

THE BRASWELL HANGING;
ONLY LAWFUL HANGING IN COUNTY HISTORY

By Judge Ernest H. Boyd
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The only lawful hanging in the history of Putnam County took place in what is now the South West part of Cookeville, on March 27, 1878 when two brothers, Teke Braswell and Joe Braswell, were executed for the murder of Russell Allison, which crime was committed on the night of November 9, 1875, at the location on the Nashville highway formerly known in pioneer days as the Allison Place and later known as the Isbell place, about ten miles West of Cookeville.

At the time of the commission of the crime, the late William J. Isbell was County Trustee of Putnam County and on November 9, 1875 he was collecting taxes in the vicinity of the scene of the crime, and the perpetrators of the crime supposed that the County Trustee would spend the night with his father and step-mother at the Allison place, but instead he spent the night at the house of a friend.

Thinking that the County Trustee was spending the night with his father and step-mother, and knowing that he was collecting taxes and that he had considerable funds in his hands, four men went to the Allison Place that night to rob the County Trustee. They were Teke Braswell, Joe Braswell, Dop Johnson and Doll Bates.

The occupants of the home were Mr. and Mrs. J. L. Isbell, Russell Allison, a young man who was a son of Mrs. Isbell by a former marriage, also a negro hired hand, Wade Bartlett, who lived until his death in old age a few years ago, in Cookeville.

The would be robbers entered the home. Russell Allison recognized the voice of one of the Braswell brothers and addressed him by his given name, where upon Russell Allison was shot and killed. Later in an attempt by relatives and citizens to capture the guilty parties at a wildcat distillery. John Allison, a brother of Russell Allison, was shot and killed.

This crime naturally aroused great public indignation. The four men were taken into custody, indicted for the murder of Russell Allison and tried in the Circuit Court at Cookeville. Dop Johnson, one of the four men, made a complete confession, testifying as to the part of each of the four accomplices, thereby avoiding his own prosecution. Teke Braswell and Joe Braswell received death sentences. Doll Bates received a penitentiary sentence of 21 years. Judge N. W. McConnell was the trial Judge. George H. Morgan was the Attorney General. The State and the defense were each represented by several attorneys. C. J. Bohannon was Sheriff of Putnam County at that time.

The Supreme Court affirmed the conviction of the Braswell brothers and Bates. The date of the execution of Teke and Joe Braswell was set for Wednesday, March 27, 1878.

On Saturday evening, about sun down, preceding the day of execution, Sheriff Woodall, of Davidson County, and Sheriff C. J. Bohannon, of Putnam County, with seventeen men, arrived in Cookeville from Nashville, with the Braswell brothers who were placed in the Putnam County jail.

Fearing that an attempt might be made to rescue the Braswell brothers, by setting fire to the town or by some other malicious mischief to create an excitement among the citizen, the Board of Mayor and Aldermen of Cookeville ordered an increase of the police force in order that they could keep watch of the town all night. Accordingly sixteen extra policemen were appointed and armed with double barrel shot guns and pistols and put on duty. They were detailed to stand guard on every street through which person entering Cookeville might pass without being discovered by the jail guards, and to see to it that nothing calculated to create an unnecessary excitement should happen.

On Monday night, the police force held their meeting agreed upon the position each man should occupy, changed their countersign and went to their respective posts. Everything passed off quietly until about 2:00 o'clock Monday morning when the guards who were stationed on the West side of town were fired upon by

some unknown person. The guards lost no time in returning the fire, and eight or ten shots were fired in rapid succession, by the respective parties. The firing was heard by the jail guards, most of whom seemed anxious for an engagement, and they were soon in a position to do execution. The police force in obedience to standing orders, when the signal was fired, abandoned their stations and rallied on the Public Square, prepared to assist the guards at the hail if they were attacked. It was soon discovered, however, that there was no danger, and that those who fired upon the guards, did it as a smatter of amusement or from some unknown cause.

