

12-1-1989

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### Recommended Citation

Howard, Walter T. (1989) "A Hillsborough County Tragedy: The 1930 Lynching of John Hodaz," *Tampa Bay History*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

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## A HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY TRAGEDY: THE 1930 LYNCHING OF JOHN HODAZ

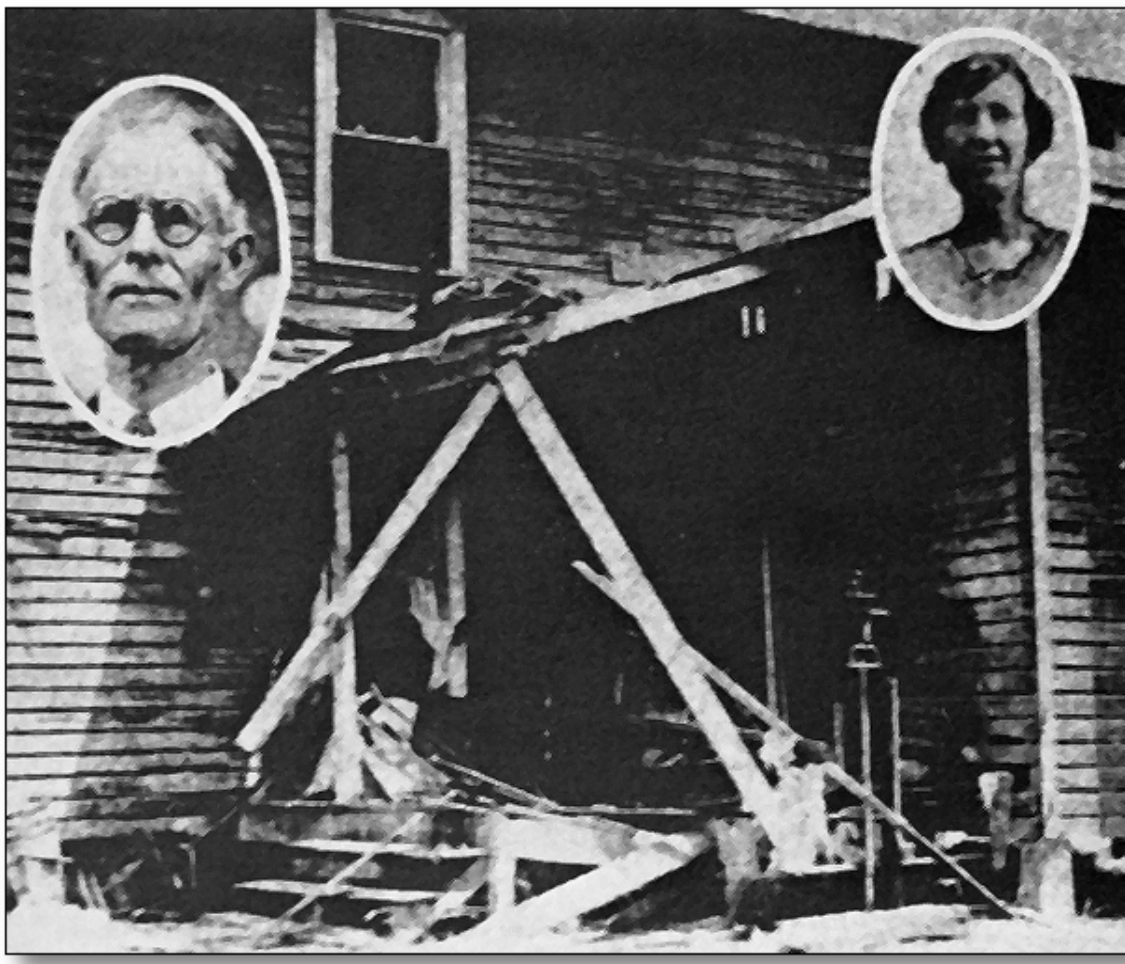
by Walter T. Howard

In April 1930, vigilantes in Florida's Hillsborough County brutally lynched a Hungarian immigrant named John Hodaz after kidnapping him from police custody. The victim stood accused of violating the "honor" of family and community: he had allegedly dynamited the home of a prominent family in Plant City, maiming and nearly killing a woman in the process.<sup>1</sup> As late as 1930 the use of lynch law to defend family honor and enforce order was still a firmly held Florida tradition.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Florida was the most lynch-prone state in the South during the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> One antilynching organization of the day, the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, reported in a special survey that during those years the Sunshine State had the highest frequency of lynch law in the country.<sup>4</sup> From 1930 to 1939, Florida went only one year (1933) without a lynching. The next worse state, Mississippi, had two lynch-free years; Georgia and Louisiana, three; and the rest of the lynching states at least four. Virginia had only one extra-legal execution in this period. These data clearly reveal that during the thirties, Florida ranked first in the South when it came to the frequency of its lynching activities.<sup>5</sup>

Hillsborough County residents, although living in and around the city of Tampa with a population of over 100,000, looked both forward and backward in 1930. In April of that year they witnessed dramatic international and national events: Mahatma Gandhi's salt campaign in India, Charles Lindberg's record coast-to-coast flight over the country and Al Capone's escapades in Chicago.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, they regularly devoured press exposés about crime and violence. For example, on April 25, 1930, local residents read on the front page of the *Tampa Tribune* about a lynching in South Carolina where whites dragged a black man from jail, strung him up and riddled his body with bullets.<sup>7</sup> On the same front page they also read about another tragedy much closer to home, in eastern Hillsborough County.

