

DAY 1 IN A 3-PART SERIES ON THE LAST LYNCHING IN CULPEPER

The untold story of Allie Thompson



PHOTO

1
 2
 3

WRITTEN BY ALLISON BROPHY CHAMPION | RESEARCH ASSISTANCE BY ZANN MINER

About the series

Last summer, the Star-Exponent ran articles by its sister newspapers on the history of lynching in Virginia. The articles appeared shortly after the U.S. Senate officially apologized for never having enacted a federal anti-lynching law.

When the lynching stories ran in the Star-Exponent, readers generally had two reactions:

1. Why are you bringing up such a bad chapter in our history? 2. You should have included something on Culpeper's last lynching.

As for the first question, yes, lynching is still a sore subject among many people in the South. Yet it is something that we cannot sweep under the rug.

With that in mind, we embarked upon learning more about the story of Allie Thompson. Months of research and planning later, we present to you our findings.

—Rob Humphreys
 Managing Editor



PHOTO

The field in northern Culpeper County where Allie Thompson was arrested in November 1918 on charges of raping a white woman, Lelia Sisk.

The murder of an 18-year-old black man, lynched by a mob Nov. 25, 1918, remains one of the most intriguing — and mysterious — crimes in Culpeper history.

Many facts and records related to the Monday morning lynching have disappeared with time.

A deeper look at existing documents, however, reveals a tragic story of two very different families robbed of due process in the name of anonymous hate. Months of research also exposes key facts were misrepresented 87 years ago, when one group of 12 to 15 vigilantes did not have to answer for their crime.

But as the buried truth is uncovered, bits and pieces of the story form a better picture of what really happened to Charles Allie Thompson.



Allie Thompson's grandmother
3
4

TIMELINE

- 1863:** Abraham Lincoln Issues Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves in Confederate states.
- 1865:** Civil War ends. Virginia rejoins Union.
- 1866:** Wade H. Thompson, Allie Thompson's father, and Ida V. Marshall, his mother, born in Rappahannock County. Wade is the son of Wade and Katie Pendleton.
- 1872:** Charles D. Sisk, future husband of Lelia Nicholson Sisk, born in Madison County.
- 1878:** Last time there was a lynching in Culpeper, according to 1918 account by The Culpeper Exponent.
- 1887:** Charles Sisk, now 15, found guilty of voluntary manslaughter by Madison County jury. He is sentenced to 16 months in jail.
- 1888:** Sisk gets another six months in jail after trying to bum down his cell.
- 1890:** Charles Sisk, now 18, marries Laura Nicholson, 15, of Madison. She is the daughter of Gamett and Winnie Nicholson, also of Madison.
- 1890:** Wade Thompson, Allie Thompson's father, marries Ida V. Marshall, Allie's mother, in Culpeper County.
- 1891:** Lelia Frances Nicholson born in Madison County, the oldest daughter of Ephraim Nicholson and Patsy Corbin Nicholson. Lelia was raised in the Nethers area of Madison, on land later seized from the government for the establishment of Shenandoah National Park. She was the third of 13 children.
- 1900:** Charles Allie Thompson born in Culpeper County, the youngest son of Wade Thompson, a farmer, and Ida Marshall Thompson. Allie was the middle child of five. He grew up in northern Culpeper on a farm owned by his father. According to census records, both black and white families lived in the rural farming village.
- April 1905:** Charles Sisk, now 33 and widowed, marries Lelia Frances Nicholson, 14, at her parents' home in Madison. She is a neighbor and already has several children. By December of this year, Sisk later claims in divorce documents, his new bride left him and headed to Washington, D.C.
- 1906:** Thompson family photograph taken, including Allie's mother, his sister, Lillian, Allie himself and baby sister, Myrtle. This is the only known photograph of Allie Thompson, about 6 years old at the time.
- 1910:** Census lists Lelia (Nicholson) Sisk living in a private home as a cook in the town of Culpeper. The census says she is 18 and has been married for four years. According to the census, Lelia bore one child by 1910, but it had died.
- 1910:** U.S. Census lists Wade Thompson and family still living in northern Culpeper County, near Amitsville. Wade and Ida have been married 19 years and have five children — Robert, 15, Lillian, 13, Charles Allie, 10, Myrtle, 6 and Ida, six months. Wade, a farmer, owns his own farm and is self-employed.
- 1912:** Charles Sisk, 40, obtains divorce from Lelia Nicholson Sisk.



1
2

LYNCHING

CONTINUED FROM PAGE

Thompson, who went by the name "Allie," stood accused of sexual assault — the rape of Lelia Nicholson Sisk, a 26-year-old white woman who lived with her sister's family in the small farming village of Amisville in northern Culpeper County.

Sisk was unmarried at the time of the lynching, despite newspaper accounts that claimed her husband was stationed with the U.S. Army in France during World War I. She grew up in the mountainous Nethers area of Madison County, which today straddles the eastern edge of Shenandoah National Park.

Thompson, a light-skinned, single black man, also lived in Amisville, on a family farm owned by his father. Census records seem to indicate the two families were separated geographically by just one other property.

Allie and Lelia were likely involved romantically, according to sparse accounts passed down through the Thompson family. Their forbidden relationship — once discovered by neighbors and/or family members — incited the lynching, Thompson descendants say.

Thompson's nephew, Otis Jordan, who is 72 and lives in Culpeper, recently recounted stories about the mob murder passed down from his father.

"Yeah, I heard," he said. "I heard he was staying with, running with some white woman and they caught him and drug him up the road behind the car."

At a time when racial inequality was a fact of life, a young black man accused of sexually violating a white woman carried explosive overtones. Guilt was often pre-empted, and sometimes, angry citizens took measures into their own hands.

But in this instance, at least, the evidence forms a case that would produce reasonable doubt if brought to trial today.

On both sides, the human story is painful, spanning many social classes and generations. The setting is one of old and entrenched intolerance versus the age-old struggle for equality.

Murder on a Monday

It was late November 1918 and the war to end all wars had ended. A mixture of joy and grief flooded families on the home front as sons and husbands, dead and alive, returned home from brutal trench warfare.

Allie Thompson had registered for the draft, as mandated by law, on Sept. 12, 1918 — two months before war's end. Thompson's draft card listed him as a farmer employed by his father. It said the teenager was short, of medium build and with black eyes and black hair. Thompson would not be called to serve his country but he would lose his life two



PHOTO

1
2
3

months later in a war of another kind — a war against due process.

The week before Thanksgiving 1918, Thompson was shucking corn one morning in a neighbor's field. That's where Culpeper County Sheriff's Deputy E.L. Crane, another resident of the Amisville area, arrested him on a rape charge.

Crane arrested Thompson, working at the farm of a white neighbor, Willie Luttrell, around 10 a.m. on a Wednesday. The alleged rape occurred earlier that morning, before light, when Thompson "called at the home of Lelia Sisk and told her she was wanted at a farm in the neighborhood to help in the work of butchering hogs."

This was the second morning Thompson had visited his neighbor on the same errand, the paper reported.

The story continues: Sisk responded "she would be along after light" but changed her mind when Thompson agreed to accompany her through the darkness. "When they reached an isolated spot, he assaulted her, tearing her clothes from her in the struggle."

The rape investigation mobilized within hours when "two other suspected colored men" were brought before Sisk. But it wasn't until Allie was brought before her that "she promptly identified him as the guilty party."

Crane transported Thompson 26 miles to the Culpeper jail on West Davis Street, according to a front-page article published Thanksgiving Day in The Culpeper Exponent, a weekly forerunner of the Culpeper Star-Exponent.

Built in 1908, the same jail — though expanded — today

houses prisoners and the Sheriff's Office.

Thompson spent five days in jail until late Sunday night or early Monday morning when the lynch mob forcibly removed the young farmer from his cell.

"They declared that they had come for Allie Thompson, and that they were going to get him," the Exponent reported Nov. 28, 1918, three days after the lynching.

It was about 2 or 3 a.m. Nov. 28, 1918, when jailers O.M. Tipton and a Mr. Herndon, the Exponent reported, "were aroused" by two unidentified men. The men apparently tricked police into believing a third man, tied in rope, was a prisoner who needed to be placed in jail.

Tipton told the men to come around to the side entrance. When he opened the door, a mob of about 15 men "wearing cloth masks" rushed into the jail and reportedly tied up both jailers.

