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City at Bay: Society's Response to the Atlanta Child Murders

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Since citizens sifted through the rubble and ashes of General Sherman's merciless sacking of Atlanta, the city has experienced no darker time than the Atlanta child murder rampage stretching from 1979 until the arrest of convicted killer, Wayne Williams, in 1981. The killings of young African Americans brought the expanding city to a standstill. Businesses once eager to relocate to the gleaming city began stalling. Racial tensions sparked by the slayings began to strangle Atlanta's moniker of "the city too busy to hate." The entire nation watched in fascination and horror. The city experienced hysteria and unity in response to the string of killings, which affected a greater number of people than just the victims and their families. This paper highlights and divulges many of the numerous ways in which the youth murders reverberated across metropolitan Atlanta and the United States.

Two days before the first would-be victim disappeared, *The Atlanta Journal*, the city's afternoon newspaper at the time, published a story on July 19, 1979, documenting the spike in crime as compared with the first half of 1978 (Hiatt, 1979, p. 14A). The article cited FBI statistics claiming a "29 percent increase in serious crime during the first quarter of 1979 over a similar period in 1978" (Hiatt, 1979, p. 14A). In the first six months of 1979, the reeling city had already suffered more murders (113) than in the entirety of 1978 (74). Thus, crime was noticeably on the rise even before the Atlanta child murderer commenced his work. Unfortunately for Atlanta, this increase did not remain a local story. Less than a month later, Susan Harrigan of *The Wall Street Journal* authored a front-page story detailing the swelling crime problem in the southern city. Harrigan (1979) cited the same FBI statistics and also mentioned that Atlanta "had the highest crime increase (18%) of any major city" (p. 1A). The crime surge was jeopardizing the growing city's ability to attract more industry, particularly within Atlanta's lucrative and massive convention business (Harrigan, 1979). The article further referenced recent studies, which claimed that, "for firms thinking of moving or expanding, a city's crime level now is the second-most-important consideration, just behind 'city government attitude toward business'" (Harrigan, 1979, p. 1A). Harrigan connected the crime dilemma to conflicts within the city's police force. She credited six years of racial tension within the police department along with a twenty-five percent decrease in the overall size of the force as main factors exacerbating the crisis (Harrigan, 1979). The depleted force and city representatives were already over burdened with the spike; however, far worse was on its way. Atlanta's citizens, its municipal leaders, and even the national media could not have anticipated how quickly the situation would turn from grim to disastrous.

The first murders eventually connected with the killer surfaced in late July 1979 (Headley, 1998, p. 33). The discovery of the two slain black boys, Edward Smith age fourteen and Alfred Evans age thirteen, garnered little media as described by historian Bernard Headley (1998):

> Atlanta's dominant news media showed little, if any, interest in the two killings. The editors of the city's dominant newspaper organization…must have looked at these deaths in the same way as the police. The boys were part of a "delinquent subculture," their deaths having little or no meaning to newspaper readers (p. 34).

Headley (1998) further argued that the black population in Atlanta paid no more attention to the killings than the whites or the police (p. 34). Many dismissed the murders as the effects of living in crime infested and impoverished areas. Some, on the other hand, immediately recognized the gravity of the deaths and link between the cases. Kim Reid (2007), author of *No Safe Place: a Family Memoir*, lived as a child in the city during the killing spree and recalled her mother, a city police officer, conveying a heightened sense of caution regarding these particular homicides (p. 3).

Six murders later and the police still failed to treat the cases as the works of a single killer. Georgia Governor George Busbee stood with police in affirming that the deaths were isolated incidents when he "offered a $1,000 reward, per case, for information leading to separate indictments" (Headley, 1998, p. 52). Finally, after eleven child slayings, Public Safety Commissioner Lee Brown, a black man, announced the formation of a special task force assigned with compiling and linking clues between the individual child murder cases (Mallard, 2009, p. 11). This decision came too late according to some mothers of early victims. *The New York Times'* contributor Reginald Stuart (1981a) quoted them as blaming Atlanta Police for waiting too long before exploring a potential correlation between the homicides. Headley believed the mothers had good reason for their accusations. After examining city data on child murders, he concluded that, "had Atlanta police taken a closer look at their own data on child murders over the most recent five-year period, they would have indeed seen something unusual" (Headley, 1998, 51). According to Headley (1998), the city's data showed that only two children had been strangled to death in a three-year span between 1975 and 1978 and two already fell victim to strangulation between July 1979 and July 1980 (p. 51). Shootings, stabbings, and beatings were more common in causing death in child homicides. Controversy surrounding the Atlanta Police Department's handling of the growing number of child murders would continue to spread across the region and the rest of the country.

