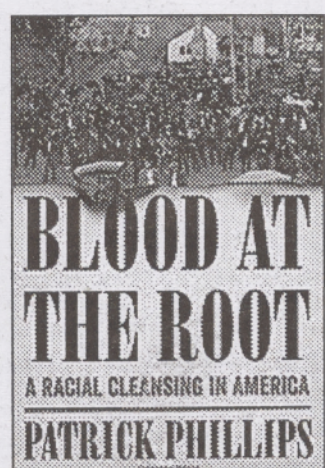


You can't go home again

Author Patrick Phillips delves into the violent past of the county in Georgia where he grew up



Blood at the Root: A Racial Cleansing in America by Patrick Phillips. The book is now available in paperback.

BY JOE MARTIN
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Check out the website for Forsyth County, Ga. Looks pleasant and picturesque, “a great place to call home and do business” and not too far from Atlanta’s vibrant urban scene. Once a rural farming region, the fast-growing county is now residence for many professionals, techies and others who make their living in the big city. Most have no connection to its horrific history, when white racist hysteria drove out all black families and individuals by intimidation, violence and murder.

In “Blood at the Root,” Patrick Phillips tells of the American South when “all hell broke loose” a little more than a century ago. Phillips is white. He was a kid when his parents — professionals and politically liberal — moved the family from Atlanta to Forsyth’s more bucolic environs in 1977. Knowing of Forsyth’s sordid past, they felt their presence might help bring a modicum of salubrious change in the unapologetically bigoted county.

Phillips was schooled by his new boyhood friends that black people were not to be found nor wanted in their town of Cumming — the county seat — or anywhere else in the area. The N-word was used casually. Phillips recalls “when my Little League team piled into the back of a pickup truck and joined Cumming’s Fourth of July Parade in 1978, I watched a group of Sawnee Klansmen stroll along behind us, all wearing their pointy hoods and white

robes, as they waved and lobbed handfuls of Super Bubble to the crowd.”

In September, 1912, an 18-year-old white woman named Mae Crow was found near-dead in the woods, brutalized by a person or persons unknown. Predictably, local whites determined the crime was the work of a black man, maybe more than one. The next day Ernest Knox, a black teenager, was accused. Soon others would be charged. One was Rob Edwards, 24, known to many of his white neighbors. Soon after his arrest, Edwards was dragged from his cell by a furious mob and killed.

“As spectators streamed toward the town square, someone lobbed a rope over the yardarm of a telephone pole and hoisted Edwards’ limp body skyward. People took turns with pistols and shotguns, and each time a load of buckshot spun the mutilated corpse, the crowd of hundreds roared.”

The assault on Crow ignited a malicious campaign of expulsion aimed at all Black residents. Weeks later, the young woman died. The night after her funeral, bands of white men on horseback known as “night riders” intensified their orgy of terror. The lethality of racist hatred was unleashed in all its ugliness. By the end of October, Forsyth’s vicious “racial cleansing” was complete. This grim reality would endure for generations.

Lynching didn’t always mean a hanging by a crazed mob. “Lynch” became a verb in 18th-century America. A man with the last

name Lynch, an Irish surname, oversaw irregular courts to deal with Tories opposing the colonial rebellion against Britain. Those found guilty by Lynch likely received a lashing. Most survived. Hanging and desecration of a victim’s body came later.

Throughout history, people have demonstrated a proclivity for imposing bestial practices upon persons perceived to be an enemy, a miscreant, a threat or different due to race or religion. The psychoanalyst Erik Erickson coined the term “pseudospeciation” to denote humanity’s capacity to relegate certain groups to the subhuman, something irrevocably “other.” Hideous things people wouldn’t do to a dog have been performed with relish on those deemed unworthy of human status. Atrocities depicted in Phillips’ book are as agonizing as any execrable deeds visited upon hapless human beings over the centuries.

In the seven decades from 1877 to 1950, more than 5,000 lynchings took place in the United States. The actual number is much higher since many of these ghoulish events were unreported. While more than 1,000 victims were white, overwhelmingly victims were black men. Black women, too, were subjected to this murderous ritual. Some were tortured, burned alive and then hoisted for all gathered to see. One grotesque incident involved a pregnant woman. Perpetration of these atrocities was often done before an enthusiastic audience. Photos of the carnage might be taken and made into postcards. It was common to cut away body parts from the corpse for souvenirs.

Another black teenager, Oscar Daniel, was sentenced along with Knox to be hanged for the killing of Crow. A judicial procedure, the execution was to be discreet. Instead, racist county Sheriff Bill Reid ensured it would be a spectacle. The execution site was like a vast amphitheater. “Thousands of people could gather on those hillsides, with their quilts, their children and their picnic baskets, and every last one of them would have a clear view of the proceedings. Once the hanging proper began, Reid knew they would cheer for him as he sent two convicted black rapists to their doom.” It was a mockery of justice. Three years later saw the recrudescence of the Ku Klux Klan. Reid would join their hateful ranks.

On Jan. 17, 1987, the world became aware of the white supremacist asylum that had been Forsyth County. There, a march for peace and brotherhood led by civil rights veteran Hosea Williams was met by a large, volatile rabble of whites. One week later 20,000 peace marchers arrived in support of fairness and decency.

In spite of resistance, Forsyth is no longer a bastion of white supremacy. But little is said about the black citizens forced to abandon farms, homes and churches. In many instances, whites assumed ownership of those properties without compensating former owners.

Forsyth is now a place of wealth where most natives “would prefer to leave this whole tale of murder, lynching, theft and terror scattered in the state’s dusty archives or safely hidden in plain sight — in places whose significance is known only to the dwindling handful of people who still remember the stories they once heard at some old timer’s feet.”

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