They located Allie Thompson in the jail's "hospital room." There was no struggling or scuffling, the newspaper reported, and no "outcry was heard from the victim."

With a rope around his neck, the mob took Thompson three miles up Rixeyville Road (modern Route 229) and hanged him from a tree along the well-traveled thoroughfare north of town.

No witnesses came forward, and police records of the lynching do not exist. It's unclear if the authorities even logged official transcripts of the murder.

Sisk and the paper's reporting

"The First Lynching in Culpeper in 40 Years," The Exponent's main headline read.

A closer look at The

Exponent's reporting from Nov. 28, 1918, reveals serious questions about the accuracy of its account. Until now, the article had generally been accepted as truth, with pieces reprinted through the years in various publications.

First, it misreported the day of Thompson's arrest as "a Thursday or Friday." Jail records handwritten by Tipton show Allie was brought to the jail on a Wednesday.

Then, the newspaper got its facts wrong about Sisk being a Mrs.

The front-page article described Allie Thompson as "a bright mulatto ... arrested last week, charged with a criminal assault on Mrs. Lelia Sisk, whose husband is in the Army in France."

The Exponent, a weekly newspaper established 1881 by James W. Green, did not include the name of Lelia Francis Nicholson Sisk's husband, and for good reason — she was no longer married to Charles D. Sisk in 1918.

They were divorced in 1912. Sisk, known as Charlie, married Lelia April 20, 1905, at the bride's family home in Nicholson Hollow — an area in the hills of Old Rag Mountain.

She was 14 and Sisk, who also lived in the hollow, was 33, according to the marriage license. Sisk was widowed with six children when he married Lelia, the oldest daughter of 13.

By December 1905, after less than a year of living together as a married couple, Lelia had left her new husband, according to divorce documents in Madison County Circuit Court filed by Charlie Sisk. The year his ex-wife was supposedly raped by Allie Thompson, Mr. Sisk, a stonemason, was 46 and not serving with the Army in France.

Instead, he was serving time in the state penitentiary for "deliberate and premeditated" murder, court records show. A Madison County jury found him guilty in the shooting death of W.H. Dodson in 1914. Sisk was sentenced to 17 years in jail. And this was not the first time Charlie Sisk was in jail for murder.

Madison County Circuit Court records show Sisk was convicted of involuntary manslaughter in 1887, when he was just 15. He got 16 months for that crime. Witnesses say he used a rock to inflict a fatal blow to the head of W.H. Jenkins, a young man from another mountain family.

Sisk was back in court the following year, found guilty of "setting fire to the door and timbers of a cell in said jail," according to court records from March 1888. A jury sentenced Sisk to another six months behind bars for that infraction.

Did Lelia Nicholson Sisk fabricate the story, on her own, about her ex-husband serving overseas? Or was it coerced from her by members of the lynch mob in an attempt to gain public acceptance for their crime?

History is silent on the mat-

ter. After Thompson's lynching, The Exponent also grew silent.

Quick to claim guilt

An arrest record for Charles Allie Thompson does not exist — in Culpeper, criminal records stored in the records center date only to the 1960s.

Older records are destroyed by the General District Court, as allowed by law. The hastily compiled jury report also could not be recovered in the court's record room.

There are no living witnesses to the 1918 lynching — a 10-year-old then would be 97 now — and much of what has long been believed about the crime is folklore.

However, the new evidence uncovered casts substantial doubt — based on fact — regarding Thompson's guilt. If he had been allowed a trial by jury, would he have, in fact, been found innocent?

The Exponent had an answer for that, declaring, "there appears to be no doubt as to Thompson's guilt." Nonetheless, the paper went on, "this resort to lynch law is to be greatly deplored."

The newspaper assumed Thompson, if allowed to live, would have been found guilty in a court of law, adding, "it is not thought that there would have been any doubt of his conviction and the imposition of the full penalty — death."

The Exponent's story concluded, "Lynching is murder in the eyes of the law, and no law abiding citizen should tolerate it. But, in this particular case, the movements of the mob were so quiet and unexpected that it will scarcely be possible to ever identify a single one of the lynchers."

"The whole proceeding was remarkably quiet and devoid of any exciting circumstance or noise," The Exponent reported about the lynching. "It was impossible to recognize any one of the lynching party."

These unattributed statements are presumed to be from the on-duty jailers.

In the Nov. 28 edition, The Exponent reported the case closed — with baffling speed, a six-man jury quickly decided there wasn't enough testimony to identify any members of the mob.

And, just like that, the lynching of Allie Thompson was history.

Swept under the rug

There were no follow-up stories or reports of community reaction. The only mention of the incident was printed March 13, 1919, in a list of government expenses associated with the "November 27 coroner's inquest over the body of Allie Thompson."

Coroner W.S. Chapman, six jurors and Culpeper County Sheriff James S. Yowell were paid a total of \$15 for their services in the case, which included transporting jurors to see Thompson's lifeless body.

For a sheriff and deputy who had ties to the tight-knit

Headline here

Short intro text here, one to three sentences.



- 1 Nicholson Hollow near Iethers, Madison County. Here in the hills of Old Rag Mountain, Leila Nicholson grew up, the oldest daughter of 13 children. She was married at age 14 to Charlie Sisk, who also lived in the Hollow. This area of Madison County now belongs to the federal government and is located in the Shenandoah National Park.
- 2 Town of Culpeper. By 1910, Leila is no longer living with her husband but with a private family in the town of Culpeper. She is listed as a servant/cook on the 1910 U.S. Census and is 19 years old. The jail on West Davis Street, from where Allie Thompson was taken by a mob, is also located in the town of Culpeper, 26 miles from his home.
- 3 Amisville, Rappahannock County. Here in Amisville, 18-year-old Allie Thompson, a native of the area, is accused of raping 26-year-old Lelia Sisk, who lives a few doors down with her sister's family. He is arrested/shucking corn on the Luttrell farm. Allie's uncle, Otis Jordan, still lives in the Amisville area. Allie was buried in the family cemetery, where his parents also rest.
- 4 Brandy Road, three miles from town center. Now route 220, this well-traveled road is where Allie Thompson was hung from a tree.
- 5 Viewtown, Rappahannock County. Lelia Nicholson Sisk, who went by Mrs. Sisk until the day she died, is buried next to her parents in the church cemetery at Forest Grove Baptist Church. She died in 1973 in a Woodstock nursing home at the age of 82 following a long illness.
- 6 Eban, north Madison County. Charlie Sisk died 1961 at the age of 90. He is buried in the cemetery at Eban Methodist Church.

THE FIRST LYNCHING IN CULPEPER IN 40 YEARS

Mob of Avengers Chose Sunday Night for their Work

Note: This is the story that ran in the Nov. 28, 1918, Culpeper Exponent

Prior to Monday morning few people in Culpeper were aware of the fact that there was a colored prisoner in jail charged with assault and rape on a white woman.

Allie Thompson a bright mulatto, residing in Jefferson township, near Amisville, was arrested last week charged with criminal assault on Mrs. Lelia Sisk, whose husband is with the army in France.

Sunday night — or rather Monday morning — between two and three o'clock, Jailers Tipton and Herndon were aroused by two men, who bore a third man, tied up in rope, with them. They told Messrs. Tipton and Herndon that they had a prisoner to put in jail. This talk took place at the front door of the jail. Mr. Tipton, naturally thinking that the men were telling the truth, told them to come around to the side door, which is the regular entrance to the jail part of the building. When he opened the side door, twelve or fifteen men, their faces covered with cloth masks, rushed in and over-powered both him and Mr. Herndon, and tied them hand and foot. They declared they had come for Allie Thompson, and that they were going to get him.

They then took Mr. Tipton's keys, and began a search of the steel cages. They finally located their victim in the hospital room of the building. Messrs. Tipton and Herndon say that when they came down stairs with the prisoner there was a rope around his neck. They both say that there was no struggle or scuffling, and that neither of them heard any out-cry on the part of Thompson. That the whole proceeding was remarkably quiet and devoid of any exciting circumstances or noise. That it was impossible to recognize any one of the lynching party.

On their way out of town, the mob must, have been very quiet, for no one has been found who heard any undue noise of that hour of night. Upon arriving at the entrance of the old John W. Payne place, no the Rixeyville road, about 3 miles north of town, the lynchers selected a small oak tree and from it hanged the unhappy and helpless victim. His body was discovered early Monday morning by some passer-by. This is the first lynching in Culpeper in over 40 years, the last instance being soon after the Civil War.