Perhaps the most stinging charges levied upon Atlanta's police and city leaders in response to the child murders were those of apathy. *The Washington Post* quoted Eddie Lee George, resident of Bowen Homes housing project where the thirteen-year-old slain Curtis Walker once lived, as saying that, "'I guess Maynard Jackson is a good mayor; he tries to do what he can do. But they don't care. The mayor, the police chief and all, they don't really care'" (Robinson, 1981, p. 5A). George and many blacks shared these feelings with the press even though the mayor, police chief, and commissioner were all African American men. Headley found similar sentiments in Camille Bell, mother of murdered Yusef Bell, and Grace Davis, chief of the inner-city advocacy association Atlanta Women Against Crime. They insisted that Mayor Jackson was more concerned about keeping conventions rolling through town than he was about the deaths of the black children (Headley, 1998, p. 40). When reporters questioned the agency's commitment to ending the horror Commissioner Brown barked, "Of course we're concerned…that's one of our major problems. We're very worried about that, and we're doing all we can" (Robinson, 1981, p. 5A).

Brown attempted to subdue all grumblings of inaction by telling the public of the countless hours he and his team had logged away trying to crack the case (Richardson, 1980). The Atlanta Police even teamed with the Atlanta Fire Department in "questioning individually nearly every Atlanta resident" (Montgomery & Richardson, 1980, p. 14A) in the search for clues. Despite the city's efforts, criticisms continued to flood the newspapers. Willie Mae Mathis, whose son Jeffrey Mathis was among the missing children at the time, told *The Atlanta Constitution* that officials did not "get serious about case" (Richardson, 1980, 8B) until after Clifford Jones' body was found in the opulent northwest section of town. Before Jones, all of the victim's bodies had been discovered south of Interstate 20, areas which formed much of Atlanta's destitute neighborhoods and housing projects (Headley, 1998, p. 55). Mathis did not hide her belief that Atlanta's city leaders and police were more concerned with combating crime afflicting the rich than crime afflicting the poor.

Stuart's *New York Times* article honing in on the controversy surrounding Atlanta's police added a new angle to the disparagement by suggesting that Mayor Jackson was acting to preserve the safety his political standing above effectively handling the case. Stuart (1981a) described "a growing sentiment in the (police) department that Mr. Jackson, who was the city's first black mayor, wanted to handle the crime with 'kid gloves' to avoid offending his constituents" (p. 13A). Former Atlanta Police officers voiced their disapproval of the city's progress and attempted to conduct a separate investigation. One of those

former officers, Mr. Perry, told Stuart (1981) that, "the Atlanta police were not sharing information with neighboring police departments" (p. 13A). Disunity amongst separate police departments in the Atlanta metropolitan area appeared to hinder the overall investigation. Mayor Jackson, however, had an answer for that critique: "'We decided a long time ago that we were going to have to sit back and take the heat rather than reveal a lead, a clue. We know a hell of a lot more than we are ready to discuss'" (Stuart, 1981, p. 13A).