The mysterious dynamiting of the J.L. Waller home in Plant City stunned the county. The *Tampa Tribune* which carried all the details of the incident, reported that on April 24, 1930, at about 6:00 a.m., Mrs. Waller unsuspectingly opened her kitchen door only to have a bomb go off in her face. The perpetrator had placed dynamite in a tin bucket on the Waller's back porch and then connected it with a string to the doorknob. Opening the door brought an instant explosion which demolished the porch and wrecked the kitchen. The force of the blast hurled Mrs. Waller about ten feet through the air leaving her unconscious and covered with debris. Reacting quickly to the crisis, the seriously-injured woman's husband and neighbors rushed her to the hospital where doctors amputated her left leg.<sup>8</sup>

The shock to the community of Plant City caused by this catastrophe was compounded by the discovery of four undetonated bombs planted at the H.B. Willaford home. Observers described the Willafords and Wallers as "prominent farmer folk," well-liked by their neighbors. These two families lived about one mile from each other.<sup>9</sup> Willaford had awakened that morning to discover a box of explosives with 350 sticks of dynamite under his bedroom window. Fortunately for him,

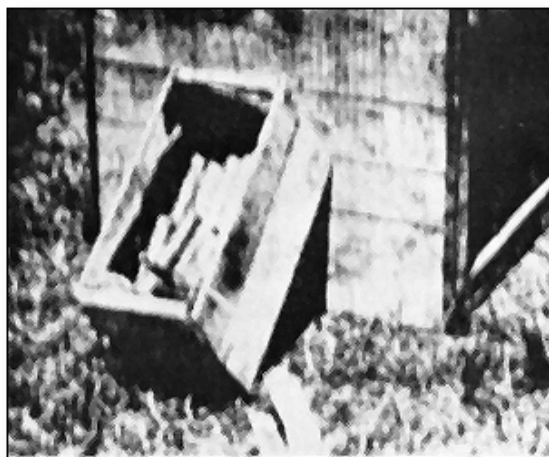
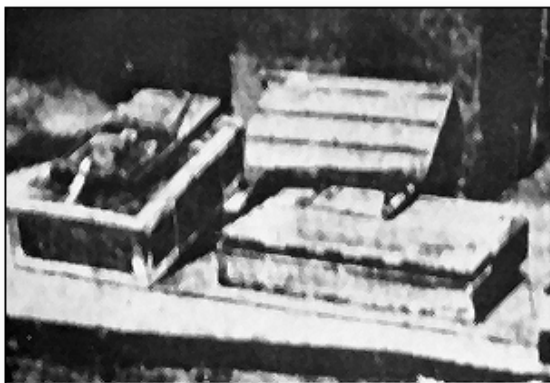


**Rear of the J. L. Waller home, showing the bomb's damage. Insets are portraits of Waller and his wife, who was reported "near death of explosion injuries."**

Photograph from *Tampa Tribune*, April 25, 1930.

a long fuse connected to it had burned about three inches and then sputtered out harmlessly. Later in the day he tripped a string on the path leading to his barn which sprung a rat trap device designed to set off another charge, but it too failed to detonate. Further, he found another bomb connected to the barn door, ready to go off. Finally, after a thorough search of his property, Willaford came across a fourth dynamite device along a well-trod path near his house. Not surprisingly, friends congratulated this lucky man on his remarkable escape from disaster.<sup>10</sup>

Press accounts of tragedy and near-tragedy in Plant City inflamed local opinion. Tampa papers described in graphic detail the so-called "fiendish plot to destroy the Waller family and H.B. Willaford family," and they declared that the "bomber had apparently worked for several hours during the night, setting the quiet country scene for wholesale murder." Finally, they confidently claimed that the perpetrator of this outrage would soon be apprehended.<sup>11</sup>



**Clockwise from upper left: Marsh Waller, the son of the bombing victim; Mr. and Mrs. H. B. Willaford who escaped injury when bombs at their home did not explode; a box of dynamite that failed to explode; one the assembled devices that did not detonate.**

Photograph from *Tampa Tribune*, April, 25 1930.

