

A Prosperous Town

A visitor standing on the front lawn of the Methodist church in the east-central Georgia town of Sandersville in late February 1925 might have thought this a prosperous community, one with both a distinguished history and a bright future. The church, crafted of red brick with polished marble accents and a suitable number of stained-glass windows, faced the main east-west highway, appropriately named Church Street but as yet unpaved. Directly across the street stood a simple, white frame house on whose porch the body of a dead Confederate cavalryman had lain, killed in a skirmish during Sherman's March to the Sea in November 1864.

A few hundred feet to the west of the church, a small forest of white marble monuments sprouted from the Old City Cemetery, their sheer quantity and ornateness confirming the fact that Sandersville had produced a significant number of citizens who felt their wealth should be on display long after having shed their mortal coils. Just inside the cemetery entrance that faced the church, two family plots lay on either side of the wagon path. To the left, Rawlings. To the right, Tarbutton. A freshly covered grave in the Tarbutton plot awaited its permanent tombstone.

A block to the east, the spire of the First Baptist Church loomed over the intersection of Church and Harris streets, the latter being the local name for the main north-south highway through the town. On the opposite side of the intersection, a large white Victorian house dominated the crossroads, its

location and size a testament to the wealth of its owner. A broad, covered porch lined with turned balusters was shaded from the harsh afternoon sun by two huge magnolia trees. The ornate door opened into a wide hall lined with raised-panel walnut, its glass window etched with the initials "CGR," for Charles Graves Rawlings, the home's owner. It was in this home that on the night of February 18, 1925, Rawlings was arrested for the murder of his first cousin, George Augustus Tarbutton.

News of the arrest of one of Sandersville's most prominent citizens spread rapidly. Five years earlier, it might have seemed incredible that a man of his wealth, power, and influence could even be suspected of such a crime, much less charged with it, but the world had changed. The heady days of easy money and seemingly limitless economic expansion appeared lost forever, and perhaps this was simply one more sign of the new reality.

The facts of the case seemed simple enough. Charlie Rawlings had been, and probably still was, the wealthiest man in the area. But his fortune, like those of many others in Georgia's cotton-producing Black Belt,¹ was closely tied to the farm economy. The sudden drop in cotton prices in 1920 and the ensuing implosion of the infrastructure that had supported the cotton culture spared no one, rich or poor. Like many others of the entrepreneurial class, Rawlings was deeply in debt. He was said to be close to his cousin, but the cousin was

¹ The term "Black Belt," used in a geographic sense, refers to a broad crescent-shaped swath of land stretching from Virginia to Mississippi that was the historical center of upland cotton production in the United States. Although the term may have originally applied to soil type in certain areas, in general usage counties of this region have a large African-American population.

A Killing on Ring Jaw Bluff

heavily insured with the policies payable to Rawlings's struggling bank. There had been an accident—or so they said—some twenty miles away near the river at a place called Ring Jaw Bluff. Tarbutton had been shot in the head. A coroner's jury heard testimony that cast doubt on Rawlings's account of the tragedy. He was ordered arrested on a preliminary charge of murder.

While some may have been shocked at the news, others may have felt a quiet sense of gloating, for there was another side to Charlie Rawlings. He was a man who had stepped on a number of people on his way up. Someone who always seemed to avoid the well-deserved consequences of his many sins and transgressions. Someone who had gotten away with too much for too long. Perhaps this time would be different.

For many, it was hoped that the new year, 1925, would bring change. It was the beginning of the sixth year of the lingering uncertainty. Men of substance and property, formerly assured of their wealth and place in the evolving century, were now doubtful of their future. While the rest of the nation was in the midst of what would be known as the "Roaring Twenties," the mood was grim in small towns across the South. The construction of the big houses that lined Main Streets had ground to an abrupt halt. Nearly half the state's banks had failed. Farmers and merchants alike were facing bankruptcy. Farms were abandoned as steward sharecroppers migrated to the growing cities, often under cover of darkness, hoping to avoid their unpaid creditors. The Klan rallied and railed about America's moral decay, eager to assign blame for events seemingly beyond anyone's control.

So in some ways, the arrest of Charlie Rawlings may have been a sign of the times, a bit of concrete evidence that the old order was dead and a new one would soon arise. But this story,

William Rawlings

while unique to one small east-central Georgia town, was in many ways similar to others being played out in towns and villages across the vast lands of the cotton-producing South. The details and the characters may have been different, but the basic theme was the same. The world was changing, and with it small towns were dying.