Police determined that the killer followed a pattern of abducting children, murdering them (often by asphyxiation), and then dumping their bodies in wooded areas or the Chattahoochee River, which would be discovered in a matter of days or months. The city kept track of two figures: the number murdered and the number missing. The killer's targets were black children, mostly males, many coming from slums south of Atlanta, although Headley (1998) pointed out that some victims came from middle class households (p. 26). One of the only two female victims, Latonya Wilson, was abducted from her apartment home in the middle of the night (Montgomery & Richardson, 1980). Annie Geter cautioned her fourteen-year-old son, Lubie, one late January afternoon in 1980 to "'come back before dark…people are so bad these days, someone might get you like the other children'" (Harris, 1981, p. 12A). Lubie jokingly replied, "'don't worry, Mom, they've got to catch me first'" (Harris, 1981, p. 12A). Lubie went missing that evening and his strangled corpse was later found in a wooded area approximately a month later (Headley, 1998, pp. 86-87). In a 2010 CNN documentary titled *The Atlanta Child Murders*, Sheila Baltazar told Soledad O'Brien of her stepson's desire to catch the killer, gain fame, and the reward money (Polk, 2010). Twelve-year-old Patrick Baltazar would later become a victim himself. Patrick was last seen alive on February 6, 1981, near the Omni Center in downtown. A maintenance worker found his body a week later behind an Atlanta suburban office complex (Polk, 2010). Jeffrey Mathis disappeared while walking to a local convenience store to buy cigarettes for this mother (Headley, 1998, pp. 42-43). One child was even abducted after attending a mass rally protesting the Atlanta child killings held on Morehouse College's campus west of downtown (Headley, 1998, p. 116). Children were vanishing while conducting seemingly routine chores or activities leaving families across Atlanta, especially African American ones, with the conclusion that there was no safe place for their children with this killer on the loose.

Atlanta's children noticed new curfews set by horrified parents in response to the slayings. Kim Reid remembered the frustration she harbored towards her mother who forbade her from first going to

the downtown Rialto Theater and then from downtown altogether (Reid, 2007, pp. 56-59). David Butler, 7, told *The Washington Posts'* Eugene Robinson that, "'I have to stay in the house most the time now…it's just not as much fun.'" Although David may have been too young to understand the complete reasons for confinement to home, eleven-year-old Paul Anthony knew perfectly well and shared the panic gripping the rest of the city: "you be scared to go places by yourself…you can't do the things you used to do" (Robinson, 1981, p. 5A). Atlanta City Councilman Arthur Langford grew worrisome of the potential long term effects Atlanta's children might suffer due to the slayings: "'Parents are teaching their children not to trust anyone, not preacher, policeman, teacher, fireman, anyone. But when this is over, how will we teach them to trust ever again?'" (Robinson, 1981, p. 1A).

Businesses could not ignore the perilous state of Atlanta either. *The Wall Street Journal* found in 1981 that tourism decreased nearly eight percent because of the youth murders (Goolrick, 1981). The business slump was even worse than in 1979 before the child murder story broke. The article claimed that tourists planning to come to town for a jazz festival cancelled nearly 600 reservations in the towering Peachtree Plaza Hotel over a two-week span (Goolrick, 1981). Scheduling upcoming conventions grew strenuous. The crime spike in 1979 first disrupted Atlanta's economic engines but by 1981 the city's businesses were nearly held hostage by a single killer. Until he was stopped, commerce would remain sluggish.

Because all of the dead victims attributed to the Atlanta child murderer were black, racial tension inevitably ensued. Famed African American writer and essayist, James Baldwin, wrote in his piece *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* that, "Atlanta's first reaction to the murders was to assume that this was an action of the Ku Klux Klan" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 79). In October of 1980, Governor Busbee announced that the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) would be conducting investigations into the activities of the Georgia chapter of the Klan (Hesser & Wells, 1980). *The Atlanta Constitution* dubbed Mayor Jackson responsible for urging the investigations for fear that the child kidnappings and murders might be racially motivated (Hesser & Wells, 1980). The same article mentioned that some 800 blacks were beginning to militarize under the leadership of a black veterans' faction in an effort to "arm themselves against the KKK or anyone else who threatens blacks" (Hesser & Wells, 1980, p. 12A). Former Black Panther, and commander of a local post of the group, Orvell Anderson, promised *The Atlanta Constitution* that, "'I will be militant if I have to be. We're not going to continue to let all these crimes be perpetrated against our children'" (Hesser & Wells, 1980, p. 12A).