Coroner W.S. Chapman was notified, and he immediately summoned a jury, went to the scene, had the body cut down by Undertaker W.G. Morris, and held an inquest. The jury's report was that there was no testimony upon which to base a verdict as to the identity of the parties forming the lynching party. The jury was composed of Messrs. J.F. Shell, A.B. Cline, J.W. Wankley, O.N. Hudson, J.H. Newhouse and J.D. Longbeorn. The facts and information that were possible to be gathered by a representative of the Exponent, point to the following case.

On Thursday or Friday morning last, before light, Allie Thompson, near Korea called at the home of Mrs. Lelia Sisk and told her that she was wanted at a farm in the neighborhood to help in the work of butchering hogs. This was the second morning he had come to her house on the same errand, each time using the name of different neighbors. Upon the second visit Mrs. Sisk told him that she would be along after light. Thompson said that she could go along with him. To this she assented. When they reached an isolated spot he assaulted her, tearing her clothes from her in the struggle. Thompson was arrested about 10 o'clock while shucking corn in the field of Mr. Willis Luttrell. Two other suspected colored men had previously been taken before Mrs. Sisk. When Thompson was confronted with her she promptly identified him as the guilty party, and he was brought to Culpeper and placed in jail.

Thompson's appearance and general make-up was such that it is difficult to think that any one could be mistaken in identifying him. He was a light mulatto, and his face showed more than the average intelligence.

While there appears to be no doubt as to Thompson's guilt, this resort to lynch law is to be greatly deplored. Had the law been allowed to take its course, it is not thought that there would have been any doubt of his conviction and the imposition of the full penalty — death.

Lynching is murder in the eyes of the law, and no law abiding community should tolerate it. But, in this particular case, the movements of the mob were so quiet and unexpected that it will scarcely be possible to ever identify a single one of the lynchers.

This incident recalls the fact that Lynn Woodson and Horace Williams, charged with the murder last February of Mr. O. F. Clark, the merchant at Mitchells, are still in jail, both of whom were convicted of murder in the first degree. The verdict against Lynn Woodson was set aside afterwards upon the confession of Horace Williams, while exonerated Woodson. Horace Williams later escaped from jail and was afterwards recaptured. His sentence to death is being deferred because of the fact that he is considered a material witness in any proceeding regarding the murder of Mr. Clarke. This case is set for final trial at the coming December term of the Circuit Court.

ents of Otis Jordan — were not listed as "colored" for some reason.

In 1920, Lelia Nicholson Sisk — listed as "Lena Nicholson," age 28 in that year's census — was still living in Amisville. Her recorded relation to the head of household, A. Franklin Jenkins, was sister-in-law.

Jenkins was the husband of Lelia's sister, Ila, age 27. Sisk was then working outside the home as a seamstress, the census says. As for her stated marital status, the recorded information is garbled — what looks like an "M" for married has been written over or scratched out.

A look back and ahead

After 1920, Lelia Sisk disappeared from the area for several decades and cannot be found in area census records for many years to come.

A look back at her early life, however, reveals hard living in Nicholson Hollow and at the end, a long illness followed by death in a nursing home over the mountain.

The road of life for Lelia Sisk was not lined with roses.

Just one family away on the 1920 census is "Wade Thompson," also misspelled, and Allie's mother, "Ada," which should have been "Ida."

Ten years after the 1910 census, the Thompson family had dwindled from five children living at home to two. One child would never return home, but several would go on to live meaningful lives, contributing to society through careers in medicine and education.

For descendants of Allie Thompson, remembrance of his lynching is sparse, but the memory still painful.

Allison Brophy Champion can be reached at 825-0771 ext. 101 or abrophy@star-exponent.com.



PHOTO
Robert Thompson, Allie's brother, graduated from Virginia Union and became a pharmacist.

TIMELINE

1914: Charles Sisk convicted by Madison County jury of murder in the second degree. He is sentenced to 17 years in state penitentiary for the shooting and killing W.H. Dodson.

June 1917: While attending school at Virginia Union University in Richmond, Allie Thompson's older brother, Robert Levi, 22, registers for the draft for World War I. Soon after graduating from VUU the following year, Robert Levi is drafted.

Sept. 12, 1918: Allie Thompson, 18, registers for the draft in Culpeper County. According to his draft card, he is a farmer, employed by his father.

Nov. 11, 1918: Peace treaty signed, ending World War I.

Nov. 20, 1918: The Culpeper Exponent, a weekly newspaper, publishes a story about a black man accused of raping a white woman in N.C. The man is shot dead by a mob.

Nov. 20, 1918 (Wednesday): In the early morning hours, Allie Thompson stops by home of Lelia Sisk, his neighbor, to tell her she is wanted at a nearby farm to help butcher a hog. The Exponent reports. On their way together to said farm, this is when the alleged rape occurs. At 10 a.m., Deputy Sheriff E.O. Crane arrests Allie Thompson while he is shucking corn at the farm of another neighbor. He is transported to the Culpeper jail on West Davis Street, charged with raping Lelia Sisk. Newspaper reports Mrs. Sisk's unnamed husband is serving with the Army in France.

Nov. 25, 1918 (Monday): Around 2 or 3 a.m., a mob of 12 to 15 men drag Allie Thompson from his cell in the Culpeper jail. He is hanged from a tree three miles away in the Catalpa area of Rixeyville Road (Route 229).

Nov. 28, 1918 (Thanksgiving): Headline of The Culpeper Exponent read "The First Lynching in Culpeper in 40 Years." Newspaper declares the case, in essence, closed, reporting that a six-man jury decided there wasn't enough testimony to identify any of the murderers. Though the local newspaper stated, "this resort to lynch law is to be greatly deplored," it prefaced that statement with, "there appears to be no doubt to Thompson's guilt."

End of November 1918: Allie Thompson buried in family cemetery in Amisville.

Oct. 1, 1919: The Culpeper County Board of Supervisors votes to pay Wade Thompson, Allie's father, \$25 for a coffin and burial expenses. Government officials declare the lynching act, "an illegal execution."

1928: Commonwealth of Virginia enacts anti-lynching law

1961: Charles D. Sisk, 90, dies April 27 in a Staunton hospital. Sisk is survived by his wife, Hedrick Hesse Sisk of Madison, four daughters, two sons, one sister, 31 grandchildren, 45 great grandchildren and three great-great grandchildren, according to his obituary published in the Culpeper Star-Exponent.

1973: Mrs. Lelia Nicholson Sisk, 82, dies Sept. 23 in a Woodstock nursing home "following a long period of declining health," her obituary reports. She is survived by one sister, Louise Corbin of Washington, D.C., and three brothers, Edward Nicholson of Clearbrook and Nelson of Brightwood.

More online!
Refer box

LYNCHING

CONTINUED FROM PAGE XX

Amisville community, it is curious as to why Yowell and Crane did not have more leads into who killed Allie Thompson.

Yowell, who ran for county treasurer in 1919 and lost, had a personal connection to the Amisville and nearby Korea communities. In the April 24, 1919, "News and events as reported from Korea," Sheriff Yowell made the listing of social activities: "Mr. J.S. Yowell of Culpeper was sojourning among friends here this week past."

Deputy E.L. Crane, who arrested Thompson, seemed to have even stronger social ties to the area — his name appears again and again in the "news and events" with regular mention of visits to the home of T.J. Finks, the supposed ring-leader of the lynch mob.

According to census records, Thomas J. Finks lived a few properties away from the Thompson family. Though public records do not identify him — or any other men, for that matter — as part of the lynch mob, folklore suggests his involvement.

Culpeper native and author Donnie Johnston wrote about the 1918 lynching in "Donnie Johnston's Culpeper: A 20th Century History," published 2004 by Mapleleaf Press.

The chapter entitled "Hooded vigilantes lynch prisoner near Catalpa" says, "While many prominent local men were reported to have been in the lynching party, there is only one man who can be directly tied to the actions of that November night. His name is Tom Finks and he lived near Korea," wrote Johnston, quoting a man who said he remem-



A view of the cemetery where Allie Thompson is buried. 2345

bered hearing Finks brag about the lynching every time he passed the tree on Rixeyville Road.

