening Missourian. He was a good writer, and by 1923 he was a stringer for the Kansas City Star, sending stories back west when something of import happened in Columbia.

This didn't happen often.

In 1923, Columbia was a fairly quiet place. Indeed, in some ways, Columbia was at last beginning to resemble the city it would eventually become. The city's traditional southern roots were finding a balance with the university's more liberal population;

# Columbia was once the scene of lynching.

the “Border War” with the University of Kansas seemed the city’s largest conflict.

Even on the issue of race, things seemed to be settling. Though black residents did not have all the rights of white ones, their culture and community were growing year after year. The white community and black community were increasingly at ease with one another, and the racial turmoil of years past seemed behind them. In the 1920 Columbia Evening Missourian, a headline noted, “COLUMBIA WAS ONCE THE SCENE OF LYNCHING: How many people in Columbia today would believe that

a law-abiding town, such as Columbia is now, was ever the scene of a lynching?”

That night Nutter believed it, as Scott turned to him and begged for his help.

“I am not guilty, I swear it,” Scott said, looking right at Nutter. “But I have no chance.”

At the same time, prosecutor Hulen and the local judge were promising swift justice after a trial and begging for any one of the thousands of spectators to help stop the men holding Scott. The response of the mob was swift.

“Take him to the Stewart Street bridge! Hang him!” And with that the

mob set off down Seventh Street, turning right on Cherry Street, and then continuing south along Sixth Street, past the university campus. They turned right on Maple Street, now Stewart Road, and dragged him out onto the bridge.

Nutter saw all of this, walking with the mob, and staying close to Scott. Twice he saw them knock Scott off his feet and drag him along the street by the noose before he could regain his footing.

As the mob arrived at the bridge, more than 2,000 people greeted them, having driven their cars from the courthouse. All parts of

Columbia were represented, though the few blacks who had gathered quickly dispersed. Unlike the rest of the crowd, they had no desire to see a lynching.

Scott was dragged onto the bridge, but the rope his attackers had around his neck was too small and short for the purpose they had in mind. They sent someone to get a longer rope.

Within minutes, a man forced his way through the crowd. It was Professor Hermann Almstedt.

He had come to save the life of James Scott, the man accused of trying to rape his daughter.



**A 1920 Hupmobile, the type of car James T. Scott drove and later traded in to pay for his trial lawyer. He was one of the few men in Columbia, of any race, to own a car.**

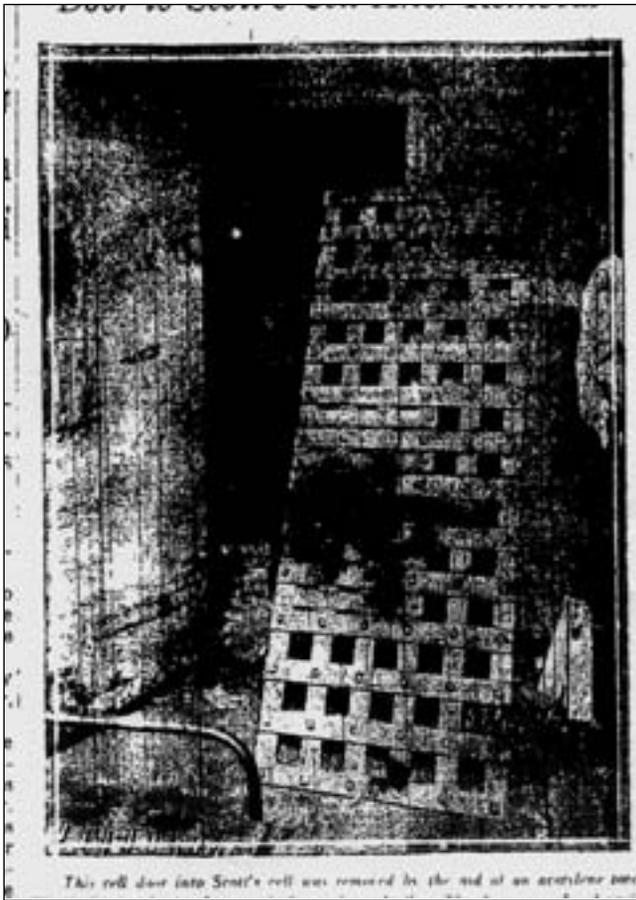
**Professor Benjamin Almstedt, in 1910, about a decade before the lynching. A professor and MU alum, his daughter Regina was attacked near the Stewart Road Bridge in 1923.**

Photo courtesy of University Archives, Collection



# 3

## And no one lived happily ever after



This is the door of Scott's cell. It was removed by the mob that attacked Scott on Saturday, April 28.

