



Bio & Character Sketch of Sheriff **Fred Brown**

February 25, 1882 – November, 1970

Age in April, 1923: 41 Age at Death: 88

Age when picture was taken: (est) 40

Fred Brown was born to Berrywick Johnson Brown and Lara “Lula” Prather Brown on February 25th in 1882. He had a brother named Hinton who was three years older.

Brown’s early life was spent on a farm and his teenage years he worked as a farm laborer. Brown was married to Edith Vaughan on November 26, 1900. They were married their entire life with Edith passing away in 1972 at age 90, and Fred passing away two years earlier at age 88. During their life, the Browns had three children; Ruth, born in 1903, Dorothy, born in 1913 and Fred, born in 1915.

In 1916 Fred was elected the Police Chief of Columbia and two years later, in 1918, he is chosen to be the Deputy Sheriff for Boone County under the current Sheriff, T. Fred Whitesides. (Whitesides is the brother-in-law of Ernest Rowland, who will be the Police Chief in 1921. Whitesides is also one of the signers of George Barkwell’s bond – he was retired at the time.) In 1921 Brown succeeds Whitesides as Sheriff of Boone County and serves from 1921 to 1924.

Immediately after serving as Sheriff, Brown retired from law enforcement at the age of 42 and took over a car dealership. By 1930, when he was 48 years old, he was the proprietor of a pharmacy. This was also the case ten years later when the 1940 census still lists him as a “pharmacist.”

Brown’s actions before, during and after the assault on the Boone County Jail and the catastrophic results were widely criticized. Media outside Columbia, and many state elected officials blamed his leadership for the tragedy. His apparent bravado and overwhelming-yet-naïve trust in his fellow citizens resulted in huge miscalculations and mistakes. Many pointed out that he could have moved Scott to a different jail earlier in the day, or deputized additional personnel, or defended Scott with his own life if necessary. Though some at the state level of government wanted to fire him, they were powerless because he was an elected county official and no one at the local level felt the need.

That Fred Brown continued on as Sheriff for another year until the end of his term, then stayed in Columbia in fairly visible positions shows that he felt no shame for his actions, nor did the people of the town truly hold his actions against him. When the chips were down and James Scott was utterly defenseless, Fred Brown was either unwilling or afraid to perform his sworn duty to protect the men in his custody. And like George Barkwell, Fred Brown evaded responsibility.



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Character Sketch

In 1923 Sheriff Fred Brown was in the second year of a three year term as the Sheriff of Boone County. He was a law enforcement veteran of seven years by that time.

Born and raised in Boone County, Brown knew everybody. He was widely popular with most people in town, but most negroes steered clear of him.

In the week leading up to the assault on the Boone County Jail, Sheriff Brown certainly heard some talk about lynching James Scott, but he “knew” the jail house was a veritable Fort Knox. The gates were very heavy gauge steel and could survive a “tank shot.” Was it possible to break in and get Scott? “Sure it’s possible – anything is if you’re determined enough. But I’m willing to take that chance.” It was that kind of bravado that Brown exuded, coupled with his insensitivity that his decisions could cost the lives of “other people.”

That an hour earlier, Jailer Hall had positively influenced the mob with the threat of lethal violence, the fact that Sheriff Brown and the five others in the Jailer’s Kitchen did not use the same type of threat – even after a verbal confrontation failed – is simply hard to understand. Brown either did not care if the mob took Scott, or he colluded with the mob, or he was scared and did not want to risk his own life to do his duty. All three of these possibilities are bad.

Though it can’t be guaranteed that Sheriff Brown was a racist, he was at the very least “indifferent” to the well being of the negroes that were in his custody.