In the Feb. 13, 1919, Exponent, "the news and events from Korea" reported, "Deputy E.L. Crane was a dinner guest of Mr. and Mrs. T.J. Finks on Sunday at Sunset View," their home. He was a guest again at the Finks home on Feb. 27.

Crane, a deputy for four years, sought the elected office of sheriff in 1919. He too lost the election.

Government tolerance of lynching, or at the least, automatic presumption of guilt because of race, seemed to go to even higher levels during that period of history.

On Allie Thompson's death

certificate, issued by the commonwealth of Virginia, his cause of death is listed, "Lynch for rape on white woman. Was known jury held. Was hanged by a rope."

Virginia enacted an anti-lynching law in 1928. The federal government never did.

Too little too late

It was 11 months after the lynching that the Culpeper County Board of Supervisors issued the closest thing to an apology or acknowledgement that would ever be heard in the case.

Recorded in the Oct. 1, 1919, meeting minutes, it states: "On motion it is ordered that Wade H. Thompson be allowed \$10 for coffin and \$15 for burial expenses of his son, Allie

Thompson, illegally executed at the hands of unknown persons."

This symbolic payment was not mentioned in the Oct. 2 Exponent's coverage of the board's meeting, but several other unrelated expenses were. And there are no stories leading up to the October meeting that mention what prompted the action.

The only other mention of the Thompson family was in the Sept. 25, 1919, newspaper under marriage licenses: Robert Jordan of Rappahannock and Lillian Thompson, Allie's then 23-year-old sister, were wed Sept. 21 in Amisville. But unlike other previous marriage announcements, Robert Jordan and Lillian Thompson — the par-

PHOTO

Culpeper Star-Exponent

CULPEPER, VIRGINIA

STAREXPONENT.COM | A Media General Newspaper

50 CENTS

DAY 2 IN A 3-PART SERIES ON THE LAST LYNCHING IN CULPEPER

Worlds apart; bound by fate



PHOTO

1
2
3

WRITTEN BY ALLISON BROPHY CHAMPION | RESEARCH ASSISTANCE BY ZANN MINER

In 1918, black and white families lived peacefully — albeit, under very different social conditions — in the farming village of Amissville, a churchgoing community in the far reaches of northern Culpeper County.

The fall of that year, though, would see the end to that fragile peace.

A young black farmer stood accused of raping a white woman eight years his senior; fact and folklore suggest the two were involved in a forbidden romantic relationship.

Within days of the alleged rape, a local mob of neighbors and family formed, handing down a death sentence. The exact identities of the white men who composed the hooded mob remain shrouded to this day.

On the other hand, recorded history permits a detailed glance back at the families of Allie and Lelia — whose names share the same letters, but whose fate had little in common.

Digging into the story of these deeply contrasting family trees lends itself to more understanding of a society that looked the other way when men were lynched.

The story speaks of harsh country living in the mountains and the tense racial climate of Jim Crow. It also speaks of a highly regarded black family, just 55 years after the declared end of slavery, making its way forward in an unequal world.

These are the stories of Charles Allie Thompson, Lelia Nicholson Sisk and their families.



Charles Allie Thompson

A young life cut short with no justice | Page A4



Lelia Nicholson Sisk

Rocky times, on and off the mountain | Page A5

LELIA NICHOLSON SISK

Rocky times, on and off the mountain

1
2
3
4
5

By Allison Brophy Champion
STAFF WRITER

About 20 miles southwest of Amisville, in the hills of adjoining Madison County, Lelia Nicholson Sisk grew up the child of a mountain family.

The daughter of Ephraim Nicholson and Patsy Corbin, Lelia was the oldest daughter of 13 children. In the early 1900s, the Nicholson family inhabited a log home in sparsely populated Nicholson Hollow, settled in 1790 by rugged frontier folk who didn't mind being cut off from civilization.

Old Rag Mountain rises heavenward south of Nethers, a still-untouched area of rocky trails and translucent springs. An old mill sits at the main intersection, its roads meandering past a river, down a mountain road and up into Shenandoah National Park.

If that mill could speak, what a story it would tell.

Marriage and divorce

Like many other young girls in the mountains, Lelia Nicholson married young, at the age of 14, but she didn't move far. In 1905, she became the wife of Charlie Sisk, a 33-year-old lifetime resident of Nethers.

Sisk, a stonemason, was a widow and already had six children when they married at his bride's home. Their marriage lasted less than a year, according to divorce documents filed in 1911.

"She left me in December 1905," Sisk is recorded as saying at the Madison County Courthouse in his divorce deposition. "I did not know that she was going to leave. I had been away for a couple days working at my trade as stonemason, and when I returned she had left, and has never returned."

Sisk also said he "heard from others" that Lelia had taken off for Washington, D.C. "I got a letter from her about three years ago," he said, "and she said she was not coming back to me. She was talking about getting a divorce."

Sisk went on to say that he did not know if Nicholson did in fact obtain the divorce, but that he "never gave her any grounds for a divorce."

When the 1911 deposition was taken, Sisk said he believed Lelia was living in Maryland.

"Were you kind to your wife and did you provide a home for her?" asked his lawyer, N.G. Payne.

"Yes, sir," responded Sisk, who was twice convicted of murder in his lifetime. "I gave her plenty to eat and wear."

Nethers resident Perry Sisk, the first of two witnesses questioned in the divorce proceeding, agreed Charlie Sisk was "always kind to her when I was there."

"She left of her own accord," said stonemason Perry Sisk, 30, in the deposition.

John Dodson, the final witness questioned in the divorce, also said Lelia Nicholson left her husband in December 1905. The farmer from Nethers had some unpleasant things to say about her.

"She just got tired of staying with him," said Dodson, aged 30. "She liked to run around with other men, and she left of her own accord."

The final divorce decree between Charlie Sisk and Lelia Nicholson Sisk was issued March 11, 1912 — six years before the lynching of Allie Thompson. Lelia, "a non-resident defendant," did not "appear, plead or answer this cause" for divorce, court documents say.

Charlie Sisk died in 1961 in a Staunton hospital at the age of 90. His obituary in the Culpeper Star-Exponent did

"County enforcement officers ventured into the mountains only when complaints were made."

■ "SHENANDOAH HERITAGE: THE STORY OF THE PEOPLE BEFORE THE PARK" | PUBLISHED 1978



PHOTO

1
2

Headline here on Lelia sidebar

Lelia Nicholson's homestead was one of three area hollows purchased by the federal government for the creation of Shenandoah National Park.

The landscape boasts stunning views and an abundance of wildlife — but no permanent residents. The families who lived there for generations were forced to leave in the 1930s.

Nearly 500 households, including the Ephraim Nicholson family, scattered across the valley in search of a new life.

They left behind an insulated and segregated existence, casting off the simple life for the complexities of the modern world.

The Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, a leading authority on SNP history, describes a mountain society "to some extent out of reach of the law well into the twentieth century" — from the 1978 book, "Shenandoah Heritage: The Story of the People Before the Park," by Carolyn and Jack Reeder.

"County enforcement officers ventured into the mountains only when complaints were made," the book says, "usually in the case of serious crimes such as murder. And murders there were. Most of them were committed

1
2

under the influence of moonshine and involved family members or neighbors.

Personal violence almost always had a motive: rivalry over a woman, suspected infidelity, an argument over a still."

At the same time, mountaineers were known for being "kindly and helpful."

"Several times I've met a problem

too big for me to handle without assistance and never has one of our mountain people turned away without offering help and making the offer good," wrote Mozell Cowden, who worked with mountain families during the time of their displacement.

— Allison Brophy Champion



PHOTO

1
2
3

not mention his ex-wife. Instead, it listed his surviving relatives as another wife, Hedrick Hessie Sisk of Madison, four daughters, two sons, 31 grandchildren, 45 great grandchildren and three great great grandchildren.

Charlie Sisk's funeral service was held at Etlan Methodist Church in north Madison,

where he is buried in the church cemetery next to another son. A humble stone, apparently handcrafted, marks his final resting place.

Back in the area

By 1910, Lelia — still going by the name Mrs. Lelia Sisk — was living in the town of Culpeper's Catalpa area,



PHOTO

1
2
3

Nelson Nicholson of Brightwood.

Lelia was buried next to her parents in the cemetery at Forest Grove Baptist Church in Viewtown, just over the Culpeper County border in Rappahannock County.