Reporters had good reasons for making this claim. Indeed, from the beginning of the investigation authorities viewed a man named John Hodaz as the chief suspect. He was a forty-one-year-old naturalized citizen, born in Hungary. The *Tampa Times* described him as an unmarried person who often appeared quiet, depressed and sullen. His naturalization papers revealed that he had come to the United States from eastern Europe in 1915. It would later be learned that Hodaz had worked for the U.S. Navy in World War I and had been trained in the use of explosives. Another Tampa paper published a brief story stating that the small Hungarian

community in Hillsborough county declared this immigrant to be a Czech, although local Czechs correctly denied this. In response to this claim and denial, the *Tribune* reported that “nobody wants to claim him.”<sup>12</sup>

It developed that Hodaz had harbored a grievance against Waller and Willaford. About one year prior to the bombing, both Hillsborough County men had been instrumental in having the Hungarian arrested and prosecuted for a series of domestic burglaries in the Plant City area. In addition to this, Willaford had physically assaulted Hodaz who then sought refuge in the Waller home. Mr. Waller, however, drove him back out onto the street.<sup>13</sup> The humiliated immigrant apparently waited a year and then took his revenge.

Needless to say, law enforcement officials went right to work on this case. Plant City officers, Tampa policemen and Hillsborough County deputies combined their manpower and resources in an intense manhunt for Hodaz. All day on April 24, and throughout the night, they searched with bloodhounds for the alleged culprit over the countryside surrounding Plant City. According to one account, Hillsborough County Sheriff R.T. Joughlin, “fresh from a moonshine raid,” went about spreading a “dragnet” over the greater Plant City area. Efforts to find Hodaz at his usual haunts were unavailing, and law officers monitored major roads throughout the county. Finally, the police in neighboring communities were furnished a description of the suspect.<sup>14</sup>

Local newspapers wasted no time in publishing an astonishing announcement that encouraged unauthorized efforts to track down and punish the dynamiter. They printed an offer, made by Willaford and Sheriff Joughlin, promising a \$1,000 reward to anyone coming forth with information leading to the bomber's capture, “dead or alive.”<sup>15</sup>

With this kind of encouragement, a large, unofficial search party organized itself soon after the dynamiting. This unruly crew, consisting of scores of outraged Plant City citizens, looked day and night for Hodaz. Reacting wildly to any rumor, these angry men roamed over Hillsborough County searching frantically for the Hungarian whom they believed had set the explosives at the Waller and Willaford homes. At one point, this restless group took a strawberry grower named Otto Keen, who was suspected of hiding the dynamiter, from his house and flogged him severely for some ten minutes before satisfying itself that he was not concealing Hodaz. Expressing concern about these extra-legal activities, law enforcement officials stated that when the suspect was apprehended he would promptly be spirited away to an out-of-town jail for safekeeping.<sup>16</sup>

Authorities sought to assure the public that they were in control of the tense situation. Directing the investigation, Sheriff Joughlin told reporters that he would soon make an arrest. On the day after the bombing, State Attorney J. Parkhill joined the inquiries and called the dynamiting “one of the most dastardly crimes ever perpetrated in Hillsborough County.” The state attorney and sheriff followed every lead until the case broke wide open.<sup>17</sup>

On April 26, two days after the bombing, Deputy Sheriff Tobe Robinson responded to an anonymous tip and arrested Hodaz in Tampa. The suspect surrendered without a struggle. He was taken into custody at a boarding house at 115 Magnolia Avenue, where he had rented a room under the assumed name of “Alga Diaz” on the night before the bombing. “I told Hodaz what I wanted,” stated Robinson, “and he came along without any resistance.” The deputy added, “he

only asked that he be given a chance to get a lawyer. I handcuffed him and we started out.” Robinson searched Hodaz’s room and found \$12,000 in Polish government bonds and a file of newspaper clippings about the dynamiting episode.<sup>18</sup> The deputy claimed that his prisoner confessed to planting the undetonated explosives at the Willaford home, but he denied the Waller bombing. Finally, Robinson related that Hodaz swore he was aided by an accomplice, whom he refused to name.<sup>19</sup>

The deputy put Hodaz in his car and headed toward Bartow in neighboring Polk County. In some unexplained way, however, a band of gunmen knew precisely where to wait for the officer and his prisoner on this route. “I guess I was about five miles southeast of Plant City,” explained Robinson, “when I saw a car coming to meet me with his headlights out.”<sup>20</sup> He also declared that another auto came up behind him at about the same time. Finally, he described the kidnapping of his prisoner in the following way:

Four men jumped out wearing black masks, each armed, and one holding a flashlight. Three of the guns were shoved into my side, and one against the head of Hodaz, and the flashlight brought out his features clearly in the darkness. I guess they knew him. Not much was said and there were eight men in two cars. They still held guns on me and they put Hodaz in one car. They turned around and told me to drive like hell. As I started .four shots were fired.<sup>21</sup>

The kidnappers took Hodaz and brutally lynched him. They first drove their captive to a secluded area of Hillsborough County about ten miles north of Plant City.<sup>22</sup> There they dragged the handcuffed prisoner from the car while someone backed another automobile under an overhanging bough of an oak tree.<sup>23</sup> A rope was thrown over the limb, and then a perfectly fashioned hangman’s noose was placed around Hodaz’s neck. One of the vigilantes forced the helpless man up on top of the motorized scaffold. Several gunmen trained their weapons on the hapless prisoner and fired just as the auto supporting him was abruptly withdrawn. One shotgun blast discharged at close range tore through the body beneath the heart, ripping a jagged hole in the middle of the victim’s torso. Another similar charge took effect on the right side of the chest. The lynch victim was killed instantly by shotgun fire rather than by strangulation. Before departing, vigilantes fired five pistol bullets into the abdomen of the lifeless form as it swung from the oak.<sup>24</sup>

