

The Scottsboro Boys – The Start of the Modern Civil Rights Movement

The Scottsboro case is a major U.S. civil rights controversy from the 1930s that surrounded the wrongful prosecution in Scottsboro, Ala., of nine black boys charged with the rape of two white women. Times were hard during the Great Depression and many young men were out of work and lived in total poverty. Many men traveled all over the country on trains, looking for work in each town they passed through. Nine black boys were riding a train going through Alabama as hobos, all looking for work. There was also a group of young white men on the train. One of the white boys stepped on the hand of Haywood Patterson, one of the blacks. This started a fight, and the blacks eventually threw the whites off of the train. The white boys reported this to the local sheriff, who phoned ahead to have the train stopped at the next town to arrest the boys. The boys were pulled off the train and greeted by a mob of angry whites who had guns and ropes, threatening to lynch them all.

At that time, two white hobos in overalls were pulled off a different car by the police, who discovered these two white hobos were actually women. The women, afraid of being arrested, told the police officers that they had been raped by all nine of the black boys. Victoria Price had been arrested for prostitution before, which may have made her eager to avoid more legal trouble, because crossing state lines to commit a crime, including prostitution, can bring serious legal charges. The nine black boys - Olen Montgomery (age 17), Clarence Norris (age 19), Haywood Patterson (age 18), Ozie Powell (age 16), Willie Roberson (age 16), Charlie Weems (age 16), Eugene Williams (age 13), and brothers Andy (age 19) and Roy Wright (age 12) - were accused of raping the two women, Ruby Bates and Victoria Price, on March 25, 1931.

In the Jim Crow South, a black male was said to risk lynching by just looking at a white woman. Word quickly spread about the supposed rapes, and a new lynch mob gathered in front of the jail in Scottsboro and prepared to storm the jail. The crowd grew into the hundreds of bloodthirsty people. Jackson County Sheriff Matt L. Wann barricaded the door to the jail to protect the prisoners. At 8:30 that evening, he decided to move the accused boys to a jail in another community, but could not, because the wires to the headlights on the squad cars had been cut. Mayor James David Snodgrass begged the crowd to leave; however, they refused and demanded that the youths be surrendered to them for immediate lynching. At the request of Sheriff Wann, the Alabama Governor Benjamin M. Miller, called in the National Guard to protect the jail. This saved the lives of the “Scottsboro boys.” The nine boys were brought to trial in Scottsboro in April 1931 just three weeks after their arrest. Not until the first day of the trial were the defendants provided with the services of two volunteer lawyers. The volunteer lawyers were incompetent, and did little to free the boys. Between 8,000 and 10,000 whites came to watch the trials, and their behavior varied between curious and hateful towards the accused.

During the trial, the doctors indicated the women had indeed had sex, but the evidence was it was long before the supposed rape. It has later been said the women had sexual relations with some men at a work camp before boarding the train. The women both maintained that they were gang-raped by the black boys on the train. Despite testimony by doctors who had examined the women that no rape had occurred, the all-white jury convicted the nine boys, and all of the boys except the youngest, who was only 12 years old at the time, were sentenced to death for rape. They were scheduled to die just three months after being convicted in trials lasting only one day each. The state issued a stay of execution 72 hours before they would have been killed.

The announcement of the verdict and sentences brought a storm of angry charges from outside the South, and all over the world. People in America, Europe, and other countries all said that a gross miscarriage of justice had occurred in Scottsboro. The cause of the “Scottsboro Boys” was championed, and in some cases exploited, by Northern liberal and radical groups, notably the Communist Party of the U.S.A. The Communist party paid for the boys to have a new lawyer, attorney Samuel Leibowitz. Leibowitz was a Jewish lawyer from the North, in New York City. Many people felt that having a Northern, Jewish lawyer brought even more racism and prejudice into the case.

In 1932 the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the convictions (*Powell v. Alabama*) on the grounds that the defendants had not received adequate legal counsel in a capital case. The state of Alabama then re-tried one of

the accused and again convicted him. In a 1935 decision (*Norris v. Alabama*), the U.S. Supreme Court overturned this conviction, ruling that the state had systematically excluded blacks from juries. The attorney Lebowitz is credited with raising the issue of the fact that African Americans were excluded from Alabama juries during this case, and winning this early victory for Civil rights. Ruby Bates, as a surprise witness, came back and revealed to the jury that she lied at the first trial, and said she was never raped.

Despite the new lawyer, new testimony, and new jury, Alabama again tried and convicted another of the group, Haywood Patterson, this time sentencing him to 75 years in prison. All of the other boys were reconvicted as well. Ozie Powell tried to escape and failed after assaulting a deputy with a knife. Even though his hands were raised in surrender, the deputy shot him in the head, causing Powell permanent brain damage. Further trials of the rest of the defendants resulted in more reconvictions and successful appeals until, after persistent pressure from citizens' groups, the state of Alabama freed the four youngest (who had already served six years in jail) and later paroled all but Patterson. Patterson escaped in 1948 and fled to Michigan, where, three years later, he was convicted of manslaughter in the stabbing death of another black man in a bar fight. He then died in prison.

The last known surviving member of the group, Clarence Norris, who had fled North after his parole in 1946, was granted a full pardon by the Governor of Alabama in 1976. He wept upon receiving his pardon, and wished he could have shared the moment with the other eight boys who suffered with him.



Ruby Bates & Victoria Price in 1931



The Scottsboro Boys, with attorney Samuel Leibowitz, under guard by the state militia in 1932.

Credit goes to Wikipedia, the PBS documentary "Scottsboro: An American Tragedy," and The Encyclopedia Britannica Online for all photos and information.