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## Chapter 1

### A Union in Hoop Spur

HOOP SPUR HAS LONG since disappeared from the maps of Phillips County, Arkansas, and even in 1919, when it could be found on such a map, it consisted of little more than a railroad switching station and a small store. But the cotton fields surrounding Hoop Spur were speckled with cabins, each one home to a family of sharecroppers, and on September 30 of that year, shortly after sunset, the black farmers began walking along dirt paths and roads toward a small wooden church located about one-quarter mile north of the switching station. For most, the church was a mile or two away, or even farther, and as they expected their meeting to run late into the night, they brought along sweaters and light coats for the walk back home. Many had their children with them, and a few, like Vina Mason, were carrying babies.

By 7:00 p.m., the first of the farmers had arrived, and they lit three lamps inside the Baptist church. The wooden benches began filling up rapidly. Sallie Giles and her two sons, Albert and Milligan, reached Hoop Spur around 8:00 p.m., and by then the "house was packed," she said. Paul Hall was there, and so too were "Preacher" Joe Knox and Frank Moore, along with their wives. At last, Jim Miller and his wife, Cleola, pulled up in a horse and a buggy. Miller was president of the Hoop Spur Lodge of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union, which for the past several months had been signing up sharecroppers throughout southern Phillips County.

The one person still missing was the lodge's secretary, Ed Ware. He was, as he later admitted, thinking of quitting. The previous Thursday, September 25, sharecroppers in Elaine, a small town three miles to the south, had held a Progressive Farmers meeting, which he'd attended. The next day, white planters had singled him out and warned him not to go to any more such gatherings. He had reason to be afraid, but at last his wife, Lulu, insisted that they go, reminding him, as he later recalled, that "I had those [union] books and papers." Although they lived only one mile to the west of the church, they had to swing around to the south in order to get past the Govan Slough, a ditch lined by a thicket of trees, and it was nearly 9:00 p.m. by the time they arrived. Ware nodded at the nine or ten men milling around front, and then he shook hands with Lit Simmons at the door, both men twisting their fingers into the lodge's secret grip.

"We've just begun," Ware whispered.

That was the union's password, and everyone who had entered that night had uttered the same thing. Although the meeting was now in full swing, with, as one sharecropper put it, "two hundred head of men, women and children" inside, Simmons and the other men in the front yard remained where they were. William Wordlow, John Martin, John Ratliff, and Will Wright stood together in one group, about fifteen feet away from the door, while Alf Banks Jr., Albert Giles, and the three Beco brothers-Joe, Boisy, and Ransom-sat in Miller's buggy. At first glance, it all seemed so peaceful. The church lamps cast the yard in a soft glow and the men were speaking in low voices, or saying nothing at all. But not too many yards distant, the light petered out, and everyone had his eyes glued to the road that disappeared into that darkness. Route 44, which ran north 22 miles to Helena, the county seat, was a lonely county road, bordered on both sides by dense patches of rivercane. In the buggy, the Beco brothers fiddled with shotguns draped across their laps, while several others nervously fingered the triggers of their hunting rifles. Martin was armed with a Smith & Wesson pistol.

At the door, Simmons was growing ever more nervous. This was only the third time that the Hoop Spur lodge had met, and at the previous meeting, which had been Simmons's first, he'd asked why it was necessary to have men stand guard. "White people don't want the union and are going to get us," he'd been told. And on this night, Simmons knew, rumors were flying that whites "were coming there to break up the meeting, or to shoot it up."

The minutes passed slowly by. Everyone listened for the sound of an approaching car, but the only noises that Simmons and the others heard, other than the chirping of field crickets, rose from inside the church. Nine-thirty passed without incident, then ten and ten-thirty. The road remained dark and quiet, and yet, to Simmons, it seemed that this night would never end.

"The whites," he muttered, "are going to kill us."