The next morning a woodcutter found the executed man swinging from the oak tree.<sup>25</sup> Word of the macabre scene swept through the county, and within an hour of this discovery, a large crowd of curious onlookers gathered in pouring rain to view the gaping holes in the dead man’s chest.<sup>26</sup> One report estimated the gathering to number in the hundreds. The narrow road winding through the woods was choked with cars and horse-drawn wagons. The crowd expressed no sympathy for the victim. In fact, one angry man in the throng had to be restrained to keep him from kicking the body of Hodaz. A few men even asked for pieces of the hangman’s rope to take home as souvenirs. Sheriff Joughlin and State Attorney Parkhill were among the last to arrive at the site that morning.<sup>27</sup>

At the scene, in a sudden spring rainstorm, Justice of the Peace A.W. Hawkins hastily empaneled a coroner’s jury. Indeed, he selected a jury from the spectators who stood about. This



Headline from the *Tampa Tribune*, April 28, 1930.

group gathered in the cleared spot beneath the tree and stared at the mutilated form that hung above. The sheriff took down the body, and jurors watched as the corner went through a perfunctory examination and declared: "I pronounce this man dead."<sup>28</sup>

After the pronouncement Sheriff Joughlin virtually absolved his deputy of any liability in this affair. He declared that Robinson was merely following orders in taking Hodaz to Bartow. Even so, neither lawman ever satisfactorily explained how the waiting gunmen knew what route would be used to take Hodaz out of Tampa that day. The deputy speculated that one of the cars driven by vigilantes must have followed him to and from Tampa. While this might have explained the presence of the car that came up from behind, it clearly failed to account for the automobile that came toward him with its lights out. As events proved, investigating authorities never challenged the officer's story. Indeed, the sheriff announced at the lynch scene itself that he would pay the posted reward money to Deputy Robinson.<sup>29</sup>

The Hillsborough County sheriff took it for granted that few in Plant City would object to his awarding the reward money to his subordinate. This town, where the lynch victim lived and worked, before his demise, was a small community of some 6,000 inhabitants in 1930.<sup>30</sup> Situated just twenty miles from the metropolis of Tampa, the pleasant-looking city was identified as the center of strawberry farming in Florida.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, unlike many farming towns in the state, Plant City was neither culturally isolated nor economically backward. Attractions and diversions

in nearby Tampa offered residents many opportunities for varied ways to pass their leisure time. Moreover, the *Tampa Tribune* and *Tampa Times* kept them well-informed about national and international affairs. Plant City citizens lived in a bustling community and drove on paved streets lined with many modern-looking office and commercial buildings; most owned cars and enjoyed the use of electricity in their homes.<sup>32</sup>

In spite of the relatively modern appearance of Plant City in 1930, many who lived in and around this rural community still adhered to the old-fashioned frontier ethics of their fathers. This code of conduct called for the immediate administration of informal justice to criminals or undesirables, bypassing costly, time-consuming legal processes. Although blacks were the most common victims of lynch law in the South, whites identified as outsiders, especially foreigners, also suffered at the hands of vigilantes.<sup>33</sup>

A number of foreign-born whites lived in Hillsborough County in 1930. Moreover, many of them were clearly visible to the native majority as farm workers and transients. In a county of some 153,519 inhabitants, foreign-born whites comprised about eleven percent of the total population in 1930, and blacks made up nineteen percent.<sup>34</sup> These large minority groups, which included a small contingent of eastern Europeans,<sup>35</sup> undoubtedly raised the anxiety level of native white Southerners who were much concerned about maintaining their dominance in the community.<sup>36</sup>

By 1930 the native white majority in Hillsborough County had not yet learned to live peacefully with the varied ethnic groups who resided in their midst. They still looked askance at the different social customs and cultural practices of blacks, Cubans, Spaniards, Italians and eastern Europeans who lived among them in the Tampa Bay area.<sup>37</sup> Varying dress, mannerisms, languages, social habits and institutions of immigrants sometimes stirred fear and distrust among the dominant social groups in the county. Members of the dominant groups, in turn, had often used extra-legal violence as an instrument of social control against ethnics accused of seriously violating expected standards of behavior.<sup>38</sup>

In addition, economic conditions created by the onset of the Great Depression undoubtedly exacerbated ethnic tensions in Hillsborough County. Hard times in the vicinity of Plant City took the form of bank failures, mortgage foreclosures, falling crop prices and rural unemployment. In this increasingly constricted local economy, native whites and ethnics competed for the low-income, marginal jobs provided by agricultural and commercial enterprises. In all probability, indigenous agricultural laborers were angered when they could find little or no work, while migrants, many of whom were foreign-born and willing to accept subsistence-level wages or alternative payments, continued to plant and harvest strawberries and other crops.<sup>39</sup> Lynching a Hungarian immigrant might well have been one way this distressed group vented its frustration over economic difficulties which it could not control.