**P**rofessor Hermann B. Almstedt walked into the mob gathered at the Stewart Street bridge. He was trying to stop the lynching of James Scott and combat the one thing that had personally marred his years in Columbia: racism.

A teacher of German, Almstedt found his classes and his heritage under attack in the years leading up to World War I. When the United States joined the war, he found his classes canceled.

He was able to teach other classes, and his job was never in jeopardy. But the cancellations stung.

As he moved into the top of the university hierarchy, it was an experience he could not forget, not even tonight. He walked down to the Stewart Street bridge alone. From a nearby fraternity house, he could hear the young men singing "The Same Old Moon Shines Down On You." On any other night, it would have been nice.

He approached the bridge and walked onto it. Although he was an imposing man to his family and on campus, here, he was one man against a mob. Surrounded by the crowd, he began to speak.

"We think you are going too far; you may have the wrong man."

He appealed to them as a parent and as an American.

"I am the father of the girl, and I have been wounded to the heart by this very affair, wounded far more than any of you. Do not besmirch your hands with this deed.

"As an American citizen, I plead with you to let the law take its course with this man. I ask of you in the name of law and order and the American flag."

Someone from the mob responded quickly, "Shut up, or we'll lynch you too."

Professor Almstedt knew then this wasn't about justice for his daughter or keeping a community safe. It was about hatred and racism, and with that, he turned back into the crowd and walked home.

■ ■ ■

By now, James Scott was leaning weakly against the rail-

ing, battered, bruised and bleeding. He turned to the crowd and spoke.

"I am an innocent man. I have a 15-year-old daughter, and it would be impossible for me to commit this crime. I have never touched a white woman in my whole life."

Pleading, he attempted to implicate one of his cellmates. "Ollie Watson — this afternoon, he told me he did this. His wife and him had been having some trouble, like the girl said the man who attacked her told about. My wife never has had trouble with me. Go down and see her. I can prove my innocence, mister."

He then turned and looked directly at Charles Nutter, a reporter for the Columbia Evening Missourian: "I know I haven't a chance. They won't listen to me. Won't you say something?"

And Nutter tried. Just 20 years old, he tried to reason with the mob. He failed, just as Almstedt had before him. It was a moment that would stay with him forever.

Within minutes, someone had returned with a larger rope. Some said it was George Barkwell. Others said the man just looked like George; the former city councilman himself was on the other side of the bridge, watching but not participating.

Whoever it was, he slipped the new noose around Scott's neck and tied the other end to the bridge. Scott knew he had only minutes to live and dropped to his knees, hoping his final plea would be heard.

"Lord, thou knowest the truth," he said quietly. "Have pity on an innocent man's soul, O Lord. Thou knowest my innocence.

Will thou allow an innocent man to suffer?"

And with that, the crowd watched as Scott, a small black man, was seized by the hands of a large white man and lifted to the rail. Balanced upon the railing, Scott was pushed off at the shoulders, sending him crashing head-first through the branches of a tree.

As he reached the limit of the rope, it jerked taut, and a sickening crack echoed through the night. Scott was killed instantly. Only death could stop the final words that he cried as he was thrown off the bridge, "I am innocent."

The crowd stood silent for a few seconds, watching his body dangle 12 feet above the ravine below. "That'll teach 'em," said one onlooker. It was 1:40 a.m. April 29, and by the top of the hour, the

crowd had gone home.

The music returned, the warm spring night carrying the sounds of a banjo. A full moon bathed Jesse Hall in soft light. That, and the body of a small black man dangling above the railroad tracks.

His friends called him Scotty.