MOST OF THE HOOP SPUR farmers in the church that night were middle-aged, in their thirties, forties, and fifties, and their religious faith was such that they began all of their meetings with a prayer. They all had migrated here during the past decade, as this was about as deep in the Mississippi Delta as you could get, the cotton fields having been a tangle of swampland and dense hardwood forests only ten to fifteen years earlier. Southern Phillips County was a floodplain for both the White and Mississippi rivers, and as a result it had been about the last

stretch of delta land in Arkansas to be drained and cleared. It remained an inhospitable place to live, the woods thick with fever-carrying mosquitoes, and yet it offered the black families a new hope. The two rivers had deposited topsoil so rich in minerals that geologists considered it perhaps the most fertile land in the world.

The Hoop Spur farmers were mostly from Mississippi and Louisiana, although a few hailed from as far away as North Carolina. Their journeys here had been much the same. Most had arrived during the winter months, just after the end of a harvest, as this was moving season for sharecroppers throughout the South. The black farmers almost always ended the year in debt, and so, hoping that it might be different someplace else, many packed up their meager belongings every couple of years and moved to a distant county or to another state. Most of those who'd come to Hoop Spur had arrived—as a local scholar named Bessie Ferguson wrote in 1927—with "nothing of their own with the exception of their makeshift household furniture, a few ragged clothes, a gun, and one or more dogs, sometimes a few chickens or a hog."

They'd moved into cabins that were, even by the dismal housing standards of the time, a sorry lot. Plantation owners threw up cabins made from rough lumber for their sharecroppers, each one surrounded by the plot of land that was to be worked by a family, and typically they were so poorly constructed that, as the joke went, the sharecroppers "could study astronomy through the openings in the roof and geology through the holes in the floor." A sharecropper's cabin usually consisted of one large room, perhaps 18 by 20 feet in size, where the entire family would live and sleep, with a shed attached to the back. The main room would have a fireplace for heat and a couple of windows—with wooden shutters but no glass—for light. Because southern Phillips County was so vulnerable to floods, the landowners had erected cabins that were particularly flimsy, since they needed to be "so cheap that the loss from floods is small," Ferguson said.

During the winter months, the Hoop Spur sharecroppers did what they could to survive. Occasionally it would snow, and with nighttime temperatures regularly dipping to near freezing, they struggled mightily to stay warm. They patched up the drafty walls of their cabins with newspapers, and they collected firewood from the Govan Slough and other nearby stands of trees, although at times they grew so desperate, Ferguson wrote, that "garden or yard fences are used for fuel." Fortunately, there was plenty of fish and game to be had, which complemented whatever vegetables they had grown in their gardens the summer before and canned. The woods were filled with deer, wild turkeys, rabbits, squirrels, doves, quail, and geese, and those hunting with dogs could chase bears through the canebrakes. At last, March would come and the rains would turn the fields into bogs, and the sharecroppers would pray that the levees on the White and Mississippi rivers would hold and keep away the floods that could destroy their cabins.

Once the fields began to dry, usually by the end of March, the men began breaking up the soil, leaving their cabins before the first light of day to hook ploughs to their mules, their work hours stretching, as they liked to say, from "can see to can't see." This was particularly true for the Hoop Spur farmers, as most were working 15 to 30 acres, which were large plots for sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta. After they finished turning up the soil, which took a couple of weeks, they would run a "middlebuster" over it to form furrows and mounds. By early May, they were ready to plant. They would dig a narrow trench in the mounds and, every 18 inches or so, drop in cottonseed.

As soon as the plants sprouted, they would work the fields with long-handled hoes, chopping the weeds that grew fast and thick in the humid air. Everyone in the family would help with this chore, even the younger children spending long hours in the hot sun. Daytime temperatures regularly soared into the nineties, and night brought little relief. Malaria was a constant problem in the delta, and at dusk, in order to drive off the mosquitoes and flies, the cabins had to be smoked or sprayed with insecticide, and with the doors and windows shuttered to keep out the pests, no one slept well in the stifling air.

The cotton plants, however, flourished. Early in the season, they produced a light-hued blossom that darkened, wilted, and dropped within a couple of days, which was all the time it took for pollination. A tiny green pod soon appeared at the base of the flower, and during July and August it swelled into a boll packed with seeds wrapped in willowy fibers, until at last, in late August, the bolls split open and the fields would be painted white.