It fell to the representatives of the native majority to apprehend and deal with the vigilantes who lynched Hodaz. Not surprisingly, they were pessimistic about the upcoming investigation. Sheriff Joughlin, for example, declared that identifying and capturing the murderers “will be extremely difficult in view of the scanty evidence.” He continued, “my regret is that we did not get a chance to question Hodaz concerning an accomplice.” State Attorney Parkhill stated that





**Aerial view of Plant City in 1928.**

Photograph from *History of Hillsborough County* by Ernest L. Robinson.

the Hillsborough County grand jury would investigate the lynching in May, but he speculated that apprehending the masked killers would be difficult without any eyewitnesses to identify them.<sup>40</sup>

After the coroner's inquest, officials turned the lynch victim's remains over to a Plant City undertaker. Graphic press accounts and wild rumors stirred a morbid curiosity among a great many people. In fact, more than 4,000 persons from all over the Tampa Bay area visited the local funeral home to view the Hungarian's body. This throng included men, women and even children, who were "abnormally curious to see the victim of the hideous lynching."<sup>41</sup>

Soon after the burial of Hodaz, community leaders in the county assessed the unfortunate situation created by this incident. The *Tampa Tribune* led the outcry over the lynching. Along with the details of this grisly, extra-legal execution, it featured a front-page story about how Florida led the nation in lynchings in 1929.<sup>42</sup> It also ran a long and strongly-worded editorial titled, "An Avoidable Lynching," which stated that "it is unfortunate that Hillsborough County's record for the year has already been marred." Further, the editorial emphatically noted that "this was a lynching which could have been avoided easily. . . .To take the accused man directly back



**1925 view of Plant City, at the intersection of North Collins Street and Reynolds Street, with the Bank of Plant City on the left.**

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

into the territory where indignation centered was a stupid piece of business. He should have been taken in the other direction.”<sup>43</sup>

The Tampa paper wrote at length about the causes of this tragedy. Moreover, its analysis went further than noting the obvious motivation of vigilantes seeking vengeance for the Plant City bombing. It explained to the public that a year earlier authorities had unsuccessfully prosecuted the Hungarian for several burglaries and then reluctantly dismissed the charges. The dismissal of charges was allegedly based on the “technicality” of a defective search warrant used to gather evidence for the state’s case against Hodaz. This evasion of punishment, editors claimed, was the key factor in motivating a small group of Hillsborough County vigilantes to take the law into their own hands. The lynchers, according to the *Tribune*, were fearful that this man might once again manipulate the legal process to avoid being brought to justice. The editorial concluded that “we’ll have to score another black mark against Old Man Technicality, who so often defeats justice and turns loose upon the public criminals who ought to be doing time.”<sup>44</sup>



1925 view of Plant City's West Reynolds Street.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

Editors in nearby Orange County followed the Tampa newspaper's lead. The *Orlando Sentinel* took a special interest in this case, and it ran an editorial which argued that the Plant City lynching was actually an understandable protest against legal technicalities. It also characterized Hodaz as "an undesirable citizen, a lawbreaker, and a positive menace to society." *Sentinel* editors asserted that "whenever court procedures moved with increased swiftness and with greater surety, the incentive to such an affair. . .will be lessened and the number of lynchings will be decreased."<sup>45</sup>

The *Tribune* promptly responded in kind to this editorial. It stated that "probably upper-most in the inflamed minds of those who did Hodaz to death was the thought that, if left to procedures of the courts, he might escape the penalty for this much more serious offense." It then concluded by asserting that "the lynching was a crime, but it was at the same time a bloody assertion of the lack of confidence in the established process of justice."<sup>46</sup>

The Tampa newspaper continued its analysis of this lynching tragedy in a third editorial which appeared on May 2, 1930. In this piece, however, the *Tribune* made a full disclosure of all the facts and admitted that there was more to the Hodaz affair than a band of vigilantes venting frustration over legal technicalities. Tampa editors finally spelled out the details of the Hungarian's earlier encounter with the law and in the process cleared up some of the misunderstandings about this case. After his previous arrest, Hodaz had pled guilty to burglary charges and the court was preparing to sentence him to a term in Florida state prison. At this point he retained a private attorney who withdrew the guilty plea and asked the court to discharge the prisoner on the grounds that the arrest warrant had been technically defective. The court refused to do this. Hodaz was then tried before a jury on the burglary charges. After hearing all of the evidence, the jury acquitted the defendant.<sup>47</sup>

The *Tribune* laid out these facts and tried to defend its earlier version of the case. Editors claimed that "it is our information that the validity of the warrant figured in the trial and probably had something to do with the verdict rendered." However, they failed to explain just how the so-called faulty warrant influenced the jury's decision, nor did they state why they had failed to mention the jury trial in their previous coverage of the story. Instead, they diverted attention from these questions by singling out Hodaz's lawyer as the villain, arguing that it was he who had thwarted justice in order to save his client from punishment.<sup>48</sup>