Both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* covered the mounting drama in Atlanta. *The Washington Post* quoted residents of Atlanta's housing projects as stating with absolute certainty that whites were behind the slayings (Robinson, 1981). Men as prominent as the Reverend Joseph Lowry, president of the renowned and Atlanta-based Southern Christian Leadership Conference, voiced his beliefs to *The New York Times* that the murders were "part of a national wave of racially motivated black deaths" (Stuart, 1981b, p. 16A). Some housing project inhabitants blamed the police force's inadequacy to protect black children as the catalyst for forming their own armed groups (Stuart, 1981b). Commissioner Brown declared that, "'there will be only one police force in Atlanta'" (Robinson, 1981, p. 5A). Hence, police did not welcome the help and began arresting some of the new patrolling citizens. Even some black citizens opposed the armed groups. A Techwood Homes resident opined that, "'I'm against them…some of the ones with the baseball bats are the same ones you see every night around here trying to rape and mug people'" (Robinson, 1981, p. 5A). Some black Atlantans accused the city's white populace for not showing any concern over the homicides. To this Michael Trotter, a white member of the Atlanta Action Forum, offered his rebuttal and described the predicaments white leadership faced:

> If you express concern about the problem, you may be viewed as criticizing black leadership…but if you don't speak out, you're considered not caring. So you somehow try to find a middle ground where you try to express concern about the situation without being critical (Stuart, 1981b, p. 16A).

The United States had front row seats via the newspaper media to the unfolding racial angst not witnessed in Atlanta since the civil rights era less than two decades prior.

Not all stories regarding interracial relations coming out of Atlanta were negative. An article in *The Atlanta Constitution* in October of 1980 drew attention to the efforts whites were making in aiding the hurting black community. Pastors of predominantly white churches urged their congregations to help in some way or fashion whether through prayer, fund-raising, or joining search parties for the missing children (Mooney & Salyer, 1980). Councilman Langford was pleased when white people began teaming up with the weekend search parties and he estimated that the they helped form "'a good biracial group – rich people, poor people, young and old. People are finally revitalizing the spirit we used to have in Atlanta'" (Mooney & Salyer, 1980, p. 8A). John Cox, an African American and executive of Delta Air Lines, saw positives in the way the city was coming together in an effort to end the killings (Stuart, 1981b). Rabbi Alvin Sugarman went so far as to state that, "'the Atlanta situation and tragedy in the black

community could be the series of events that brings us back together on a far deeper level than we were even during the emotional peek of the civil rights movement'" (Mooney & Salyer, 1980, p. 8A). The *Atlanta Daily World*, a black newspaper, published an article titled "Deaths Bring Harmony Between Races Here" and relayed the idea that these killings were bridging gaps between the blacks and whites (Rountree, 1980).

The support people from across the United States showed for Atlanta during the turmoil highlighted another positive. Entertainers Sammy Davis Jr. and Frank Sinatra headlined a fund-raising concert at the Atlanta Civic Center to aid in funding the costly police investigations (Stuart, 1981c). The city of Chicago sent a check. Donations flooded into City Hall for both the investigation and the victims' families. Even some incarcerated men sent small sums of money accompanied with notes wishing the police good luck in their searches (Stuart, 1981c). The Committee to Stop Children Murders received money from all over to send inner city Atlanta children to summer camps (Cotterell, 1981). A rally focused on the Atlanta child murders was held at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. where an estimated 5,000 people attended protesting violence towards children (Milloy, 1981). Not everyone came to the rally with the similar intentions, though, as some attendees including musicians and communist newspapers solicited business for their own profits (Milloy, 1981). Several fraudulent fund-raising groups sprouted up but the overall message was clear: Americans cared about what was taking place in Atlanta and they took action (Stuart, 1981c).

Wayne Williams, a twenty three year old black man, was arrested in 1981, tried, and convicted in 1982 for two of the Atlanta youth murders, although police connected him to dozens more (Headley, 1998, pp. 198-199). The black community received his verdict with mixed feelings. Many had trouble accepting that a black man and not a white man was responsible for the horror that gripped the city for over two years (Headley, 1998, p. 200). Some, including the *Atlanta Daily Worlds'* Barbara Beat (1999), saw too many holes in the case prosecutors made against Williams and suggested that he might have been framed. Nevertheless, the pattern of killings credited to Williams abruptly stopped after his arrest, finally giving Atlanta's citizens the peace and rest they desperately needed.

The reign of the Atlanta child murderer revealed many things about Atlanta. Aside from the actual homicides, the negative affects of the murders were the citizen's vicious derision of the police and city leadership, the decrease in commerce, and the racial tensions that proved troublesome. The negatives, however, were countered by unity amongst the races and an outpouring of support across Atlanta and

across the nation. Atlanta overcame these darks years and continued to grow and attract business, becoming an international hub for commerce and culture.

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