Eugene Bell

Liberty County, Mississippi, 1945

Background

Eugene Bell, born 28 July 1923, was an Amite County sharecropper, husband, and father of two young children. He was employed by a white farmer, Russ McDowell, until he joined the United States Army and stationed at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. He was honorably discharged due to a heart condition in the summer of 1945. Upon returning home he began working on the farm of his father-in-law, Herbert Lea.

Bell was thereafter approached by Russ McDowell, unhappy with Bell’s refusal to work for him. He told Bell, “you didn’t stay with me and you didn’t stay with…[another man] and you didn’t stay in the Army, which means you’re no good…you will never die with your shoes off. You’re going to die like your old grandfather.” Bell’s grandfather, Bow Bell, had been lynched in 1893 in Franklin County.

On the night of Saturday August 25, 1945 Bell and his family were driven from the road by a car with darkened headlights and forced at gunpoint from their vehicle by three white men. Bell, 22 years old, was beaten and shot dead. Hilton Lea, Bell’s brother-in-law, was severely beaten and left by the roadside, with the men presuming he would not survive his injuries.

Nonetheless, Hilton Lea survived and recounted the incident to Herbert Lea, who in turn informed Sheriff Wiley Smith. The following morning Smith visited the Lea home. Offering his condolences, he said: “I know what you say is true, because white persons have been to me and explained what happened. It’s bad, but I regret that there is nothing I can do, for if I attempt to arrest them, a mob would form and kill all of your family. I am sorry.”

Lea soon fled Amite to New Orleans, Louisiana. There he reported the event to NAACP leader Daniel E. Byrd. In his statement to Byrd he cited the perpetrators as Earl Moore, Little Wiley Banns and O’Ball Mundrey; the latter was related to McDowell by marriage.

Legal Status

There was no official investigation of the killing.