



Bio & Character Sketch of

Janitor/
Lynching Victim

James T. Scott

ca. October, 1885 – April 29, 1923

Age in April, 1923: 37 Age at Death: 37

Age when picture was taken: (est) 22

James Thomas Scott was born around 1885 in the town of Las Vegas in the New Mexico territory to James and Sarah (Akers) Scott. He had an older brother, Akers who was born one year before James. James' mother Sarah was a native of Columbia, Missouri. James' father died in New Mexico at some point before 1900.

After James Sr.'s death, Sarah, Akers and James moved to Chicago where he spent nearly two decades. Chicago at that time was very open to all races. Sarah and James (Akers was now working and on his own) lived on the north side of Chicago, in a racially diverse neighborhood.)

In Chicago, Scott worked in a club at age fourteen, then a laborer, then a fireman and as a janitor.

Between 1900 and 1905 Sarah re-marries to a man named Charles Clemens. (They will later divorce in 1914.) In 1905, James now takes his first wife, Grace Williams and they live in the same home as his mother and step-father. In 1906, James and Grace had a daughter, Anna. A second daughter, Virginia was born in 1909, and a third child, Ida was born in 1910. Ida died at six months of age in 1911. James and Grace divorced a year later.

In 1912, James marries Lucille Smith and remains in Chicago. Together, they have a daughter Helen in 1913.. Later that same year, Scott's daughter Virginia dies from meningitis at age four. A year later, in 1914, a son, Carl was born. At some point in this period, Sarah moves back to Columbia, MO.

Scott enlisted in the Army in 1917 and it is believed he fought in France with the decorated 370th Regiment from Illinois.

In 1920, Scott moves to Columbia to be closer to his mother Sarah, who has now taken a third husband, James Brown. James brings his two children – Helen and Carl – from his marriage to Lucille with him. (He officially divorced Lucile in January, 1921 and is granted custody of their kids.)

Later that year Scott marries Gertrude Carter, a school teacher and daughter of a large family from Columbia. By that time James is now a janitor at the University of Missouri and the owner of a nearly new Hupmobile car. He is happily living with Gertrude, two of his three children, just a few blocks from his mother and step-father, with a full-time job and a nice car.



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Character Sketch

In his wildest imagination, James Scott could not have predicted how April, 1923 could begin with the serenity of an Easter Mass and end with his lynching at the hands of a mob. He was doing everything “right.” Though he had two failed marriages in Chicago, he found a lovely new wife in Columbia who came from a good family, taught his two children at nearby Douglass Elementary School, and loved him more than he thought possible. Scott had a full time job at the university, drove a nice car when many others did not have one at all, and he was a respected member of the community who was recently chosen to lead a parade.

So it must have come as a complete shock when he was arrested – and later identified – as the rapist of a young white girl.

It’s very likely that Scott had never been in trouble with the law so he was almost certainly frightened and overwhelmed with the whole process. He was lucky to have Rev. Caston pulling for him.

Scott’s kindness, his empathy for his children, his love for “death row animals” and his religious side of his life were all positive influences. But we also do see Scott’s more direct and angry side when he confronts Ollie Watson in his jail cell and “puts together” the fact that he’s been a victim of mistaken identity.

Scott protests his innocence, he begs the men in the kitchen – all armed – to intervene and save him from the mob. When all is nearly lost, Scott prays. He professes both his innocence and his love for his wife and mother. He screams in anger at his plight.

Scott does not leave the earth willingly. With his canine friends Doug and Clyde barking and crying for his nearing fate, he finally – against his will – is “pushed” into Heaven.