

# THE ROAD TO EVIL



**James Byrd Jr wasn't just murdered: he was chained behind a pick-up truck and dragged for more than two miles. By the end of the ordeal, he had been skinned and decapitated. Now the small town of Jasper, Texas, must come to terms with its most horrific crime. And America may have to face up to a vicious new tide of racism. Report by Christine Toomey**



Jasper's sheriff found a grisly trail of blood, flesh and personal belongings leading from the corpse of James Byrd. At one point on the road (far left) were his false teeth; at another point (below) was his head



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heriff Billy Rowles had only golf on his mind as he cruised along Highway 190, with temperatures already heading for 100°F early in the morning of Sunday, June 7. The former Texas golf champion was dreaming of bringing glory on his small home town of Jasper by winning a national title from the World Police Olympics, opening in Dallas that evening. The call that crackled across his radio at 8.20am determined he wouldn't make it to Dallas. And the news

it brought ensured that Jasper would acquire a very different title. The logging town set deep in the yellow-pine forests of east Texas, on the rich alluvial banks of the Angelina River, would within days become known as "the hate capital of America".

At first the call seemed mundane. The body of a man had been found at the roadside by a father and son, out checking their cattle early that morning on a remote farm road to the east of Jasper. "It sounded like a hit-and-run," recalls Rowles, who reluctantly swung his car round and headed south again to meet his deputies at the scene.

By the time he arrived at Huff Creek Road just under an hour later, it was clear that the crime was more complex and barbaric. The body the farmer had at first mistaken for that of a deer was found to be the remains of a black man, with his head and one arm missing. The ankles of the corpse were rubbed raw, as if he had been shackled and then dragged along the road.

As the sheriff and his men followed the trail of dried blood that led from the corpse down a gentle incline in the road, past a country cemetery and the small clapboard Rosebloom Baptist Church, they came to a sharp bend where a broken drainage pipe jutted out from a gravel ditch. There, lying in the dirt, was the upper part of the corpse, its face disfigured beyond recognition.

Pacing further back along the road, Rowles and his deputies found traces of human flesh and blood and personal belongings — including a wallet, keys and a set of dentures — slaloming back and forth across the Tarmac for more than two miles. They followed the trail of carnage as it took a sharp turn to the right along a heavily overgrown logging track, just before a bridge over the brackish waters of Huff Creek.

A few hundred yards along the track, the trail ended in a small clearing. There they found broken beer bottles, a wrench with the name "Berry" inscribed on it and a cigarette lighter bearing the name "Possum", beneath a triangular symbol of the Ku Klux Klan. "A terrible feeling came over me. I knew then we had some mighty hard work ahead of us, and that these were sick people we were looking for," Rowles remembers, spitting a stream of chewed tobacco into a nearby bin.

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Betty Boatner and her mother, Stella Byrd, had just finished teaching Sunday school that morning when they heard rumours that a man's body had been found up near Huff Creek. "We had no idea who it was. We just said a prayer for his family," says Betty, 44, as she sits on a hard, polished pew in Jasper's Greater New Bethel Baptist Church, absently fanning her face.

As she strolled back to her parents' small brown wooden house, Betty says, she and her mother had other things to discuss. Family members had travelled to Jasper from as far away as Hawaii to attend a bridal shower for Betty's daughter Tenika the day before, and there was plenty of news to keep the two women talking into the hot and humid afternoon as they sat sipping iced tea.

They discussed arrangements for Tenika's wedding and plans for a father's-day supper the following Sunday. They talked about Betty's five sisters and two brothers, and both noted how subdued her eldest brother, James

Byrd Jr — "Son", as they called him — had seemed the day before. He had sung none of his favourite Al Green songs, nor played the trumpet or piano as he usually did at family gatherings. The talk of weddings had seemed to get him thinking about his own failed marriage. As the rest of the family sat around laughing, eating hot chicken wings and drinking punch, he had bounced his baby granddaughter on his knee and offered advice to the bride-to-be: "Make sure this is what you want. Remember it should be for ever."

Although James, 49, and his wife, Thelma, had been married for more than 20 years, they had divorced in 1993 after his drinking got out of hand, he lost his job as a vacuum-cleaner salesman and ran into trouble with the law. His two eldest children, Renée and Ross, left home to join the army, and his youngest daughter went to live with her mother.

