



Mill Town Murder

Frank Beacham

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On the morning of September 6, 1934, in the tiny town of Honea Path, South Carolina, friends and neighbors came to blows in a labor dispute. When it was over, seven people were dead and 30 others wounded.

The bloody riot at the town's cotton mill on that warm Thursday morning shaped the lives of two generations to follow—not because of the shock of what was known, but by what was unknown. Fear, threats and intimidation were used to silence the story of the greatest tragedy in the town's history.

For 60 years, the story of a mass killing in a small town was successfully erased, not only from the history books, but from the public consciousness of those people most affected by it. An instrument of fear—so powerful that parents were afraid to tell the story to their own children—formed a lifelong social contract for entire community's survival.

Ironically, Honea Path's secret was finally revealed in a way the architects of its original cover-up could have never imagined: a video documentary made by three socially-conscious New York City filmmakers who unraveled the secret after rummaging through old letters from townspeople to President Franklin Roosevelt.

Yet, even after the truth was exposed in 1995, the story took another strange twist. South Carolina's intensely pro-business establishment, still heavily influenced by the region's textile industry, tried to suppress the documentary, first by banning it from broadcast on its state-supported television system and then by making it difficult for people to see in public places.

Author Frank Beacham grew up in Honea Path. His mother was the town's history teacher. His grandfather, he was to learn, organized the posse of gunmen who fired on their fellow workers in 1934. Yet, only in his 46th year did he finally learn the deeper secrets that haunted Honea Path and the painful truth about his own family and the destructive series of events that distorted the perceptions he held of his childhood home.

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