Reactions to what had happened in Columbia were swift and came from around the world. None was quicker than that of University of Missouri professor Almstedt, father of the girl Scott was said to have attacked.

On Sunday morning, just hours removed from the lynching he himself tried to prevent, he talked to a reporter: "We want to forget this trouble as soon as possible and lift the cloud that has been hovering over my home for a week.



Every story on the front page of the April 30, 1923, Columbia Missourian dealt with coverage of the lynching of James T. Scott. The story also made the front page of many other daily newspapers across the country including The New York Times.

## I believe in law and order.

— Hermann Almstedt

“The Negro was absolutely identified by my daughter as being the man who attempted to assault her. All the time since this first happened, I have tried to keep any violence from being done. As an American citizen, I believe in law and order. I have tried to keep my daughter quiet so she would not make a mistake in identifying the man.”

Then, walking the reporter out of the house, he stopped and stood on his porch, leaving the door open. “I want to let the sunshine back into my home.”

No one who knew the Almstedt family ever heard them speak of it again for 50 years.

■ ■ ■

Ruby Hulén, Boone County prosecutor, found it difficult to build a case against Scott’s murderers. Despite the fact that most every member of the mob was from Boone County, almost every person he talked to claimed to be unable to identify anyone. Hulén eventually built a case against five men, all locals.

The first arrested was George Barkwell, businessman, city contractor and former city councilman. The most prominent of the men arrested, he was the only one charged with murder.

Community leaders rallied around Barkwell. The men who signed for his bond from jail were jointly worth more than \$1 million, a huge sum at that time. They raised money for his defense and pledged to support him during the trial.

That support was key because ultimately, the trial came down to the testimony of two men: W.E. Smith, a

banker who had signed for Barkwell’s bond, and Nutter, the reporter who covered the story and tried to save Scott’s life.

When the trial began, numerous witnesses were called before the jury, made up mostly of farmers. Nutter, the first key witness, said he saw Barkwell slip the noose around Scott’s neck and throw him from the bridge.

Smith took the stand later and said Barkwell could not have committed the crime because he and Barkwell were together on the north side of the bridge, opposite from the place where Scott had been thrown off.

The trial came down to those two pieces of testimony, and Barkwell’s attorney made the most of it in his closing argument on July 12.

“I do not believe a word of what Nutter said. If you are to believe him, you have to call W.E. Smith, one of our best citizens, a liar!”

The jury deliberated for 11 minutes; Barkwell was acquitted. No one else was ever tried for the crime.

Grace Barkwell, George’s daughter and business partner, ran forward and wrapped her arms around her father. Townspeople in the courtroom shook his hand and congratulated him. At a celebratory dinner that night, they toasted his victory.

It was perhaps Barkwell’s finest hour.

But Barkwell’s life had already begun to take a tragic turn even before April 1923. His wife, Maggie “May” Barkwell, had died of diabetes in 1921.

Although he was remarried, to Ruth Crouch, in 1930, she left him in the years that followed.



**Professor Almstedt and his wife Elizabeth with their children: baby Elsa, and from left, Margaret, Ruth and Regina, in 1915.**

Grace died of a long illness in 1925, just 18 months after the trial. Barkwell’s nephew, whom he considered an adopted son, also disappeared from his life.

His stature around town eventually diminished. In the first years following the lynching, everyone in town assumed he’d committed the crime, and he made no effort to dispel those notions. His friends about town even bragged that he’d done it.

But the people in town who were disgusted at what he had done remained that way until the day he died. As the 1920s fell further into the past, Barkwell found himself living increasingly in a world that did not approve of lynchings. Whispers on the street were that he was a radical.

When George Barkwell died in 1948 after a long illness, he merited an obituary on the front page of the *Missourian* as a prominent resident, though no mention was made of the lynching. But his estate, worth more than \$50,000, went to probate because he had left it to no one. And at his funeral, no family came to carry his coffin.

He died alone.

■ ■ ■

Gertrude Carter Scott never recovered from the killing of her husband.

After the funeral on May 9, Gertrude moved back into her parents’ home on Walnut. She would remain in Columbia for the rest of her life.