But after serving four years in jail for petty theft, forging cheques and parole violation, Son had returned to Jasper and seemed determined to straighten himself out. He had started drawing disability benefit for the severe arthritis that made him a familiar figure limping around town, and had been allocated a flat, which he was taking great pride in getting ready for his son to stay in during the summer before he was posted to South Korea.

The last Betty saw of Son was when her sisters Mylinda and Louvon gave him a lift to a friend's party after the bridal shower. "See y'all, love y'all," he had shouted as he was driven off. But even with his friends that night, James Byrd remained subdued. "He just sat there listenin' to the music and left to walk home alone around 2am," said Michael Land, a hearse driver who had known him for years.

It was as Betty and her mother sat talking that Sunday afternoon that James Earl Carter, Jasper's only black sheriff's deputy, trudged up to their porch, accompanied by a mortician, to tell them the body found at Huff Creek was Son. "I just said, it cannot be," says Betty. "My mom and dad, they were screaming."

After breaking the news to the rest of the family, Betty went to her brother's flat to collect a suit in which his body could be laid out for a final viewing. She was not to know that would be impossible. When Sheriff Rowles told them, later that day, the state in which the body had been found, "I was angry — hurting and angry," says Betty. "But the word of God says, 'Get angry but sin not.' So we started prayin' real hard."

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As the horrific details of James Byrd's death began to circulate around Jasper that Sunday afternoon, witnesses to his last hours began to come forward. Among them was Steve Scott, who called the sheriff's office to say that he had seen Byrd limping along a street on the northern outskirts of town around 2.30am. As Scott parked his car outside his home on Martin Luther King Boulevard a few minutes later, he said, he saw a Ford pick-up truck drive by in the bright moonlight, with Byrd sitting in the back and two or three white men in the driver's cabin.

It did not take long to match the owner of the pick-up truck described by Scott with the name inscribed on the wrench found at the murder scene, and at 9pm Rowles dispatched his deputies to make their first arrest. Shawn Berry, the 23-year-old manager of the local cinema, was up in the projection room getting ready for the next showing of Godzilla when the sheriff's men arrived.

Berry, a chubby-faced rodeo enthusiast, was well known around Jasper as friendly but trouble-prone. "I guess he was young for his age and kinda impressionable," said a friend, who worked at a local sawmill and said he was "like a father" to Berry for a while. "But he was a good kid."

Berry's father had walked out on the family when he was a small boy. His mother remarried, then divorced again, and her second husband, whom Shawn had idolised, killed himself with a shotgun, suffering from



depression. Shawn's mother, struggling with a drug problem, continued to shuffle in and out of his life. For a while, Shawn and his brother, Louis, were looked after by their grandparents, until they too divorced and moved away. As his family life disintegrated, Berry started getting into trouble with the law. At first it was petty thieving. But in October 1992, when he was 17, he was caught robbing a jukebox warehouse with a schoolfriend. Berry and John "Billy" King, also 17, were sentenced to 90 days in a military-style boot camp. It seemed to scare Berry enough to make him vow to friends that, from then on, he was "going straight".

One of those who believed him was Bill Snelson, the owner of Jasper Tyre. "The kid had had a rough time, and I thought he deserved a new start," says Snelson, 53, who offered him a job driving a recovery truck. Snelson later offered him a place to stay in a trailer in his mother-in-law's back yard, in return for doing odd jobs for her around the house. "Shawn was smart and pleasant," says Snelson. "He was not prejudiced. He cried like a baby when a black man he worked with here died. But he wouldn't take care of his responsibilities. He just wanted to run and play, and after a couple of years I had to let him go." The two men remained in touch. When Berry and his girlfriend Christie Marcontell, a 22-year-old local beauty contestant, had a baby son at the end of last year, Snelson says Berry couldn't wait to show him snapshots of the boy, whom they called Montana.

The picture Snelson and others in Jasper paint, of a good-natured drifter, could not be further from the tale of depravity that emerged as the sheriff and his men grilled him late into the night about Byrd's death. He said he had been riding around Jasper in his truck in the early hours with his old schoolfriend Billy King and Lawrence Brewer, a jail-mate of King's from out of town, when he spotted a black male hobbling along the road and offered him a lift. As soon as Byrd climbed in the flatbed of the

While racial hate crimes have been a part of the South's history for more than a century, until Byrd's death Jasper seemed to have escaped the worst of the region's violence.