Dan Hitt, a Viewtown native and Forest Grove deacon/trustee, was painting the church basement during a reporter's recent visit to Lelia's graveside.

A 40-year-member of the church, Hitt said he heard stories of the Thompson lynching from his great grandfather, but could offer few details. He said he heard Lelia had a husband who was serving with the Army in France and that she was caught running with Allie Thompson.

"She had to save her neck," said Hitt of Lelia's cries of rape. "Otherwise, if she had said, 'Yeah, that's my boyfriend,' she would have been strung up there with him."

A voice from the hollow

Claudia Nicholson, who married Lelia's brother Nelson, was forthcoming about life in Nicholson Hollow, where she also grew up. Claudia lives in a tidy home in Brightwood and is actually a Nicholson two times over — she was born a Nicholson to another family in the hollow.

Nicholson Hollow is located between Hannah Run and Hughes River, said Claudia, who attended school and church at the Hughes River Church.

"That's the reason they called it Nicholson Hollow, because all the Nicholsons lived in there," said Claudia, the daughter of John L. Nicholson, a farmer, and Fannie Frances. "Corbins and Weakleys lived close by."

Claudia married Nelson when she was 15 and he was 17. Soon after they were wed, Nelson would go on to serve with the Army during World War II, said Claudia, and while overseas he was wounded.

"Neither one of us had nothing," she said. "Neither one of us didn't understand going out on our own, but we went on our own. Most what I learned, I learned it myself."

Life on the mountain was "all right," said Claudia, and they did without things like a refrigerator or automobiles. There was no shortage of "good, clean water," she said, on account of numerous mountain springs nearby. She grew up in a home made of logs and mud.

"And I'm a-tellin' you, they were warm," said Claudia.

Like all mountain children, she did her fair share of chores. "Milkin', feed the hogs, chickens, gettin' in wood. I was brought up to work," Claudia said.

For fun, she chuckled, there was more work.

They raised everything they needed, except coffee, sugar and salt, which they would purchase at a store next to the old mill. At Christmas, all the children would get stockings filled with candy and oranges.

Claudia remembers when the mountain families were relocated in the 1930s to make way for the new national park. Shortly after she was married, she too left.

"I thought we might be better off if all those people got out. You couldn't get no work to do to make nothing. They had to leave from up there to get work," said Claudia. "I wanted to get out from up there."

Claudia has lived in her Brightwood home ever since, and has never been back to Nicholson Hollow since the day she left.

Got the heck outta Dodge

Claudia Nicholson said she did not know her husband's sister, Lelia, very well; Lelia would have been more than 20 years older. She remembered her brief marriage to Charles Sisk and Lelia's subsequent flight.

"She went away and stayed for 20 years," said Claudia, "and none of them didn't know where she stayed. She ran off with another man. She never come back, she had no children, no nothin' but her mother and father, brothers. It looked to me, she didn't think nothin' of them or she would have come back."

When Lelia did come back home, she moved in with her aged parents — then living in another son's home in Winchester — to take care of them, Claudia said.

Nicholson never heard any stories about the Allie Thompson lynching; Claudia would have been 2 years old in 1918. However, she offered interesting insight into the gap between black and white.

"We didn't know nothin' about colored people until we came down in here," said Claudia, adding that black people who attempted to broach the hollow would be "run out."

"But," she added, "people was wantin' to know who they was."

Allison Brophy Champion can be reached at 825-0771 ext. 101 or abrophy@star-exponent.com.

A young life cut short with no justice

1
2
3
4
5

By Allison Brophy Champion
STAFF WRITER

About two months shy of his 19th birthday, Charles Allie Thompson left behind a father and mother, Wade and Ida, three sisters — Lillian, Myrtle and Ida — and an older brother, Robert Levi Thompson, born 1894.

Wade Thompson, born in adjoining Rappahannock County the year the Civil War ended, owned a farm and was 53 the year of his son's death in late 1918.

Wade Thompson was the son of Kate Pendleton, born around 1840 in the Amisville/Korea area. Mrs. Pendleton died in her Korea home at the age of 84, and her passing elicited more than a mention in a "Jefferson Township" newspaper article published in The Culpeper Exponent May 15, 1924.

"Mrs. Kate Pendleton, one of the most respected colored citizens of the township died at her home near Korea, the article stated. 'She had lived most all her life in the immediate vicinity of her late home and will be greatly missed by many, both white and colored friends.'

Allie's mother, Ida Marshall, also was part of an upstanding family later known for its action during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Like her husband, Ida Marshall Thompson was born around 1866, but in Culpeper. She and Wade wed New Year's Eve 1890 in Culpeper.

It is likely that some members of the extended Thompson family were born into bondage — it wasn't until 1863 that Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves, yet many Southern states did not make the change until 1865, at war's end.

Two generations later, Allie Thompson's family had come a long way. Yet the schism between the races had not.

His siblings

Robert Levi Thompson was the oldest of Wade and Ida's five children. The year he lost his only brother, Robert was 24 and had just graduated from Virginia Union University, a historically black college in Richmond. There he studied for a career in pharmacy.

The year before, in 1917, Robert Levi registered for the World War I draft. In 1918, he was drafted immediately after graduating from Virginia Union, according to Selcicia Gregory, special collections/university archivist.

Culpeper County's "Muster Roll World War I in the War with Germany," housed in the Circuit Court clerk's office, confirms this information, listing Robert Levi Thompson drafted Aug. 1, 1918. It was nearly the end of the war, but he served with Company B of the 310th



1
2

Labor Battalion, Gregory said.

The 310th was based out of Newport News, according to an online paper, "A Historic Context for the African American Military Experience," published 1998 by a division of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Robert Levi lived his adult life in Washington, D.C., family members say, where he worked as a pharmacist at Freedman's Hospital, now Howard University Hospital.

Allie's baby sister, Ida, also valued education and service to community. Born around 1909, she was only 9 when her brother was killed. Ida married Willie Oren Wigenton, a farm laborer from Amisville, in 1929, according to courthouse marriage records. In the 1930 census, Ida Wigenton, now 21, was still married but was living at home with her father. She was a teacher, census records say.

By 1930, Ida the mother had passed and Wade the patriarch was a widow. Besides his youngest daughter, an "adopted" son, Posey, was living in the Thompson household, according to the 1930 census.

Little is known about Posey, but descendants say he went by the name Napoleon and served in World War II. Interestingly enough, the light-skinned Posey would have been a newborn in 1918, the year Allie Thompson was lynched.

Modern voices

As a child, Otis Jordan — the son of Allie's oldest sister, Lillian — heard sporadic mention of his uncle's lynching from his father, Jordan, who is 72 and lives in Culpeper, recently shared those family accounts, and it was evident that the retelling was not pleasant. The way he heard it, Allie and Lelia were "running together" and they got caught.

"What did I think? I thought it was terrible. It was more than one man who did it," said Jordan, a truck driver.

He did not hear stories about Allie from his mother, Lillian, because she died when Otis was a baby. Roberta Jordan, his grandmother who

lived to be 108, raised him in the Rappahannock County section of Amisville. Otis Jordan said his mother was a Sunday school teacher and that he knew his maternal grandfather, Wade.

He recalled the old Thompson homestead in Amisville, where Allie would have grown up and where his family lived until 1919. Otis Jordan also recalled drives with "Papa" Wade in the car.

"He used to carry me fishing, he loved fishing," said Jordan, who attended segregated elementary school in Amisville and segregated George Washington Carver High School in Culpeper. "After

he got old, he gave farming up and went fishing."

He and Alma Jordan, who were married for nearly 50 years. During an interview in October, she too recalled the ugliness of the Allie Thompson lynching.

"I heard that they was just going together and then when they got caught, she squealed," Alma said. "They were going to do something so they made her tell that he raped her — her father, or someone in the family. She had been going with him for some time."

Mrs. Jordan doesn't believe it necessary to bring up painful moments in black history, and

she's not too hopeful about the near future of race relations.

"I don't think you'll ever get rid of prejudice. I'll never live to see it," said Alma, mentioning unrelenting reruns of 'Mississippi Burning,' the 1988 movie about the 1964 murder of three civil rights activists.

"I mean, they put too much of it on TV," she said. "They should not keep bringing it up because a lot of people can't stand it, just bringing their memory back."

Mr. Jordan feels the South has made strides in race relations since the lynching of the uncle he never met.

