

# FBI takes new look at white men's killing of East Texas black teen in 1955

07:42 AM CST on Tuesday, February 9, 2010

By SHERRY JACOBSON / The Dallas Morning News  
[sjacobson@dallasnews.com](mailto:sjacobson@dallasnews.com)

It was just a "playful night of gunfire," a top investigator for the Texas Rangers said.

The nine bullets fired by two white men into a rural East Texas cafe – leaving a black teenager dead – had nothing to do with race, most insisted.

History no longer agrees.

On that night 55 years ago, three of those bullets struck and killed John Earl Reese, a 16-year-old high school student, as he danced in the Gregg County cafe.

Two white men later said they had just been trying to "scare the Negroes" when they fired into the building. They knew the cafe, on State Highway 149 south of Longview, was a popular hangout for blacks.

Reese, hit in the head and neck, died later at a Longview hospital. His two teenage cousins were shot in the arm.

Decades later, the Dallas office of the FBI has placed Reese's death on a list of 108 "unsolved or inadequately solved racially motivated homicides from the civil rights era."

What happened the night of Oct. 22, 1955, is the subject of a "cold-case initiative," launched by the federal agency in 2006 but revealed only in November.

That's when the FBI appealed for help in identifying the victims' next of kin in 33 of those civil rights cases dating to between 1950 and 1970.

The Reese killing was on that list, the only case assigned to Dallas' FBI division.

"We were trying to find a local relative to tell them that we were looking at the Reese case," said Mark White, a spokesman for the agency's local office.

After nearly three years of digging, the FBI said it was ready to reveal the results of the initial investigations, none of which have led to a trial.

"In half of the 108 cases, we know who did it and they are deceased," said Chris Allen, a national FBI spokesman. "Nothing else can be done."

It is not clear exactly what the FBI has learned about the Reese case. The men convicted in the killing – who never spent a day in jail – have died, as have many of the other people involved.

Investigators located Reese's cousin, one of the three people shot that night in 1955, only two months ago. Joyce Nelson Crockett is Reese's closest surviving relative. (Her sister, Johnnie Nelson Arthur, who also was wounded that day, died in 1976.)

Crockett, a 67-year-old retiree who lives in Tatum, a Rusk County community 10 miles from where the shooting occurred, has doubts that anything good can come from reopening her cousin's case.

"What can they do about it if everybody's dead?" she said. "Somebody's going to say they're sorry?"

The FBI contacted her in early December to prepare her for a letter from the Justice Department. She was told only that it would be hand-delivered by an FBI agent.

'They got away with it'

The Reese case supposedly was solved in 1956 when Joe Reagan Simpson, 22, and Perry Dean Ross, 21, admitted the shooting.

Ross was found guilty of murder without malice after a jury trial in April 1957. Simpson pleaded guilty to the same charge a few months later.

Both men were given five-year jail sentences that were immediately suspended. The fact that neither had a criminal record was used to justify the lightest possible sentence.

But it was a disturbing outcome for the teen's family and the Rusk County community of Mayflower, where Reese lived. The area had been terrorized by several middle-of-the-night shootings during 1955.

On the night of Reese's killing, Ross and Simpson also sped through the rural black community. Ross fired a rifle at two nearby houses and an empty school bus used by black children.

Simpson and Ross would later acknowledge three such drive-by shootings in Mayflower, although they were never charged in the incidents.

"They said they didn't mean to kill anybody," Crockett recalled. "They got away with it."

The lack of punishment kept Reese's murder case alive for civil rights activists.

In the 1980s, the shooting was unearthed by the Southern Poverty Law Center and claimed as one of the earliest murders in the civil rights era. In 1989, when the Civil Rights Memorial opened in Montgomery, Ala., Reese's name was on the list of "martyrs."

It was the first public recognition of Reese's death as something greater than a personal loss to his family, said Crockett, who attended the monument's dedication.

"You couldn't find a better person than John Earl," Crockett said. "There's no telling what he could have been."

Looking for lapses

The FBI isn't the only group looking into the unresolved civil rights cases. Several law schools have

dispatched students to identify possible judicial and law enforcement lapses in the long-dormant cases, including Reese's.

"His case was treated very lightly by the state," said Margaret Burnham, a professor at Northeastern University School of Law in Boston. She also founded the school's Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project.

Like other cold cases from the civil rights era, Reese's illustrates "the massive breakdown in law enforcement," she said. "There were trials that were not fair, and justice was not achieved."

Burnham based her conclusions on law enforcement documents and court records her project found in the Texas State Archives in Austin and the Gregg County courthouse in Longview, where the murder trial took place.

The political climate in rural East Texas in 1955 was a major factor in the shooting, said Kaylie Simon, a Northeastern law student responsible for delving into Reese's case.

"We are trying to rebuild the facts and put the record straight about what happened, what actions were taken and what actions were not taken."

The records indicate that because of jurisdiction issues, the Texas Rangers took over the case two months after Reese was killed.

Media reports at the time suggested that investigators dragged their feet for weeks after the killing.

The records from the case indicate that:

- A local sheriff refused to investigate Reese's death, saying he was convinced "it was Negroes who done the shooting, not white folks," stated one report.
- The Texas Rangers conducted dozens of interviews focused on a bond election to build a new "colored" school in Mayflower.
- The Rangers identified two factions in the school district that were fighting over the location of the new school. A third faction, labeled "pretty wild characters," included Ross and Simpson.
- Ross admitted to investigators that his anger over the new school had "a great deal" to do with the shooting

Capt. Bob Crowder, who headed the Rangers' investigation, concluded that the new school – which he considered a political issue and not a racial one – was behind the 1955 shooting.

As part of the investigation, most of the black witnesses were asked about racial discrimination in Mayflower and Tatum. They responded that they had never experienced it.

In his summary of the investigation, Crowder described all the black witnesses as "good" and "humble."

Case not closed

The resurfacing of Reese's case could be troublesome for residents of the East Texas communities that are involved.

Cliff Harkless, who was 7 and living in Mayflower when Reese was killed, said he was concerned that

allegations might be raised about people who cannot defend themselves.

"With a lot of these people dead and gone, we can't say that it was all factual," he said of the statements contained in the unearthed documents.

"This was one case where justice possibly was not served, but bringing up those names is not helping."

Harkless, director of human resources for the Tatum Independent School District, said race relations have improved significantly in Rusk County.

"We've come a long way in that area," he said.

Nonetheless, the FBI's investigation is not yet closed, said the Dallas spokesman.

Burnham and her law students in Boston are hoping to revive community interest in Reese's death if only to promote fuller understanding of what happened.

"A legal remedy would be difficult because so many of the people in this case have died," said Simon, the law student. "But it's possible there could be some kind of memorial or even an apology to Reese's family."

Crockett admitted she would like some recognition of her cousin's death. But she was equally worried that the local reaction might be negative.

"Every time somebody brings this up," she said, "people start telling me to leave it in the past."