Geographically on the periphery of the Old South, Texas was traditionally one of the most lynch-prone states, and many towns close to Jasper have a dark past. As recently as 1988 in nearby Cleveland, a 30-year-old black male was found beaten to death in a cell after being arrested for the theft of a fountain pen. Half the town's police force were suspended, then acquitted. The pen was later found on top of a drinks machine in the police station.

Towns such as Evedale and Vidor, an hour's drive south of Jasper, are still known as "white flight" areas, to which whites gravitate. Many are drawn by the presence of militant branches of the Ku Klux Klan, which have fought government attempts at integrating schools and public housing projects, and have deterred blacks from moving into the area. Klan rallies and cross-burnings are still held regularly in Vidor.

It was to Vidor that Billy King asked to have his school records transferred during his brief release from prison in 1994. While the local school authorities refuse to confirm whether King actually attended high school there, regulars at Gary's Coffee Shop, a popular Klan hangout in the centre of town, remember him passing through.

Despite an initial reluctance to admit any knowledge of the Klan, some of the regulars at the coffee shop boasted about their exploits in white sheets, while slipping their small white KKK passports under the table to prove their authenticity. One elderly man in a pink floral cap, proudly toting a faded photograph of himself as a boy sitting on an old Confederate cannon, described the killing of James Byrd as "sloppy work". "The way to get rid of a nigger is to just put a bullet through his head," he explained, as others nodded in agreement.



After the murder, a prayer vigil was held in Jasper (above), and a demonstration was organised by a group of New Black Panthers (right), who were heckled by an 'imperial wizard' of the Ku Klux Klan



In Jasper, few would dare to voice such rabid thoughts. On the surface the town has achieved an unusual degree of racial harmony. The community of just under 8000 — 54% white, 46% black — has several prominent black citizens, including the mayor, the hospital administrator and the head of a regional government board. It avoided the violence that racked some southern towns when the civil rights movement forced desegregation in the 1960s — although one country club on the outskirts of town preferred to fill in its swimming pool rather than allow blacks to use it.

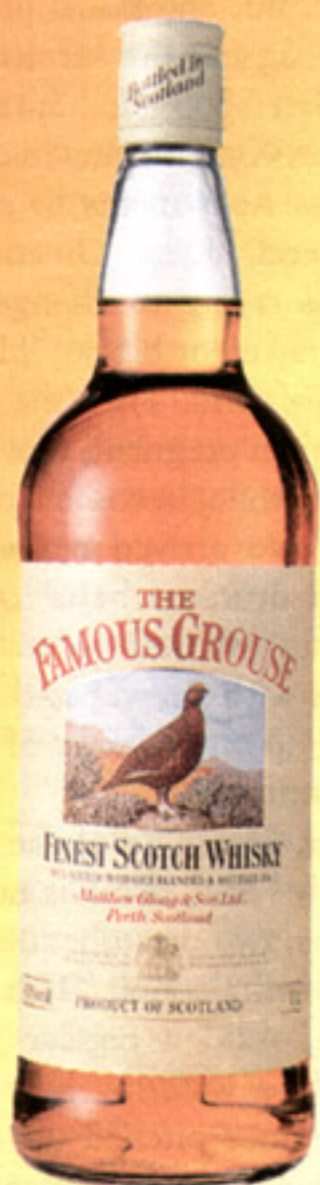
"Race relations in Jasper overall have been pretty good. When this [murder] happened, the press came here looking for the old southern town syndrome and they were disappointed," says the district attorney, Guy James Gray, who claims the worst problems the community had

faced before the killing were occasional fist fights between parents opposed to interracial dating.

"There's always a percentage that don't see eye to eye. But mostly we get along," says the mayor, RC Horn, who insists that Byrd's death must have been "the will of God". White residents point to the yellow ribbons tied to the door handles of Jasper's civic buildings and many houses as "a sign of unity in the community" following Byrd's death. But the ribbons are noticeably absent from the more modest homes to the north and east of town, where most blacks live.

Black Baptist ministers concede that only their repeated calls for calm, and for parishioners to draw on their religious faith, have prevented a bloody retaliation. "That's why Jasper didn't boil over, because of the black churches," says Rev Kenneth Lyons of the Greater New

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Bethel Church. "Overall, there is a climate of tolerance."