"We've come a long way, but it's still a lot of prejudice," he said.

"There's two sides to each story," Jordan added of the Thompson murder, "and they didn't give him a trial. It was just her word."

More voices for Allie

Lorraine Nickens never heard her mother — Myrtle Thompson — mention the death of her brother Allie. But like children do, Nickens listened to older relatives and pieced together the story of the lynching.

"You're a child and you hear different things," said Nickens, 76. "But there's not much I know about him. I know what happened, but as far as the truth and what is not, I don't know."

A resident of Lanham, Md., Nickens grew up in Washington, D.C., but returns often to the Amisville area to visit with family, including her cousin Otis Jordan. About five years ago, Nickens enlisted the help of professional genealogist Aimee Raines of Culpeper to locate the Thompson family cemetery.

Using land deed books and other courthouse records, they did in fact locate the old family burial ground, where Allie is buried with his parents. Nickens, who graciously provided numerous photographs of the Thompson family, said she wanted to find the cemetery simply so she could clean it up, place flowers at the graves and pay her respects.

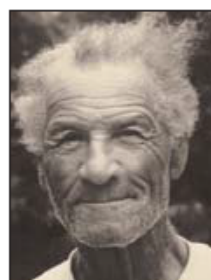
However, permission from the then landowners to access the graveyard was denied.

The Thompson cemetery is located along a country road in an overgrown patch of woods. An old oak marks the spot where Allie is buried, and a humble fieldstone marks his grave. A bit farther back in the woods, remnants of an old stone chimney still stands, evidence of a fireplace that once warmed the Thompson home. The setting was remarkably quiet and scenic during an October visit.

Just up the road a ways, Everett Smith, a lifetime resident of the area, recalled hearing his parents talk about Wade and Ida Thompson. He confirmed the location of the cemetery, marked with the oak tree.

"Good neighbors," said Smith. "I heard my parents talk about how good they were."

Reflecting further on the death of her uncle, Mrs. Nickens said, "It's a terrible thing to be done to anybody. I thought this is what we had



PHOTO

1
2
3



PHOTO

1
2
3



PHOTO

1
2
3

laws for." Monica Sharpe of Warrenton, Nickens' oldest daughter, has been helping her mother with the family research these past few years. She said they haven't been able to find much information on what happened to Allie. Sharpe said she wants an acknowledgment of the murder and, possibly, an apology from the county government.

"He had no fair trial, he was just lynched," she said. "As a citizen, his rights were taken from him."

Sharpe felt law enforcement officials should have at least received a reprimand for their role in allowing the jailhouse kidnapping to occur.

"Something should have been done to the people at the jail, the sheriff, the police, something," she said. "(Allie) never had his day in court. They automatically assumed he was guilty, but there was no proof."

Allison Brophy Champion can be reached at 825-0771 ext. 101 or abrophy@starnewspaper.com.

Racial tension and stories of war made headlines in 1918

In the months leading up to November 1918, The Culpeper Exponent, like hometown newspapers everywhere, published stories of World War I heroism — "Red Cross Saves Soldiers" — and patriotism — "Christmas parcels for soldiers abroad."

From the battlefield, soldiers penned notes for the Exponent's "Letters From France" and weekly editorials chastised the enemy — "Germans Are Very Brutal to Women."

Likewise, every week the newspaper published a list of local men killed in battle. The Nov. 7 edition mentioned one such death, Sept. 17 in France, of Shirley Brown of the U.S. Army, "one of our very best young colored men."

The unidentified Exponent writer described Brown as, "Industrious, honest and faith-

ful to duty." From the Red Cross to the "colored branch of the United War Work in Culpeper," many groups back home did what they could to ease suffering overseas. War headlines dominated The Culpeper Exponent in 1918, and stories about race relations were few and far between.

However, two stories published that year about the subject yield an interesting comparison.

"Negroes in U.S. Own 20,000,000 Acres of Land," an Exponent headline stated Jan. 3, 1918, referring to press coverage of a presentation in New York by Moorfield Storey, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

In his speech, Storey was hopeful about the future of black men in America, given their service in the war.

"This country of ours must rank among the uncivilized nations of the world, until such crime as lynching is recognized as a crime."

■ MOORFIELD STOREY
NAACP PRESIDENT, 1918

"The war," he said, "has given the negro opportunity to fight for his country and the conduct of the black man on the battlefield will prove a great benefit to the race."

More than 350,000 black men served in World War I in segregated units, as support troops, including Allie

Thompson's older brother, Robert Levi.

Storey was further quoted on the "mob outrages" of the year past, saying: "This country of ours must rank among the uncivilized nations of the world, until such crime as lynching is recognized as a crime, not only against the victim, but against the state."

Four days before Allie Thompson was lynched, The Exponent published a story Nov. 21 about a similar crime: "Mob shoots three in Winston-Salem, N.C." In this case, the mob was larger, but details of its victim much the same.

"About 5 o'clock a mob of several thousand people stormed the jail and were shot to have shot to

death the negro charged with having committed an assault Saturday night on a white woman."

Was the publishing of the N.C. lynching just a coincidence or was it a catalyst for the murder of Thompson by copycat hate criminals?

Author Perry Cabot, Culpeper historian and smart growth activist,

believes it was no coincidence. "Not likely," he writes in "Salt & Pepper: Flavor or Spice in Central Virginia," an article he published in 2004.

"It was clearly a copycat crime by the local KKK hate group. There is no evidence to indicate that it reflected community feelings, in general. In fact, just the opposite is apparent."

— Allison Brophy Champion



Culpeper Star-Exponent

CULPEPER, VIRGINIA

STAREXPONENT.COM | A Media General Newspaper

50 CEN

DAY 3 IN A 3-PART SERIES ON THE LAST LYNCHING IN CULPEPER

Looking back on a sad chapter in history



PHOTO

1
2
3

Just a short while ago, the story of a tragic lynching in Culpeper County and the names of Allie Thompson, Lelia Sisk, E.L. Crane, Willie Luttrell and Charlie Sisk were all strangers to my memory bank.

Seeking the truth about the lynching of Allie Thompson has been an incredible journey. A journey that has spanned five months as the investigation coursed through at least four counties, hardwood forests, fallow corn fields, libraries, courthouses, back roads, general stores, living rooms, churches, cemeteries and the vast resources of the digital age.

It all began, innocently enough, August 2005 in

Zann Miner, director of the Museum of Culpeper History, played a significant role researching this series. Here she speaks about how the stories came about.

the relative quiet of my office. Allison Brophy Champion told me the newspaper had decided to write a story about the lynching in 1918 of an 18-year-old named Allie Thompson. She then asked if I would help.

When I said, "Yes, of course," I had absolutely no inkling of where this quest would take us, but the museum policy is to always say yes when asked to assist those in search of history. Most often it is a case of providing resource data, photos or names of individuals to interview.

I would learn later that this one would be very different.

See JOURNEY Page XX

1
21
2

JOURNEY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

And so the journey began, not with a lot of fanfare or aspirations of great discoveries, but methodically and with serious doubts about possible findings. It was important to establish some ground rules such as timelines, expectations and a definition of the purpose of the story.

The timelines and expectations would change as the research evolved, but the purpose was adhered to firmly. The objective was to shed at least a glimmer of light on the lives of the people involved in this tragedy, to compel readers to see them as real people rather than a set of statistics. If enough records and documents could be unearthed, the truth would have an opportunity to rise to the surface and speak for itself.

The available data, which included one newspaper article published at the time of the lynching, a story in a local book, and a census record, was thoroughly studied in search of clues.

There were three categories of information: indisputable facts such as names of those involved, incident and date of incident; facts requiring proof to confirm or dispel; and opinion or hearsay.

One should be careful of the third category, but to ignore it altogether would be a mistake. Often opinion is proffered as fact, and a more risky situation is one in which a researcher loses his or her objectivity and creates fact out of fiction.

However, successful sleuthing requires continued hypothesizing, an open mind and a good imagination. Opinion and hearsay can be helpful in this effort. Sometimes, hearsay passed down by word of mouth is all there is.

To know these people, their families and the lives they lived, the quest had to ask a lot of questions. Where did they live? How did they make a living? How did they read and write? Did they own or rent? Were they married with children?

Most of this information could be gleaned from the census records and real estate deeds. Usually the answer to one question would open a door to a room with a few more doors and more doors and more doors.