Other editors in south Florida wrote much less about this lynching and its causes. Nevertheless, they were critical of this lawless act. The *St. Petersburg Times* lamented the fact that lynch law plagued the United States, while there were no similar customs in other "civilized" nations like England, Canada and Australia.<sup>49</sup> A *Miami Herald* editorial exclaimed: "Another brutal lynching disgraces the name of Florida. . . . Brave officer! It is the duty of officers of the law to protect their prisoners. The crime calls for investigation and vigorous prosecution."<sup>50</sup>

The lynching did, indeed, call for thorough investigation and vigorous prosecution of the guilty parties. In this particular case, however, there would be neither. On May 6, 1930, the Hillsborough County criminal justice system failed to consider the Hodaz lynching when the spring term of the circuit court convened without the customary empaneling of a new grand jury. The *Tribune* announced that this step sharply broke with tradition; to be sure, it was the first time in the county's history that no grand jury was convened. Disenchanted editors ran a story entitled, "What, No Grand Jury?" Noting the claim "that there is no particular demand for the services of a grand jury at this time," the *Tribune* countered, "there is always some matter which could be investigated by that important body, a recent tragic occurrence near Plant City for example."<sup>51</sup> This article made it clear to the public that, in the final analysis, Hillsborough County officials did not really want to know who executed Hodaz.

This lynching was not an isolated incident of southern vigilante justice. Indeed, the Plant City episode was one of twenty-one such crimes that took place in the South in 1930.<sup>52</sup> This number of extra-legal executions, double the figure of 1929, alarmed many concerned groups and organizations, especially the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). They feared that lynching was making a comeback after declining in the 1920s.<sup>53</sup> In response to this situation, the CIC created the Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching (SCSL) to investigate and analyze all the

lynchings of 1930. To accomplish this, the SCSL named one white and one black investigator to gather evidence about the vigilante-style executions of that year. The white investigator was Arthur F. Raper, a social scientist from the University of North Carolina, and the black one was Walter Chivers, a sociologist from Morehouse College.<sup>54</sup>

Arthur Raper inquired into the Hodaz lynching. Details clearly raising the possibility of police complicity or misconduct in the slaying immediately attracted the southern sociologist's attention. In his final report, Raper bluntly stated, "police officers were either in connivance with the mob or else extremely stupid." He concluded that "the mob took possession of the accused in the presence of the officer, who did not fire a shot or make any other real effort to protect the accused."<sup>55</sup> Raper's investigation of the Hodaz killing was part of a larger story of educated, native-white Southerners taking a strong stand against lynching in the 1930s. This change in attitude marked a dramatic development in the history of the modern South.<sup>56</sup> Raper conducted rigorous inquiries into all twenty-one lynchings of 1930 in an effort to compile scientific evidence to enlighten Southerners about the evils of lynching. His findings were compiled, edited and published by the SCSL in pamphlet form in 1932, with several other CIC members writing additional magazine articles to publicize the information.<sup>57</sup> Finally, these case studies and findings, including a brief analysis of the Hodaz episode, were published in 1933 as *The Tragedy of Lynching*.

Beyond producing this classic study, Raper spoke widely on its conclusions. Throughout the South he addressed civic clubs, churches and other similar groups. Many Southerners, he believed, thought lynching terrible and were in fact pleased to have detailed information to buttress their opposition. The SCSL sent Raper's book to educational institutions and libraries all over the South. As a result, thoughtful readers throughout the region had the opportunity to examine the details of the Hodaz slaying in the larger context of the overall story of southern lynchings.<sup>58</sup>

One Southerner opposed to this gruesome custom was Florida Governor Doyle Carlton (1929-1932), but in spite of his antilynching views he failed to take any action in response to the Hodaz execution.<sup>59</sup> The press reported that when the Plant City tragedy occurred the state's chief executive was traveling by train to North Carolina on official business and could not be reached for a statement. Even so, upon returning to Florida, Carlton did not make any effort to condemn the crime publicly, nor did he call for any special investigation of this lawless act. He could have acknowledged possible police misconduct in the matter and then demanded that certain Hillsborough County law officers, perhaps Sheriff Joughlin and Deputy Robinson, be brought before him to explain their actions in this matter. The governor, however, took none of these steps.<sup>60</sup> He might have avoided involvement in this case in part because he was already preoccupied with combating the effects of the Great Depression in his state.<sup>61</sup> In addition to this, none of the organizations and groups that usually called on government leaders to respond to such tragedies wrote Carlton after this lynching. Thus, the governor was under little pressure.

The Hodaz killing ushered in a decade of lynching violence in Florida. Vigilantes in the Sunshine State executed twelve blacks and three whites in the period from 1930 to 1939.<sup>62</sup> The Hodaz lynching fit certain recognizable patterns of vigilante tactics that typified most of the extra-legal murders that occurred in Florida during the thirties. Most of the decade's lynch



Anti-lynching cartoon indicting “Th’ Law” in Florida.