The issue of the Cookeville Chronicle of March 28, 1878 is largely devoted to the Braswell hanging, and as their execution occurred seventy-five years ago, and all who witnessed it are now dead, unless they were small children at the time, that issue of the Cookeville Chronicle no doubt contains the fullest account of the hanging, and of the incidents of the few days preceding the execution, that is now available, although that issue of the Cookeville Chronicle state that all of the leading papers of the State had representatives present at the execution.

On Sunday morning, preceding the execution, after the adjournment of the union Sunday School, the members of the Sunday School visited the prisoners at the jail who appeared to appreciate their coming and requested that religious services be held, which was done. The old song "Let us pass over the river and rest under the shade," was sung, after which prayer in behalf of the condemned men was offered by Mr. D. L. Dow. After the prayer, the son, "I am glad that Jesus loves me," was sung.

On Monday morning, the father and other relatives of the Braswell brothers visited and talked with them at the jail.

On Tuesday afternoon, at about 1:00 o'clock, there was an affecting scene when the prisoners' mother and sister visited and talked with them.

During Tuesday afternoon, Rev. J. P. McFerrin and Rev. T. S. McFerrin of Nashville arrived in compliance with a request made by the condemned men before they were brought from Nashville to Cookeville, and they in company with Rev. N. B. S. Owen and Rev. C. E. Heregis and several ladies visited the jail where religious services were held, consisting of the singing of a hymn and prayer by Rev. E. E. Heregis.

On Saturday, March 16, Sheriff C. J. Bohannon and other officials selected the sit for the erection of the gallows for the execution of the Braswell brothers. The site decided upon was on the land of T. J. Shaw in what is now the Southwest section of Cookeville. At the time the site was in a large field.

On Wednesday morning, James W. Cope, Editor and publisher of the Cookeville Chronicle, together with the representatives of the different daily papers of the State, including Maj. Henry Heiss, managing editor of the Nashville American, were permitted to interview the condemned men in their cell at the county jail. The prisoners stated to the newspaper men that they had been well treated by the officers, both in Cookeville and in Nashville, during their confinement in jail. Joe Braswell stated that he did not kill Russell Allison but that he was in the crowd that went to the Isbell home. He stated that they did not go to the Isbell home with the intention of killing anyone, but to rob. He stated that he did not shoot but one time and that he then sot at Mrs. Isbell while she was in her bed. He said that he was pretty confident that Dodson Johnson killed Russell Allison. Teke Braswell said that he was innocent.

Sheriff Bohannon and other officers took the Braswell brothers from the jail at 11:00 o'clock Wednesday morning, arriving at the gallows in a few minutes. As soon as preparations could be made the two condemned men were ordered to step upon the scaffold, which they very calmly did.

Rev. T. S. McFerrin read the Third Chapter of Romans and prayer was offered by Rev. J. P. McFerrin who followed his prayer by a brief and appropriate talk. Rev. John H. Nichols then followed in an appropriate talk. A hymn was then sung, followed with prayer by Rev. T. S. McFerrin. The hand cuffs were then taken off of the prisoners and their hands were tied behind them with a rope. The prisoners arose to their feet and Joe Braswell said "Gentlemen and ladies, I am her today in the condition which you see and what is the cause? Why, drunkenness, wickedness, recklessness and the love of money. I warn all who hear me,

especially young men, against all crime. I bid you all farewell and hope to meet you all in heaven.” Teke Braswell said “Gentlemn and ladies, this is a solemn hour. It is told me I must die. I am ready and hope to meet you all in heaven.”

Mrs. J. L. Isbell approached the scaffold and asked the two condemned men if they were not at his house on the night his stepson Russell Allison was killed. Joe Braswell replied that he was there. Teke Braswell denied it all. Deputy Sheriff J. C. Bockman then read the death warrant, Teke Braswell then arose and said; “young men, all of you in my hearing, never touch a drop of whiskey, farewell; I have to die now.” The white capes were then placed upon them. Sheriff Bohannon put the rope around Tekes’ neck and Deputy Sheriff Bockman placed it around Joe’s neck. Being asked again if he was guilty. Teke Braswell turned and said, “to all in hearing I have this to say, I am an innocent man. I have got to die for what some one else has done. I want it understood that you have got the truth.”

*Read more about the History of Putnam County, TN at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>