Those basic questions enabled discovery of the location of the Thompson home, family cemetery, family photos, farm where Allie Thompson was arrested, copies of World War I draft cards, enlistment records and marriage records.

It all sounds exciting until you find yourself confronted with the proverbial dead end. There were many, but the most profitable way to evaluate a dead end is to view it as another tool.

Example: In trying to discover just who was this Mrs. Lelia Sisk living in the Korea area, lead after lead was explored to find out who was Mr. Sisk and the supporting documentation of his reported military service in World War I.

When no records could be found, the question was retooled to next ask "under what conditions would there be not records for Mr. Sisk?" Death, divorce, and/or incarceration were a few possibilities creating new options for research. But there still wasn't a name!

Persistence broke the logjam. A deeper and tedious search into digitized online records revealed a Social Security death record for a Lelia Sisk and an obituary naming the elusive Mr. Sisk. After confirming that this was indeed the right Lelia Sisk, subsequent research produced family histories, photos, a marriage certificate, a divorce decree, murder trial transcripts, gravesites, the location of the family home-place and insight into a most unique cultural background.

Has it been worth the time? Absolutely. The journey gave those of us involved a unique glimpse into a different world and a different time. Through the research, we were able to experience just a little of life as it was in rural Virginia in 1918, the poverty, politics and prejudice, as well as the spirit, independence and relative freedom.

Would I tackle another project? In a heartbeat, but first the story of Allie Thompson and Lelia Sisk pleads for further research.

— Zana Miner,
Director of the Culpeper
Museum of History



PHOTO

1
2
3

What was reported, what we found, and the many questions that remain

According to statistics from all Southern states, the fewest number of lynchings occurred in Virginia. History would confirm, however, that this critical fact held little promise for Charles Allie Thompson, lynched November 1918 in Culpeper County.

On Wednesday, Nov. 20 of that year, Thompson — who went by Allie — was arrested for the alleged crime of raping a white woman named Lelia Sisk. Truth or fiction, guilt or innocence are questions that may never be answered. However, within five days of being accused and arrested,

Allie Thompson would be kidnapped from the Culpeper County Jail and murdered by hanging without due process. No guilt was proven "beyond a reasonable doubt."

Perhaps there were those who knew the truth and worried that their desire for retribution would fail due to the lack of conviction-oriented facts. Wishing to leave nothing to chance, they tried, convicted and executed Allie Thompson, before the justice system could be applied. Through research for this story, much of the information reported at the time has been proven false or unsubstantiated.

The alleged crime, arrest and investigation

What was reported

The Alleged Crime: It was reported that Allie Thompson came to Lelia Sisk's house, in the neighborhood of Korea, Nov. 21 before daylight and convinced her to go along with him to a neighbor's farm where her help in the annual tradition of hog butchering was requested. It was reported that as they traveled to the neighbors, the alleged assault took place.

The Arrest: On Thursday or Friday, Nov. 21 or 22, Allie Thompson was arrested for the assault and rape of a white woman. On the morning of the arrest, Allie Thompson was at work on a farm located about 1.5 miles from his home. Deputy Crane arrested Thompson about 10 a.m. on the morning of the alleged crime while he was working on the farm of Willie Luttrell. Thompson was brought before Lelia Sisk and "she promptly identified him as the guilty party."

"Thompson's appearance and general make-up," the weekly Culpeper Exponent newspaper wrote, "was such that it is difficult to think that anyone could be mistaken in identifying him."

The Investigation: No report

What we discovered
Jail records confirm Allie Thompson's incarceration as of Wednesday, Nov. 20. No arrest records exist. There are no records, either newspaper, police or court, indicating an investigation addressing the facts related to the charges such as date, time, place, evidence or witnesses. The newspaper inaccurately reported the date of arrest and implied date of crime. We found reimbursement records, submitted and paid to Deputy E.L. Crane, a resident of the Korea area, for the arrest and one-way transport to the jail.

Questions that remain

- How was the incident reported to police?
- Were formal arrest records filed?
- What was considered standard procedure in 1918 for filing formal charges and issuing an arrest order?
- During the estimated 3.5 to 4 hours just before dawn and 10 a.m., was there enough time for the alleged crime to occur, the alleged victim to seek help and file a report, an arrest order to be issued, and a total of three men — the third being Thompson at 10 a.m. — to be picked up and taken to Lelia Sisk for identification?
- Why did Allie Thompson go on to work in the immediate area of where the alleged assault took place?
- Was the arresting officer, Deputy E.L. Crane, dispatched from the Sheriff's Office in the town of Culpeper or was he still at his residence in Korea?
- Did Deputy Crane make the determination to arrest Thompson or did the order come from the Sheriff's Office?
- Was it standard procedure to only pay for transportation when the suspect was in custody or was the one-way mileage reimbursement due to the fact that Crane was already in the area?
- Between Wednesday, Nov. 20 and the early morning hours of Monday, Nov. 25, was any investigation conducted?
- Why did the newspaper inaccurately report the date of arrest and alleged crime?

The lynching of Allie Thompson

What was reported

Between 2 and 3 a.m. on Nov. 25, two men came to the jail under the pretense that the third person, bound in ropes, was a prisoner they wanted incarcerated. None of these men were masked. Upon opening the side door to allow their entry, the deputies were confronted by a mob of 12 to 15 hooded men. The mob overpowered the jailers, tied them hand and foot and declared they had come for Allie Thompson.

The lynch mob found Allie Thompson, not in a cell but in the upstairs "hospital room." He was brought down with a noose around his neck, did not "struggle or resist, nor did he cry out." Thompson was then taken out of town and hanged. An individual reported the murder to the Sheriff's Office the next morning after seeing the body.

The coroner's inquest, held on Nov. 27, two days after the lynching, determined that Allie Thompson had been lynched but there was no evidence pointing to the identity of any of the participants. The jailers stated that they could not identify either the hooded men or the three who did not wear hoods.

In October 1918, the Culpeper County Board of Supervisors voted to pay Wade H. Thompson \$10 for coffin and \$15 for the burial expenses of his son, "illegally executed at the hands of unknown persons."

What we discovered

An oral account suggests that Allie Thompson was dragged behind a car, after the arrest but prior to hanging. No records exist of the coroner's inquest regarding the Thompson lynching, conducted by W.S. Chapman. Records exist of the coroner's inquest regarding a different case and conducted by W.S. Chapman in 1918.

Questions that remain

- Why was Allie Thompson in the hospital room instead of a cell?
- What was Thompson's physical condition at the time of the kidnapping?
- Would it have been common practice to allow three unidentified men access to the jailhouse at 2 or 3 a.m.?
- What were the jailers/deputies doing between the time Thompson was kidnapped from the jail and the time his hanging was reported?
- Was it customary to close a case in within three days?
- Why are there no records of the findings of the coroner's inquest?
- What or who prompted the Board of Supervisors to offer monetary compensation to the Thompson family?

Lelia Nicholson Sisk

What was reported

Lelia Sisk, the alleged victim, was living in the Korea area and it was reported that Allie Thompson came to her house. Mrs. Sisk's husband was serving with the U.S. Army in France. There was no further information reported about her husband, including his name.

What we discovered

The 1910 census records place Lelia Sisk living as a servant in a home on Main Street in Culpeper, listed as married but not living with a husband. The 1920 census records, taken in January 1920, less than 14 months after Thompson's death, indicate that Lelia Sisk was living in the rented home of her brother-in-law and sister separated by only two households from the home of Allie Thompson.

Lelia Nicholson married Charles D. Sisk in April 1905 and by December of that year she had left him. Charles D. Sisk filed and was granted a divorce from Lelia Sisk in 1912. Divorce depositions alleged her desertion and involvement with other men as grounds. All oral accounts point to a consensual relationship between Allie Thompson and Lelia Sisk, the woman he was accused of raping.

In November 1918, Charles D. Sisk was serving a 17-year sentence, begun in 1914, in the state penitentiary for "deliberate and premeditated" murder. The 1914 murder conviction was Sisk's second.