From the *Philadelphia Record*, reprinted in *The Crisis*, January 1935.

victims, like Hodaz were targeted for execution by a small band of vigilantes, kidnapped from the police without a struggle, carried off in a car to a secluded area and murdered in a vigilante-style execution conducted wholly outside the authority of the law. And, of course, none of the lynchers was ever punished.<sup>63</sup>

While the Plant City tragedy can be seen in terms of this broad picture of the history of lynching in Florida during the thirties, it was also part of the long story of extra-legal violence in urban Hillsborough County and surrounding areas. Indeed, civil rights groups had identified this county as an area prone to lynching.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, vigilantes in neighboring counties lynched a total of twenty-two victims between 1900 and 1935.<sup>65</sup> In Tampa itself, between 1858 and 1935, six whites and three blacks fell victim to lynch law. Further, in the period from 1900 to 1940, there were five lynchings in this large metropolis, a total that represents “one of the largest numbers recorded for any major city in the South.”<sup>66</sup>

In the Hodaz case none of the lynchers was ever officially identified, let alone brought to trial. Authorities in this instance clearly refused to take action. County officials, the state attorney and even the governor failed to investigate aggressively this tragic crime. Not one official was committed to apprehending and then prosecuting the guilty parties. Each undoubtedly viewed the lynch victim as an undesirable immigrant and a menacing criminal who deserved his fate, even at the hands of vigilantes.

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<sup>1</sup> The strong inclination of southerners in Hillsborough County to take the law into their own hands has been established in recent studies: Robert P. Ingalls, “Lynching and Establishment Violence in Tampa, 1858-1935,” *Journal of Southern History*, 53 (November 1987), 613-644; Ingalls, “General Joseph B. Wall and Lynch-Law in Tampa,” *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 63 (July 1984), 51-57.

<sup>2</sup> For a broad discussion of the issues of violation of honor, southern violence, and vigilantism, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> For detailed account of Florida’s fifteen lynchings during the thirties, see Walter T. Howard, “Vigilante Justice: Extra-Legal Executions in Florida, 1930-1940” (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> *Miami Daily-News*, April 2, 1930.

<sup>5</sup> Records of victims lynched in Florida during the 1930s can be found in the files of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching at the Trevor Arnett Library, Atlanta University, Atlanta, Georgia. There are also accounts of these incidents in the “Lynching Files” in the Administrative Correspondence Records of Florida governors, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, Florida. See also Jessie Daniel Ames, *The Changing Character of Lynching* (Atlanta: Commission on Interracial Cooperation, 1942), 36.

<sup>6</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, April 4, 15, 21, 1930.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, April 25, 1930.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*; *Tampa Times*, April 25, 1930.

<sup>9</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, April 25, 1930.

<sup>10</sup> *Tampa Times*, April 25, 1930.

<sup>11</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, April 28, 1930.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*; *Tampa Times*, April 28, 1930.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Tampa Times*, April 25, 1930.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.; *Tampa Tribune*, April 25, 1930.

<sup>16</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, April 27, 1930; *Tampa Times*, April 28, 1930.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, April 27,28, 1930.

<sup>19</sup> Investigators found only one clue suggesting that Hodaz may have been helped by an accomplice. They spotted an extra set of foot prints in the garden around Willaford's house. *Tampa Times*, April 28, 1930.

<sup>20</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, April 28, 1930.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> One Tampa journalist, who was a child at the time of the Hodaz execution, recalls that the victim was lynched at a spot on the road between Thonotassasa and Zephyrhills (off of present-day U.S. Highway 301). He also reports that it took place somewhere in the vicinity of what is now Hillsborough State Park. Author's interview with Leland Hawes, *Tampa Tribune* staff writer and editor, March 11, 1988.

<sup>23</sup> *Tampa Times*, April 28, 1930.

<sup>24</sup> The Hodaz lynching was, in the words of one observer, "conducted with precision pointing almost to rehearsal." The same commentator noted that "there were no signs of hurried preparation" by the vigilantes in this carefully planned execution. *Tampa Tribune*, April 29, 1930. Since neither the governor nor the grand jury investigated this crime, the only detailed accounts of it were published by Tampa's two newspapers.

<sup>25</sup> For a generation, vivid memories of this affair were associated in the minds of Hillsborough County residents with the lynch-tree widely known as the "Hodaz Oak." Author's interview with Leland Hawes, March 11, 1930.

<sup>26</sup> *Tampa Times*, April 28, 1930.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, April 29, 1930.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930; Population, III, Population – Florida* (Washington, D.C., 1930), 423.

<sup>31</sup> Quintilla Geer Bruton and Diard E. Baily, Jr., *Plant City: Its Origins and History* (St. Petersburg, Fla.: Valkyrie Press, 1977), 71; Ernest L. Robinson, *History of Hillsborough County* (St. Augustine, Fla.: Record Company, 1928), 83-88.

<sup>32</sup> As the central marketplace for eastern Hillsborough County, Plant City was strategically located at the hub of six rail lines. Further, in the area of education this community claimed an accredited high school and four grammar schools with an enrollment of hundreds of students. It also boasted a thriving social and cultural life, including its own music and opera house. Bruton and Baily, *Plant City*, 71; Robinson, *Hillsborough County*, 54, 87. See also Charles S. Johnson, *Statistical Atlas of Southern Counties: Listing and Analysis of Southern Counties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 77.