Although the plants grew waist high, many of the bolls hung close to the ground, and so the sharecroppers moved through the rows stooped over or even on their knees. They flexed their fingers into claws to pluck the cotton from the bolls, and while one hand was plucking the other hand would be stuffing the cotton into a canvas sack they dragged behind them. The best sacks had tar covering the bottom to reduce the friction, but still, as the bags filled with a hundred pounds of raw cotton, the strap slung over the picker's back would cut into his or her shoulder. "Pulling the cotton out of the boll can work your fingers too," one sharecropper remembered. "The husks of the cotton boll are sharp and brittle." After years of picking, sharecroppers regularly ended up with arthritic hands, their fingers crippled at the joints.

The younger children, of course, had smaller sacks, and as the Hoop Spur families moved together through the fields, they would sing:

I'm down here in this cotton field

With a sack that's ten feet long

Well my poor back is killin' me

I'll be glad when this cotton's all gone.

A good picker could fill a hundred-pound bag in the morning, break for lunch, and then fill a second one by the end of the day. The cotton would be dumped onto a mule-drawn wagon, packed down, and taken to the nearest gin. There it would be vacuumed from the wagon through a suction pipe and run through a machine that, by means of narrowly spaced teeth, removed the seeds from the fiber. The cotton would then be funneled into a compressing room, where it was pressed into bales, wrapped in burlap, and tied together with steel bands.

The fertile fields around Hoop Spur yielded at least 1,500 pounds of raw cotton per acre, and that translated into one 500-pound bale of ginned cotton, ready for the market. A sharecropper who worked 10 acres could expect to produce ten bales of cotton, and the seeds could also be sold—the protein-rich hulls were fed to cattle, and the cottonseed oil was used in foods and cosmetics. However, the sharecroppers would have to make several passes through their fields to fully reap what the land had to offer, as not all of the cotton bolls ripened at the same time; thus it was late in November before the plantation owners and sharecroppers met to settle their accounts.

It was then that the sharecroppers' lot, at least from the black farmers' point of view, turned most unfair.

SHARECROPPERS THROUGHOUT THE MISSISSIPPI Delta proudly declared to census workers that they were "working on their own account" and were not plantation "employees." However, from the first moment of spring planting, their wishes conflicted with their landlords' desires. They wanted to plant large gardens, raise hogs and chickens, and grow both corn and cotton. However, the landowners, who often had overseers run their plantations, wanted their sharecroppers to keep their gardens small, and at times would insist that cotton be planted right up to the cabins' front porches. Not only did this maximize the cotton harvest, it minimized the amount of food the sharecroppers could grow, and that created an opportunity for the landowners to keep them in debt. The black farmers would be forced to buy most of their goods on credit at plantation commissaries, or at stores in nearby towns where the landlords had an account for their tenants, and in either case, the sharecroppers would be charged exorbitant amounts.

Many of the Hoop Spur families shopped at Dowdy and Longnecker's in Elaine, a town of four hundred people 3 miles to the south, and they paid 25 percent to 100 percent more than whites did for the same goods, the higher prices said to be a "carrying charge." A gallon of molasses that normally cost 85 cents was sold to the sharecroppers at \$1.25 on credit. Work shoes that normally sold for \$2.50 cost the sharecroppers \$4. When it came time to settle, the plantation owner would deduct these expenses from his tenant's half share of the cotton crop, and more often than not, after he was done with the arithmetic, he would scribble a balance-due figure on a scrap of paper and hand it to the bewildered farmer.

"They didn't give no itemized statement," recalled one Arkansas sharecropper, Henry Blake. "No, you just had to take their word. They never give you no details. They just say you owe so much. No matter how good account you kept, you had to go by their accounts. . . . It's been this way for a long time."

The black families in Hoop Spur had a song for this moment as well:

Nought's a nought

An figger's a figger

All fer de white man

None fer de nigger.