Questions that remain

- Why was Lelia Sisk living in the Korea area of Culpeper?
- Was Lelia Sisk a close neighbor of the Thompson family living with her sister and brother-in-law?
- Did Lelia Sisk concoct the story about her husband serving overseas? Was this "lie" fabricated to portray Mrs. Sisk in a more favorable light with the public? Where did the newspaper get this information?
- Why did the newspaper not report the name of the alleged victim's husband?
- Why did Lelia Sisk leave Charles D. Sisk after only a few months of marriage?
- Was Lelia Sisk engaged in a relationship with Allie Thompson?

Charles Allie Thompson

What was reported

"A bright mulatto ... whose face showed more than average intelligence."

What we discovered

18-year-old Allie Thompson lived and worked on a small farm owned by his family in the Korea area. He was arrested on charges of raping Lelia Sisk and subsequently hanged by a lynch mob. Thompson was the third child, second and youngest son of five children. In September 1918 he registered for the draft.

Questions that remain

- Was Allie Thompson prone to violence?
- Did Thompson demonstrate a history of trouble for his family or "run-ins" with the law?
- Was he engaged in a relationship with Lelia Sisk?
- Was the sex consensual, or did a true crime take place?

Race riots, lynchings cause for concern in '19

Among the news: Klansmen, debates in the Senate and riot-plagued cities

In the year following Allie Thompson's 1918 lynching in Culpeper, the single weekly newspaper in town — The Culpeper Exponent — published an array of race-related stories.

There was no mention of Allie Thompson, however, except for a few sentences in the March 13, 1919, edition, where it listed the county government's list of expenses: "November 27 - Coroner's inquest over body of Allie Thompson." Six jurors, the sheriff and coroner received a cumulative total of \$15 for their contributions to the case, which was closed within days.

A look back at other headlines from 1919 tell of racial unrest locally and nationwide:

■ **May 1, CHARLOTTEVILLE** — "To Prosecute Clansmen" ... Article on a case pending in Greene County Court against Edgar Morris, "mountain clansman," charged with the murder of Magistrate Bluford Sullivan.

■ **May 8, RICHMOND** — "Alleged outlaw and clansman is taken as he makes break for open country" ...

The article details that Edgar Morris has since been arrested in the mountains of Elkins, W.Va. Morris told authorities he had been hiding in the mountains near his home since March 26, when he shot the magistrate to death inside the Greene County Courtroom. He was making a break for the open country when taken into custody.

Morris, facing charges of carrying a concealed weapon, shot six bullets into Magistrate Sullivan while in court. The Albemarle Rifles were dispatched to Stanardsville to

protect residents after "it is said Morris made threats" in the courtroom. He was known in the surrounding country as a particularly dangerous man. In July, Morris got 18 years for the murder.

■ **May 15, CHARLESTON, S.C.** — "Fatal riots occur when races clash" ...

Two black men are killed and another 17 wounded in fatal race riots "between sailors on one side and negroes on the other." The riot started, the paper reported, after a black man shot a sailor and then was shot himself. Soon after, 2,000 sailors showed up, "and started on a hunt, shouting: 'Get the negroes.'"

■ **May 22, NASHVILLE, Tenn.** — "Negro protests innocence" ... "Frank Ewing, a negro, convicted of attacking a woman in this (Davidson) county last June was electrocuted in the penitentiary here today. Ewing protested his innocence to the last."

■ **June 5, CULPEPER** — "Love and charity convention at Antioch Church" ... Antioch Baptist Church on West Street, a historically black congregation, opened convention.

■ **June 5, NEW YORK** — "Extends material aid to many Negro schools" ... The General Education Board appropriated \$310,000 for six black colleges, including Hampton Institute in Virginia and the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

■ **July 24, WASHINGTON, D.C.** — "Police officers and negroes slain in Washington streets" ... The U.S. Army dispatched 400

1
2
3

troops to the nation's capitol to quell race riots. At least two black men were fatally shot, and scores other, black and white, injured.

■ **July 31, CHICAGO** — "Death list in Chicago race riots reaches 25" ... "Trouble spreads from Black Belt to Loop and exclusive north side - 4,000 troops there."

■ **July 31, RALEIGH, N.C.** — "Governor Bickett offers home to 25,000 negroes" ... The governor said his state can

absorb 25,000 black people who want to return to the South from Illinois, the site of intense race riots, "unless they have become tainted or intoxicated with dreams of social equality or political domination." Governor declares "social equality and political power in the south is forever impossible."

■ **August 7, RICHMOND** — "New Ku Klux Klan" ... "The historic Klu Klux Klan" revived in Virginia capital with a membership of 213. "Every man is armed and mounted ... and has pledged his sacred honor not to

divulge the identity of any other member or anything which takes place within its meetings."

The Negro Baptist Association responds that "such an organization will bring about trouble between the races of this city and the South and causes an exodus of our people from the South."

■ **Aug. 28, LYNCHBURG** — "Merchant killed by negro" ... Shooting followed an argument over return of merchandise.

■ **Sept. 3, KNOXVILLE, Tenn.** — "City quiet after riot" ... Knoxville fell under heavy patrol by national guardsmen following weekend race riots in which two men were killed and 16 sent to the hospital.

■ **Sept. 11, LURAY** — "Alleged assailant held" ... The case of "John Spencer, colored, charged with attacking a white girl" was sent to grand jury.

■ **Oct. 21, WASHINGTON** — "Senator defends lynch law on Senate floor" ...

Democratic Sen. Williams from Mississippi blamed recent race riots on "atempted outrages by negroes." Sen. Borah from Idaho responds, "But the disease spreads and men are lynched for the most trivial causes. The record shows 218 negroes lost their lives the first year of the war at a time when negro boys were giving their lives to the republic and displaying great heroism overseas."

Sen. Borah further said, "There can be no justification for the lynching of any per-sons. If the republic does not protect the lives of its people, the seeds are planted that ultimately will lead to its disintegration."

Allison Brophy Champion can be reached at 825-0771 ext. 101 or abrophy@starsexponent.com

PHOTO

Guilt or innocence? Charles Allie Thompson

What was reported

Allie Thompson was charged with the assault and rape of Lelia Siak. The Exponent's article read: "It is not thought that there would have been any doubt of his conviction and the imposition of the full penalty — death."

What we found

There exists no evidence of a police investigation. The only reported testimony to a crime having been committed was that of Lelia Siak, the alleged victim, and there is no evidence that her testimony was ever formally recorded.

There exists no evidence of judicial process. No official information, records or process exists that would prove Thompson's guilt.

Questions that remain

- Was a crime committed?
- Was there enough evidence to convict Allie Thompson?
- If allowed judicial process and tried in a court of law, even by 1918 standards, would Thompson have been convicted?

Guilt or innocence? The lynch mob

What was reported

A mob of 12 to 15 men overtook the jailers, placed a noose around Allie Thompson's neck and abducted him from the jail. The formal coroner's inquest concluded that Thompson had been lynched. The Culpeper County Board of Supervisors declared Allie Thompson to have been *illegally executed*.

What we found

The crime of murder by lynching was confirmed. A newspaper account reported testimony by deputies Tipton and Herndon that a mob of 12 to 15 unidentifiable men overpowered the deputies and took Thompson from the jail.

A newspaper account reported that a coroner's jury was convened, an undertaker was taken to the scene and a formal inquest was held. Official minutes recorded from a meeting of the Culpeper County Board of Supervisors confirmed that Thompson was *illegally executed* and compensation for burial expenses would be paid to the father.

Questions that remain

- Was there a conspiracy instigated by mob mentality that was condoned and concealed by law enforcement officials and others in public positions?
- Was the newspaper's incomplete and inaccurate reporting an example of active or passive participation in the conspiracy, an act of negligence, a result of overworked and underpaid staff or simply the 1918 style of journalism?
- What or who prompted the Board of Supervisors to make a determination in the Thompson death and a subsequent compensation for burial expenses?
- It was never officially nor formally documented that Thompson was more than a suspect in an alleged crime. Yet, he was judged and sentenced by two groups, the "unknown" mob and the local newspaper, neither of whom possessed judicial authority.
- On the other hand, several official records confirm that Allie Thompson was the victim of deliberate and premeditated murder. Yet, no arrests were made and subsequently no guilty parties were apprehended, brought to trial or penalized.
- Some answers may be forthcoming with continued research; others will remain forever inexplicable. The cause of death on Allie Thompson's death certificate reads "lynch for rape on white woman." Is it now possible to set the record straight for Allie Thompson?

Allison column to go right in here



ALLISON BROPHY CHAMPION

PHOTO