<sup>33</sup> Richard M. Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 144-179; Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth Century South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), passim.



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<sup>34</sup> The distribution of the county's ethnic population in 1930 can be broken down in the following way: 107,623 (70.1%) native whites; 16,737 (10.9%) foreign-born whites, and 28,983 (18.9%) black. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census*, 413, 423.

<sup>35</sup> The east European population in 1930, in Hillsborough county numbered as follows: 91 Poles, 52 Czechs, 101 Austrians, and 268 Russians. Only a handful of the 1,347 Hungarians who lived in Florida at the time resided in this urban county. *Ibid.*, 402, 425.

<sup>36</sup> One recent study of Tampa's ethnic history briefly discusses ethnic and class divisions in urban Hillsborough County. The authors state that the "white power structure jealously guarded and retained control" of the community. Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 55-57.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, passim.

<sup>38</sup> Robert P. Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa, 1882-1936* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), passim.

<sup>39</sup> By 1930 Hillsborough County agriculture was clearly feeling the sting of the Great Depression. Hundreds of agricultural laborers were unemployed, and those still working often suffered wage cuts. Overall, the county's farmers in 1930 planted fewer crops of all kinds than in previous years. In addition to this, there was also a sharp decline in the acres of strawberries planted and in the number of quarts harvested. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Agriculture, vol. 2, Part II* (Washington, D.C., 1932), 238-250.

<sup>40</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, April 29, 1930.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Of the ten lynchings that occurred in 1929, four took place in Florida, three in Texas and one each in Kentucky, Tennessee and Mississippi. *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Orlando Sentinel*, April 30, 1930.

<sup>46</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, May 1, 1930.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, May 2, 1930

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *St. Petersburg Times*, April 29, 1930.

<sup>50</sup> *Miami Herald*, April 29, 1930.

<sup>51</sup> *Tampa Tribune*, May 7, 8, 1930.

<sup>52</sup> Hodaz was the only white man lynched in 1930. Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933), 469-471.

<sup>53</sup> Raymond Wolters, *Negroes and the Great Depression* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970), 116-17.

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<sup>54</sup> Ann Wells Ellis, "The Commission on Interracial Cooperation, 1919-1944: Its Activities and Results" (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgia State University, 1975), 59-105.

<sup>55</sup> Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> For accounts of the origins, development, and impact of antilynching sentiment in the twentieth-century South, see Wilma Dykeman and James Stokely, *Seeds of Southern Change: The Life of Will Alexander* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), passim. The CIC's role in regard to Florida's lynchings of the early 1930s is covered in James R. McGovern's *Anatomy of a Lynching: The Killing of Claude Neal* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 14.

<sup>57</sup> George F. Milton, "The Impeachment of Judge Lynch," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 8 (April 1932), 250-52; Howard Odum, "Lynching, Fears, and Folkways," *The Nation*, December 30, 1931, 719-20; Alex Spence, "Lynching and the Nation," *Commonweal*, April 13, 1932, 658-59.

<sup>58</sup> Ellis, "The Commission on Interracial Cooperation," 72-77.

<sup>59</sup> Carlton's antilynching stance was not surprising in light of his educational background. He attended such prestigious northern schools as Columbia University and the University of Chicago. His opposition to the practice of lynching, however, was based primarily on his recognition of the damage it did to the state's reputation in the North, discouraging northern visitors from coming to Florida for vacations with their tourist dollars. A brief, but enlightening, portrait of this governor can be found in Charlton Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1971), 395-99.

<sup>60</sup> By way of contrast, Carlton's successor, Governor David Sholtz, took all of these listed steps in response to the 1934 lynching of a black man named Robert Johnson in Tampa. Walter T. Howard, "A Blot on Tampa's History: The 1934 Lynching of Robert Johnson," *Tampa Bay History*, 6 (Fall/Winter 1984), 7-8, 15.

<sup>61</sup> In contrast to his inaction in the case, Governor Carlton reacted firmly to the next Florida lynching that occurred in Calhoun County in August 1931. He carefully investigated this extra-legal murder of two black youths who had been accused of attacking a white man. Moreover, he tried unsuccessfully to have a local grand jury indict the lynchers. See "Report Concerning Lynching of Charlie and Richard Smoak in Calhoun County, Florida, August 28, 1931," from State Attorney John H. Carter to Governor Carlton, May 28, 1932, all in Doyle Carlton Records, 1929-1932, "Lynching Files," Administrative Correspondence, Series 204, Box 53, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee, Florida.

<sup>62</sup> Ames, *The Changing Character of Lynching*, 36.

<sup>63</sup> Howard, "Vigilante Justice," passim.

<sup>64</sup> National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Thirty Years of Lynching, 1889-1918* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 53-56.

<sup>65</sup> Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes*, passim.

<sup>66</sup> Ingalls, "Lynching and Establishment Violence," 643.