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The New York Times

Sunday, February 21, 1909

South Omaha Mob Wars on Greeks

Smashes Stores and Homes in Revenge for Killing of a Policeman

House Fired by the Mob

Three Attacks Made Simultaneously; Property Destroyed Before Police Could Act
OMAHA, February 21 -- Bent on avenging the murder of Patrolman Edward Lowery, who was shot Friday night by a Greek prisoner, some 3,000 men and boys today partly wrecked 30 buildings in the Greek quarter of So Omaha, and created a riot, during which two boys were wounded with birdshot and a dozen other persons were injured with missiles of various sorts used in smashing buildings occupied by Greeks. The riots followed a mass meeting, at which two State legislators and an attorney harangued the crowd. The police were helpless for almost three hours to disperse the rioters, and Greek residents & business men w/ their wives and children fled in panic from the quarter attacked, while the mob wreaked vengeance on property. The police gained control about 6 o'clock, but were unable to disperse the crowd, which thronged the streets in the quarter where the trouble occurred.

The injured boys were Frank Sweeney & Joseph Gamble, who got in the way of the contents of a shotgun fired into the crowd by the Greeks, it is said. The other persons injured were all foreigners. After their wounds were dressed, they were sent home.

While only about 900 attended the mass meeting and later started the riots, hundreds of other persons joined in the work of destruction as soon as it was under way.

Havoc of Stores and Homes

The onslaught of the mob on the Greeks was made in 3 divisions. The main attack centered at 26th and Q streets, the principal Greek quarter. The maddened crowd began its work of destruction by throwing stones & bricks through the windows of stores and houses known to be occupied by Greeks. In a short time havoc was made of the fronts of these places, and the stocks of the stores were quickly laid waste.

Two blocks east another crowd smashed the front of a saloon, and several men attempted to pillage the interior. A squad of police charged the crowd and prevented the mob from getting the liquor. It was at this place that the two boys were shot and the other persons injured.

A third crowd rushed to 24th and L streets and attacked a confectionery store kept by Demos Brothers. The big plate glass windows of this place were quickly smashed, the doors were kicked in, and the stock and showcases destroyed. Mrs. Mary Demos and her aged father, who were in the store, narrowly escaped death at the hands of the mob.

The three attacks were made almost simultaneously, and the destruction was completed before Chief Briggs could get together his scattered force, which is not great at any time, and stop the depredations. Meantime, Sheriff Brailey was notified and called all the deputies possible and rushed them to South Omaha to aid the police. The mob assaulted many Italians and Roumanians, who were mistaken for Greeks.

The police finally collected in sufficient numbers to surround every home and business place of the Greeks, but it was nearly impossible to keep back the crowds. Chief Briggs asked the Omaha Police Department to send policemen to South Omaha, as more serious trouble was anticipated tonight. After considering the legal and other phases of the case, it was decided not to comply with the request for Omaha policemen.

Sheriff Brailey decided to swear in a large number of deputies to cooperate with the South Omaha police in preventing further disturbances.

At 9 o'clock tonight, the mob again began depredations and riot calls came in from several places. At 32nd and Q streets, the mob set fire to the house of a Greek. Three men were taken from the place. After being severely beaten, two of them were put on a passing street car, while the other was taken away by a portion of the mob, who intended to put him on board an outgoing train. It is not known what was done with him. The Fire Department extinguished the blaze.

Charles Nestroy, a member of the mob which was trying to break into a building at 28th and Q streets, suffered a gunshot wound in the forehead. He was taken to a hospital.

A mob smashed the front of a store at 30th and Q streets, and one of the Greek employees of the place was severely injured. The police rescued him, and sent him to a hospital in an automobile.

At 28th and I street, the mob set fire to a double frame building occupied as a boarding house. Twenty-five of thirty Greeks made it their home. The building was destroyed, but all the occupants escaped.

Cause of the Riot

The riot grew out of the arrest of a Greek Friday by Policeman Lowery. While on the way to a police station, the Greek suddenly drew a revolver, shot Lowery dead, and escaped. A quick but unsuccessful attempt was made later to lynch the Greek, and then a mass meeting was called for this afternoon to take some action with regard to Greek residents.

The mass meeting was addressed by State Representatives Jerry Howard and J. P. Krause, H. C. Murphy, an attorney, and others. The tone of the speeches was generally hostile to the Greeks, and Mr. Murphy, who was the last speaker, laid especial stress on what he termed the undesirability of Greeks.

“The blood of an American is on the hands of those Greeks, he is said to have shouted in closing his speech, “and some method should be adopted to avenge his death and rid the city of this class of persons.”

The meeting was then dismissed, and half of the audience rushed to the Greek quarter, where the destruction began. The crowd gave little heed to opposition, one of the damaged houses, a two-story residence, being less than 100 feet from the police station.
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