She eventually quit teaching at Douglass and withdrew into herself. As the years passed, some people whispered she’d gone crazy, while others went so far as to suggest she herself was the anonymous informant on her husband. Perhaps, they thought, she wanted the money.

All of it was too much for Gertrude, and she sank slowly into depression. She missed church more and more regularly and eventually disappeared from sight all together. Decades later, some thought she’d left town.

Neither Gertrude nor her siblings ever had children, and when she died, much of the story of James Scott died with her. It was a sad ending to a sad life.

But not all the legacies of that day were sad ones. Two other men on the bridge that night would find themselves in newspapers around the world telling a very different story.

**T**hose touched by hanging encounter success and sadness in U.S. and abroad

About a year after watching the lynching of James Scott and being called a liar in the Barkwell trial, Charles Nutter left the university as a full-time student in 1924. He returned numerous times before getting his journalism degree in 1929. Even before he graduated he was practicing his craft, first as the editor of his hometown paper in Falls City, Neb., and then as a part-time correspondent for the Associated Press. When he officially graduated in 1929, he went immediately to Mexico City as the head of the AP bureau.

For the next 35 years, he was to be at the nexus of world events. He covered the Mexican Revolution of 1929. At the London bureau, he reported on the fall of the Rhineland to Hitler in 1936. In 1937, he covered the Stalinist purges from Moscow, and in 1938 he went to Spain to cover the civil war. During World War II, he ran the AP's Latin American operations. In the United States, he worked in Washington, D.C., from 1933 to 1935 covering the New Deal.

Along with being in the right place, Nutter had a knack for connecting with the right people. He wrote a letter to Joseph Stalin, asking him for an interview to verify that he was not dead. Stalin wrote back saying that he was, and asked not to be disturbed.

He crossed paths with another writer, Ernest Hemingway, in Spain, though Nutter probably had other things on his mind. Nutter was the last Western journalist out of Madrid before the city fell



**Charles Nutter (the man who covered the lynching for the Columbia Evening Missourian in 1923) in the 1930's, while working for the Associated Press. As a reporter, he corresponded with Joseph Stalin and worked briefly with Ernest Hemingway.**

to Franco and the Fascists in 1939. He weighed 89 pounds when he came back to America. Some people thought he was crazy, but it was a story that had to be told. He had seen what could happen when a zealous minority took power.

Nutter's career brought him back to Columbia in 1944 to receive the Missouri Honor Medal. It is the highest journalism award the school can bestow, and when he retired from the AP in 1946, he had done just about everything a journalist could hope to do.

But he wasn't done yet.

He became director of International House, a business group in New Orleans designed to

boost the city's profile as a shipping port. By the time he left, the city was the second busiest port in the United States and still is today.

In 1962, he returned to journalism when he purchased the Item, a weekly newspaper in Picayune, Miss. Soon, Nutter found himself involved in the conspiracy theories that followed the assassination of John F. Kennedy. In Louisiana, New Orleans District Attorney Jimmy Garrison accused a local businessman, Clay Shaw, of being one of the principal men responsible for the death of the president.

Nutter knew Shaw from his days at the International house and knew this to be ridiculous. Garrison

was attacking Shaw not because he was a killer, but because he was gay and very popular in the New Orleans social scene.

Nutter defended Shaw loudly and often, using his standing as a city business leader as clout. It worked, and eventually Shaw was left alone. As he had at the Barkwell trial, Nutter had stood up for the truth. This time he won.



Despite the horrific events of April 29, 1923, Professor Almstedt and his family stayed in Columbia. Every summer they continued to visit the family's cabin in Michigan, and every Sunday he continued to play the organ at the Calvary Episcopal Church.

Aside from his scholarly work and contributions to the music program, Professor Almstedt earned himself a place in university lore as a result of a leg fracture in 1931. In traction, and hospitalized for three months, he taught his classes from his bed at Noyes Hospital. Stories about the students gathered in his room ran in newspapers all over the world.

All of his daughters eventually went to college, and by 1936 all of them had graduated from the University of Missouri. In 1937, he took a year's sabbatical and took a trip around the world with his wife, Elizabeth. They were gone for a year and 28 days. But here, too, their lives were touched by racism.

