

Execution In A Small Town - The Lena Baker Story

By Lela Bond Phillips

In 1996 while doing some research about 1940s Cuthbert, Georgia, I ran across some information about Lena Baker. At that time, the ordeal and execution of Lena Baker was one of the best kept secrets in town. After reading the Superior Court Minutes of her trial, I knew that Lena needed a voice. Almost sixty years after her tragic death, I knew her story cried out to be told and I was going to tell it.

Lena Baker had at least four strikes against her when she was born at the turn of the century in Randolph County, Georgia. She was from a small, rural southern town; she was a woman; she was poor; and she was black. Lena was born in a former slave cabin, about five miles southwest of Cuthbert. At the age of forty-four in 1944, Lena had never known anything except hard work and the pangs of poverty and despair. She chopped cotton, cleaned houses, and took in laundry to help support her mother and her three children.

When Ernest B. Knight, a local gristmill owner, hired her to care for him while he recovered from a broken leg, it must have, at first, seemed like a windfall. Knight, a white man, was twenty-three years Baker's senior. It was well known in Cuthbert that Knight was heavy drinker and that he often carried a pistol strapped to his shoulder. It wasn't long before a sexual relationship developed between Knight and Baker. When she attempted to extricate herself from this relationship, Knight locked her in his gristmill for several days at a time, and as a nearby newspaper reported after her execution, kept her there as his "slave woman."

At her trial, Lena explained how Knight approached her house and forced her to go with him on that Saturday evening of April 29. Baker had been warned by the county sheriff to stay away from Knight or that she was going to be thrown in jail; too, she was afraid of physical abuse by Knight (and once even Knight's son had given her a terrible beating with a warning to stay away from his father). Therefore, as soon as she could, Baker gave Knight the slip and spent the night sleeping in the woods near the convict camp. On her way back into Cuthbert the next morning, Knight cornered her again and this time took her to the mill house and locked her in while he went to a "singing" (a form of religious celebration in the South) with his son. Lena soon became fed up with spending the sweltering day lying on an old bed in the gristmill. When Knight returned, she informed him that she was leaving. They, in



Lena Baker's Georgia DOC mug shot. This is the only known photo of her.

Lena's words "tussled over the pistol."

At her trial when asked who pulled the trigger, she replied, "I don't know." She also explained the Knight was brandishing an iron bar that was used to secure the door to the gristmill and that she was afraid for her life.

Under the jurisdiction of Judge Charles William "Two Gun" Worrill, who presided at court with two pistols on the bench, the trial didn't last even a full court day, taking a little over four hours. [The trial transcript is 10 pages long.] A former "lawman" out West, Worrill boasted of gunfights with twelve men, seven of whom died. Later he was appointed to the Georgia State Supreme Court by Governor Herman Talmadge, who later became a vehemently segregationist senator. The jury consisted of twelve white men (not unusual for 1944), but many of the jurors were good friends who attended the same small churches, socialized with each other's families at card parties, and shared morning coffee at a local cafe.

In less than one-half hour the jury came back with a guilty verdict and Worrill sentenced Baker to death in Georgia's electric chair, nicknamed "Old Sparky." Her lawyer immediately asked for a new trial to be scheduled because "the verdict was contrary to the evidence and without evidence to support it ... and the verdict was contrary to law and the principles of justice and equity." He then just as immediately resigned as her lawyer. Later Lena was granted a sixty-day reprieve by then Governor Arnall, but the Board of Pardons and Parole denied clemency when they heard the case. Lena's execution date was scheduled for March 5, 1945. On February 23 she was signed into one of the worst prisons in the United States, Reidsville State Prison, where she was housed in the men's section until just a few days before her execution when she was moved to a solitary cell just a few feet from the execution chamber itself.

Lena went to her death calmly. Her last words were, "What I done, I did in self-defense, or I would have been killed myself ... I am ready to meet my God." Witnesses stated that it took six minutes and several shocks before the prison doctor pronounced her dead. Although Ernest B. Knight's death had not made the headlines in the *Cuthbert Times*, Lena's did. The paper crassly reported, "Baker Burns."

In 1998, the congregation of the church Lena

Baker Posthumously Pardoned on August 30, 2005

Lena Baker was posthumously pardoned by the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles on August 30, 2005.

Instrumental in the pardon was John Cole Vodicka, director of the Prison & Jail Project — an Americus, Georgia based prisoner rights group. During a 1998 visit to Randolph County's courthouse, the Court Clerk asked Vodicka if he wanted to look into Lena Baker's case. The clerk gave him the court file, which included the 10-page trial transcript.

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Baker Is Georgia's Fourth Posthumous Pardon

Lena Baker's posthumous pardon is the fourth granted by the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles in its 62-year history.

Missionaries Samuel Austin Worcestor and Elihu Butler were pardoned in 1992. The men were imprisoned for four years after their 1831 conviction for protesting the removal of Cherokees from North Georgia.

Leo Frank was pardoned in 1986. He was the manager of an Atlanta pencil factory convicted in 1913 of murdering a 13-year-old employee. Two years later, after Frank's death sentence was commuted to life in prison, he was lynched by a mob that stormed the state prison and kidnapped him. There is considerable evidence that Frank was innocent. He is listed in, *In Spite of Innocence: Erroneous Convictions in Capital Cases* (Northeastern Press 1994) by Hugo Adam Bedau, Michael Radelet, and C. Putnam, as having been wrongly convicted.

attended as a young woman raised \$250 for a slab and marker for her grave. Her relatives, now scattered from New Jersey to Florida, met on March 5, 2003, the 58th anniversary of her death, to place a wreath on her grave.

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