

## **CHAPTER 8: A CHRISTMAS CARD [excerpt only]**

YOU CAN EITHER jump into the river, or take what is in this gun.”

Standing at the rock’s edge, the white man held the pistol steady and waited for the boy to make his choice. James Howard, helpless, watched his sobbing fifteen-year-old son—hands and feet bound by rope—shuffle back off the edge of the embankment, watched him plunge into the cold, deep water of the Suwannee River, where he disappeared.

The lynching of Willie James Howard in January 1944 occurred more than a decade before the fourteen-year-old black youth Emmett Till was beaten and shot, and his body then dumped in a river in Tallahatchie County in Mississippi for reportedly whistling flirtatiously at a young white woman. Tens of thousands of mourners viewed Till’s disfigured body in an open-casket funeral in Chicago, and the ensuing investigation and trial of two white men accused of the murder generated an unprecedented amount of media coverage and outrage that crossed racial lines. Both suspects were acquitted, and young Emmett Till became a civil rights martyr.

By contrast, the killing of Willie James Howard barely attracted any attention inside or outside Florida, and presented Thurgood Marshall with one of his earliest introductions to violence and whitewashed investigations in Florida. In December 1943 Willie had a job sweeping floors at Van Priest’s Dime Store in the sleepy city of Live Oak. He was a precocious boy with a round face and a sweet singing voice, and his good-natured disposition had prompted his family to nickname him “Giddy Boy.” It also prompted Willie to present his coworkers at the dime store with Christmas cards.

Among the recipients of Willie's cards was a fifteen-year-old cashier at Van Priest's named Cynthia Goff, a student at the town's all-white high school. Offended by the black boy's gesture, she reported it to her father, Phil Goff, a former member of the Florida House of Representatives and the postmaster in Live Oak. Willie, meanwhile, aware that he had displeased Cynthia, wrote her a note in which he attempted to explain himself. He gave Cynthia the note on New Year's Day 1944. It read:

*Dear Fried:*

*Just a few line to let you hear from me I am well an hope you are the same. this is what I said on that christmas card. From W.J.H. with L. I hope you will understand what I mean. that is what I said now please don't get angry with me because you can never tell what may get in some body I did not put it in there my self. God did I can't help what he does can I. I know you don't think much of our kind of people but we don't hate you all we want to be your all friends but you want let us please don't let anybody see this I hope I haven't made you made if I did tell me about it an I will for get about it. I wish this was an northern state I guess you call me fresh. Write an tell me what you think of me good or bad.*

*Sincerely yours, with,  
From. Y.K.W [you know who]*

*For Cynthia Goff*

*I love your name. I love your voice,  
For a S.H. [sweetheart] you are my choice.*

Willie Howard's choice of Cynthia as his sweetheart incensed the Goff household. According to Lula Howard, the boy's mother, on the morning of January 2, Phil Goff and two other white men arrived at the Howards' house and asked for her son Willie. When the two men tried to drag Willie off the porch,

Lula Howard struggled to hold on to her boy—until Goff pulled a gun on her. She released Willie, who was then shoved into their car.

The three men drove to the Bond-Howell Lumber Company. There they picked up the boy's father, James Howard, a company employee, and then drove the father and son down a red clay road in the woods. They stopped at an embankment on the Suwannee River. Inside the car, once the boy admitted that he'd written the letter to the girl, Goff and the two white men bound the fifteen-year-old's hands and feet with rope. When James Howard tried to speak to his son, he was ordered, at gunpoint, to keep his mouth shut.

The next order forced James Howard to remove his son from the car and stand him up several feet from the riverbank. With the boy in place, bound and now crying, Goff asked him if he understood "the penalty of his crime."

Willie sobbed. "Yes, sir."

By now, James Howard knew his boy would find no mercy in these woods, and finally permitted to speak, he said to his son, "Willie, I cannot do anything for you now. I'm glad I have belonged to the Church and prayed for you."

Goff allowed the boy a last request, and Willie asked his father to take his wallet from his pocket. The postmaster lifted his gun and forced the boy to choose between a bullet and the Suwannee. Bawling and terrified of the gun, Willie staggered backward and toppled over the rock's edge, into the river, where the deep, dark water swallowed him.

The three white men returned James Howard to the lumber company. In the Bond-Howell office Lula had been waiting, hysterical, for about an hour. Looking "terribly afraid of something," James Howard told his wife, "Willie is not coming home." He would say nothing more.