Touring his ancestral home of Germany, the professor and his wife stopped at a political rally. Nazism was at its peak, and the speaker was full of venom and hate. When the speaker finished, he walked through the crowd of people, and passed just six inches from Elizabeth

Almstedt.

Born an English citizen, she knew the man and hated what he stood for. She fought against the urge to kick him in the groin. English propriety prevailed, and Adolf Hitler walked by without incident.

Back in the United States, Professor Almstedt was once again the subject of verbal taunts and abuse, as he had been during World War I, because of his German heritage. Again, the university canceled all German classes. Again, he taught other classes, but he retired as a full-time professor before the war ended. Professor Almstedt fell and broke his hip in September 1954. He died a few weeks later.

In a single lifetime Professor Almstedt saw first hand, as both the victim and the witness, the effects of racism. He did, however, live to see many positive changes, among them the admittance of the first black student to the University of Missouri in 1950.

But there was always the lynching. In 1923, he wished "to lift the cloud (and) - let the sunshine back into my home," and yet it remained a family secret. It would remain so for 50 years, until one of his daughters let it slip.

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By 1936, all four of the Almstedt girls had graduated from the university and had begun to pursue their own careers. Ruth worked first at Columbia College and then later worked in the art department

at Stephens College. She married Franklin B. Launer, a music teacher at Columbia College. Margaret and her husband moved to the Mississippi Delta, where they raised two children, taught at Mississippi State University and were active and vocal racial integrationists. Elsa and her husband were champion skeet shooters.

Regina Almstedt took a somewhat different path.

Before graduating from MU in 1932 with an arts and sciences degree, she went to nursing school at St. Luke's Hospital in St. Louis, where she met her future husband, Guerdan Hardy. After traveling in Europe and working in New York, she came back to Missouri and married Hardy, a surgeon.

They had two children, David and Bill, and with them made frequent visits from their St. Louis home to see the boys' grandmother and "Opa" - German for grandpa - in Columbia. Even in the last weeks of his grandfather's life, David and the professor would sit and practice David's German.

Regina Almstedt Hardy learned a lot from her father; a love of music, a desire to travel, the value of an education and a respect for all kinds of people.

David and Bill saw it every day in how she treated people. On the street she was friendly to everyone, regardless of race or any other differences. Despite her educated and cultural upbringing, she was far

from a snob and expected no less from her children.

Growing up, the Hardys had a black nanny, Claudia. Regina made it explicitly clear to her children that she was to be regarded as part of the family. This treatment went beyond platitudes. When Claudia was short on money, Regina would give her a little extra. When Claudia's abusive husband was becoming too much to handle, Regina was there to listen to her and support her.

In her later years, Claudia had diabetes and suffered from renal disease. Regina helped take care of her, taking her places when she couldn't get there on her own and helping pay her medical bills when Claudia could not.

In the mid-1970s at a family gathering, Regina's son David, a surgeon like his father, heard tidbits of a bizarre conversation:

Rape - hanging - syphilis - "And that was all.

His mother never talked about it again, nor did anyone else in the family. Before he knew what questions to ask, his mother died in 1980. His Aunt Elsa had been dead for years, and though his Aunt Margaret didn't die until 1995, his busy life as a surgeon kept him postponing his search for answers until it was too late to ask her.

Dr. Hardy had a secret to uncover, and he wasn't the only one.

**Regina Almstedt Hardy with her sons David (left) and Bill, in the mid-1940s. Both boys grew up never hearing about the attack on their mother in 1923.**



5

The grave of James T. Scott sits alone in Columbia Cemetery. For years the grave of Scott, who was lynched from the Old Stewart bridge in 1923, laid unmarked in what was known as the segregated black cemetery within the Columbia Cemetery. Ray Fountain, the superintendent of the cemetery, and the foreman went out and measured and put the marker where they thought the grave was from descriptions of its location. "Any time I get the chance to locate an unmarked grave, we mark them," says Fountain, who read an article about the lynching in the *Missourian* in 1992.

