



Justice Betrayed: A Double Killing in Old Santa Fe

Ralph Melnick

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Angelina Jaramillo, the eighteen-year-old daughter of a prominent New Mexico family, was raped, bludgeoned, and stabbed to death in her bedroom on November 16, 1931. Thomas Johnson, an African American laborer with a prison record in four states was convicted of the crime and executed. Now more than seventy years later this meticulously researched account of the case substantiates a longstanding rumor that the wrong man was put to death.

Johnson's conviction and electrocution (the state's first) were used to conceal the embarrassing identity of the actual killer. Ralph Melnick's account of the cover-up reveals the underside of racial bigotry and political patronage in New Mexico. Complicit in Johnson's indictment and murder were members of the criminal justice establishment, who abetted the cover-up in a desire to protect themselves. The media, in particular the newspaper owned by New Mexico's U.S. Senator Bronson Cutting, created public hysteria over "Negro Crime." The racial atmosphere, aggravated by the economics of the Great Depression, made it easy for the local establishment to engineer the outcome of the trial. In the 1930s a few well-connected people could decide that it was in the public's best interest to cover up a murder. Today the crime could be solved by DNA evidence--but in the early 1930s an impoverished, black defendant with a criminal record made an easy target. This lively true crime story is thought provoking and even more shocking today than at the time of the miscarriage of justice.

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