Later that evening, Phil Goff and his two friends, along with James Howard, appeared before the Suwannee County sheriff to give an affidavit. The three white men claimed that they had taken Willie James from his home in order to have his father punish him for the offensive note he'd written to teenager Cynthia Goff. The three men had bound the boy's hands and feet only to prevent him from trying to run from the whipping he deserved, but the boy had become hysterical. He'd refused to be humiliated by anyone, including his own father. He had stated he'd "rather die," and with that he had jumped into the river and committed suicide. The three men entered their signatures on the affidavit, which James Howard was also required to sign so as to indicate that he agreed with the version of events therein. A second document stated that James Howard had recovered the body of his son and that he did not desire a coroner's inquest.

Three days later the Howards sold their house and moved to Orlando.

The lynching of Willie James Howard soon came to the attention of Harry Tyson Moore, who had grown up just outside Live Oak and had attended school with Lula Howard. With two daughters, Peaches and Evangeline, close in age to Willie James, Moore was infuriated by the murder of a fifteen-year-old boy. On learning that James Howard was willing both to testify he had been threatened into signing the affidavit and to provide the true version of the events surrounding his son's death, Moore, who was president of the Florida State Conference of the NAACP, contacted the national office. To Moore's surprise, not only had the New York office already caught wind of the lynching but also Thurgood Marshall was already working on the case.

Armed by Moore with an eyewitness to the lynching, Marshall wrote a letter to Governor Spessard Holland requesting an investigation. The governor assured Marshall that protection would be provided for James Howard during his testimony, in light of which Holland roundly condemned the murder but at the same time warned Marshall not to get his hopes up, stating, "I am sure you

realize the particular difficulties involved where there will be testimony of three white men and probably the girl against the testimony of one negro man.” Marshall also called upon the left-leaning Florida senator Claude Pepper to exert his influence in the case. Invoking patriotism, Marshall reminded the senator that the War Department had recently confirmed stories of American servicemen who had been tortured by the Japanese in Philippine prison camps and argued that the lynching of a fifteen-year-old boy would taint America’s international reputation: “the type of material that radio Tokio [sic] is constantly on the alert for and will use effectively in attempting to offset our very legitimate protest in respect to the handling of American citizens who unfortunately are prisoners of war.” Claude Pepper refused to get involved.

In Florida, Harry T. Moore continued to press for action, even though past experiences in lynching investigations had convinced him that it would be “a waste of time to seek help from state authorities.” On May 8, 1944, the state of Florida convened a grand jury in the death of Willie James Howard. Sheriff Tom Henry did not appear pleased that the boy’s father showed up to testify. Nonetheless, Howard’s testimony failed to return an indictment against Phil Goff and his two friends. Moore could have predicted it; the case would not even go to trial.

Still, Moore refused to quit. Commenting upon the grand jury proceedings, he wrote to Marshall, “We are forced to wonder if the sheriff himself is not involved in this crime. It is very probable that he at least has tried to help cover up the facts in this case.” Nor was Marshall ready to give up on Willie Howard. He dispatched new affidavits to Attorney General of the United States Francis Biddle and requested a federal investigation. A few weeks later, Tom C. Clark, the assistant attorney general, replied that the Justice Department had begun a preliminary investigation into the boy’s death. Weeks turned into months, months into a year, and the Justice Department had not yet any progress to report. Moore could not hide his disappointment; in a letter to Clark he opined, “The life of a Negro in Suwannee County is a very cheap article.”

The death of Willie James Howard was effectively shelved in 1945. Beyond the Justice Department, Moore and Marshall had nowhere to go. The process of the case, frustrating in the extreme from its deplorable beginning to its unjust end, was a repulsive reminder to Moore and Marshall of the ruthless measures men took to protect the flower that was “Southern white womanhood.” It was a lesson no doubt made more bitter that same year in the case of a Suwannee County constable who had forced a black man, again at gunpoint, to jump off a bridge to his death by drowning in the Suwannee River. Not surprisingly, a local grand jury refused to indict. In federal court, however, the constable was tried—and convicted, but not of murder. The sentence—for civil rights violations—did not satisfy Harry T. Moore: “Thus a man gets off with only a year in jail and a fine of \$1,000 for committing first degree murder. So long as these conditions exist in America, our democracy is little more than ‘sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.’”

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The preceding excerpt is not written about the case at the center of this book.  
A case that is, if possible, even more monstrous.

Please consider reading this Pulitzer-Prizewinning book on American history. Its full title is *Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America*. It was written by Gilbert King and first published in 2012. Your library will have a copy. Buy it at your local, independent bookstore if you can. If not, this link will take you to it on Amazon.com – <https://amzn.to/34St42i>

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