## Characters

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### **Wynna Faye Elbert**

Recreation supervisor for the city of Columbia and local African-American historian. As a child, the lynching was a secret that she never heard discussed by her family or friends.

### **David Almstedt Hardy**

Grandson of Professor Hermann Almstedt and son of Regina Almstedt, the girl attacked at the Stewart Street Bridge in 1923. Now a St. Louis surgeon, he heard his family's role in the lynching only once, in passing.

### **James Nutter**

Son of Charles Nutter, the reporter who covered the lynching of James Scott. He and his father discussed the lynching and his father's attempts to prevent it.

### **Beulah Ralph**

Director of home school communicators for the Columbia School District. As a child, the story of the lynching of James T. Scott was openly discussed in her home.



**T**oday, just over 80 years after the lynching of James Scott, the city of Columbia seems to have largely buried the event.

No plaques mark the site of the lynching; no memorials are observed on the date. Every few years, someone at a church or in a historical group tries to stir public interest, or a journalist writes a recap of the event. But after a while, people forget again. Even the Stewart Street bridge is gone, along with the tracks that ran underneath it. Today there is a box culvert under the road and a few remaining pieces of concrete bridge abutment.

Even Scott's marker in the Columbia Cemetery can be hard to find. To look for it, go to the back of the cemetery where Boone Road and Todd Drive come together. Follow Boone Road toward the back of the cemetery. Look to the left, and stop where the Bond/Gooding marker lies. Now walk away from that marker, 48 feet, across the road down into the cemetery.

A small metal plaque replaces the original marker from years ago. It is an understated marker for someone whose alleged crime set off one of the most notorious events in Columbia history.

Now look northeast about 500 feet. Craning a bit around the trees, there's a large gray marker next to a tree right on the bend of the road. This is the grave of George Barkwell, the man accused of pushing Scott from the bridge.

He is buried less than 10 feet from the old black portion of the cemetery. The togetherness he fought so bitterly in life evaded him in death.

The other three stories that converged at the Stewart Street bridge have ended now, too. Professor Hermann Almstedt died in the 1950s, his daughter Regina in the 1980s. Charles Nutter, the reporter who became part of the story, was the last, in 1987.

The survivors and communities they left behind dealt with the events of the lynching in their own ways. Some chose to remember the event openly, while others tried to bury it. But all would be touched even 80 years later.

■ ■ ■

When professor Almstedt died, no mention was made in his obituary of his efforts to save James Scott. His daughter, Regina Almstedt Hardy, never mentioned it in public

or to her children, either, save an off-hand comment one night over drinks.

Her son, Dr. David Almstedt Hardy, heard the comment and wondered for 30 years what secret lay in his family's past. Over the years he has tried to find answers, but no one in the family seemed to know about it.

After his mother and all her sisters had died, he wrestled with it: "This has always been a haunting thing to me; there has always been this shadow," he said. "I wanted to know more about this. I wanted to know what the heck went on."

He's finally beginning to get answers. His career as a urological surgeon is slowing down a little now; he's digging through old newspapers, reading stories, talking to people who know what happened that day.

First and foremost, he's wondered for years if his mother had actually been sexually assaulted. In the last few weeks he's discovered she was not, and there is a sense of relief.

■ ■ ■

Until the day he died in 1987, Nutter refused to speak publicly about his role in the lynching of James Scott. Once, just a couple of years before his death, he offered a brief comment on the trial that followed to a reporter from his first newspaper, now called the *Missourian*: "There were 100 people that saw what I saw that night. I was the only one who didn't perjure myself."

But the secrets he kept from the public, he talked about to his son. Fascism, racism, even homophobia, were all blights Charles Nutter faced and battled in his lifetime. James said his father did it simply because he believed in fighting for what was fair and right.

For many years, James Nutter was a journalist himself; he and a partner started the first newspapers in southern Mississippi for black communities and readers.

Sixteen years after his father's death, James Nutter is retired as well. The walls of his home are covered with pictures of his father, some at home, some in the places he has traveled. He has the signed letter from Joseph Stalin written to his father all those years ago.

■ ■ ■

After Scott's children returned to Chicago following

their father's funeral they, like their father's wife, disappeared into the past. There is no known record of what effect their father's lynching had on them.