Many are less sanguine. "Most of us don't speak out because we have to carry on living here. But this killing was like a wake-up call to all of us," said Lawrence Simmons, an 18-year-old black high-school student playing basketball with his friends in Sandy Creek Park. "There's not much mixing. No white boys ever come and play with us here." At sports events most whites still sit at one end of the stadium and blacks at the other.

"Some [whites] are truly sorry about what happened, but most of them are just embarrassed. That's where their sympathy stops," says Ladora Coleman, a schoolteacher. "We may have lulled our children into a false sense of security, but that will change now." Some fear that trouble could break out when schools reopen in the autumn.

"People don't openly call you a nigger here, but they will follow you around in stores as if they expect you to steal something," says Alton Horn, 30. "Some will cross to the other side of the street when they see you coming, and there will always be a good excuse why you don't get a job and a white person does. A lot of things still have to change around here."

It is this competition for jobs that lies at the heart of much of the resentment between the black and white communities. Several timber mills in the vicinity have closed in recent years, pushing unemployment in the county to nearly 14% — much higher than the national average. "People get frustrated. They get depressed and start blaming everyone but themselves," says Moritz Hardwick, a Jasper resident for 25 years.

Byrd's death has lifted the lid off some of the bigotry simmering beneath the surface. Asked what he thought of the murder, an elderly antiques dealer calmly answered that he thought it was simply a game that had gone wrong: "From what I hear," he said, "they just wanted to play with him a little bit, drag him a little

ways. But it got out of hand when his head came off."

Others in the town argue that the killing was justified retaliation for the bludgeoning to death of a white businessman the week before by a black former employee. And, although Byrd never served time in the same jails as his alleged killers, two regulars at one of Jasper's private clubs, the June Bugs, casually aired their conviction that he was murdered because he had sodomised his killers in prison.

Despite assertions by Jasper's chief of police, Harlan Alexander, that his town "has never had any problems with the Klan", KKK leaders in Vidor say they have long had a dedicated following there. "We are growing at an astonishing rate and have had a klavern in Jasper County for over 30 years," says Darrell Flinn, matter-of-factly handing over his business card as "Imperial Wizard of the Knights of the White Kamellia, Inc". The logo on the card shows a hooded night rider brandishing a burning cross, beside the words "You can sleep sound tonight, the Klan is awake".

Three weeks after the murder, Flinn invoked his constitutional right to free speech and led a march of his hooded cronies to Jasper's old courthouse square — where General Custer once bivouacked his soldiers after slaves were freed in 1865 — allegedly with the intention of dissociating his branch of the KKK from the killing. Instead he savoured the media spotlight and hurled insults at an opposing contingent of New Black Panthers in paramilitary garb. "You were walking on diamonds in Africa, but none of you thought to step down and pick one up until the white man told you to," Flinn ranted.

**'From what I hear, they wanted to play with him a bit. It got out of hand when his head came off'**

"You were living in mud huts, breaking sticks and stones and eating your ancestors and termites..." Few Jasper residents turned up to watch the charade.

It is partly because of such tawdry theatricality that the KKK is dismissed as "an almost clownish outfit" by many of those who monitor hate groups in America. They argue that the Klan has been supplanted by more sophisticated right-wing extremists and militia groups using the Internet. In the past year these groups have increased in number by 20% to 474, according to Klanwatch, a monitoring group based in Montgomery, Alabama. America's overcrowded prisons are a popular recruiting ground for these white supremacists.

An FBI team dispatched to Jasper has the job of determining whether King, Brewer and Berry had any links with such groups. If enough evidence exists, they could face federal hate-crimes charges, which carry the death penalty. They already face the death penalty on state charges of capital murder and kidnapping, and are expected to come to trial early next year.

Throughout it all, James Byrd's family has maintained a dignified silence, breaking it only to call for reflection and prayer. "My brother did not die to teach us a lesson. He was not a willing martyr," said Clara Taylor, his 50-year-old sister, a schoolteacher in Houston. "But if any good can come from this, I hope it will make people ask themselves, 'Am I somehow contributing to racism?' I think if each person would do that and make the necessary changes within their own family, it would improve relations between the races."

There is little prospect of this happening, however, with those in Jasper who do not believe they have a problem. "Jasper is a nice little town where people basically get along," Sheriff Rowles insists, easing his white stetson back from his forehead. "We're not changing faster or slower than anywhere else. We're no different from other places in the world... no different from London." ■

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