In Columbia, the lynching faded quickly as a topic of conversation in the black community; residents wanted to put the event in the past.

In Beulah Davis' house, it was not a secret to be ashamed of or buried. Her mother talked about it openly because she wanted her children to learn from it. And as young Beulah walked through the streets of Sharp End and into the rest of Columbia, she thought she saw more smiles on the white faces they passed on the street in the years after the lynching; a little more tolerance, a little less hate.

Inside the black community, despite the silence, black citizens had learned a lesson: They would have to take care of themselves. Their men had fought and died in World War I, but had received little credit. The governor had tried to send the National Guard to save James Scott, but they never arrived. It was a lesson they remembered when history seemed ready to repeat itself a quarter-century later.

In 1947, another black man was accused of a crime against a white woman; this time it was rape and murder. Floyd Cochran, a local black man, was arrested and taken to the same jail where James Scott had been taken.

Around Sharp End, Beulah and her neighbors thought he was being railroaded, arrested because the police needed a suspect, and a black man would be easy to convict. Even many of the whites thought this to be true, though they did nothing.

Once again, rumors of a new lynching spread. But this time, it wasn't the people of Columbia, however; these men were coming down from Harrisburg. The militia was supposedly coming. But this time, the black citizens of Columbia took

matters into their own hands.

Beulah watched as most of the women and children were sent south to the black community of McBaine on the Missouri River. Then the men walked the few blocks from Sharp End to the county courthouse and jail. Some were armed, some were not, but all were determined not to let justice be denied again.

The lynchers never came, and eventually Cochran was put to death in Missouri's gas chamber. In some respects it seems a Pyrrhic victory, but Beulah saw it as a step forward: At least he got his day in court.

Beulah graduated from the Frederick Douglass School almost 60 years ago, and she's still there. Though the name on the desk now reads, "Beulah Ralph," she's working in the same place she spent so many hours as a child. Today she's the director of home school communicators for the Columbia School District.

She's 77, and has tried to retire a few times, but it never seems to stick. "I like to be in the mix," she says.

Though some things have stuck, like the story of James Scott and the day he was murdered, she takes a different view from many of her peers. "My attitude is a little bit different," she says. "I'm not a negative person. I always try to find something positive."

She admits it hasn't always been easy; recalling the destruction of Sharp End in the 1950s under the guise of urban renewal still makes her angry. But she still believes in the future.

"I can't walk around thinking it's never going to change, because I can't say we haven't risen. Yes, we still have a long way to go, but that's life."



In contrast to Beulah Ralph, Wynna Faye Elbert, like most who grew up around Sharp End, never heard the story of James Scott. Instead, she and her siblings spent

their youth playing on the streets of Sharp End in the late '40s and early '50s. Often, they ran up and down the stairs in the back of the Armory building, one of the few remainders of Sharp End today.

Under the banner of urban renewal, the city tore down most of the buildings in the district and moved all of the people out in the late 1950s. When Elbert considers the impact on the black community, she says it's on par with the lynching of James Scott.

"Some people don't think they're the same, but they are; we'll never allow those things to happen again."

Elbert approaches Scott's lynching the same way, though it's not always easy to get older people to talk about it.

"We'd speak to a senior citizens group about history. The neighborhood? OK. The Douglass School? OK. The lynching? Not OK," she says.

But Elbert cannot forget the lynching or its legacy, and she keeps asking questions. Today, she is working on a book about the history of Columbia's black community. The lynching of James Scott will be part of it.

Elbert is a recreation supervisor for the city of Columbia. Just as Beulah Ralph has her office in the school she attended, Elbert's office is in the same building, the Armory, where she used to play.

"I've come back to my neighborhood," she says.

She wants other people to remember her neighborhood as well. She leads a program that takes African-American youth around what used to be Sharp End and shows kids where their history used to live. Good history or painful history, Elbert wants people to know it.

"People have kept these secrets, they say, 'Those are not things you should talk about.' My family says I'm stirring up trouble," Elbert says.

"But if you don't know where you're from, you don't know where you're going."