

Title: The Scottsboro Boys Trial

Obstacles Faced: False accusations, no decent defense, all white jury, newspaper headlines

Outcome: The four youngest boys were freed and the rest paroled

By: Celeste Brown

The Scottsboro Boys case was one that compared to no other. “No crime in American history-- let alone a crime that never occurred-- produced as many trials, convictions, reversals, and retrials as did an alleged gang rape of two white girls by nine black teenagers on a Southern Railroad freight run” (law2.umkc.edu/). Nine black boys were hoboing, or hopping from rail car to rail car without pay, along with a group of whites. A fight broke out between the two groups and the train was stopped. All nine boys were arrested and charged for rape, accused by two women also riding the train without pay. This case is important to the study of Civil Rights because it shows the lack of respect African Americans received and how much higher white people’s word was valued. “Although there was no evidence connecting the youth to the women, the nine youths were charged with raping the women. The women -- who had had sexual relations with some of the white men thrown off the train and fearing prosecution for their sexual activity with the white men -- agreed to testify against the black youths” (www.pbs.org). There was nothing to prove that those nine boys raped the two women other than the woman's own claim. According to the boys themselves, if any of them were to try to call one of the women a liar and claim that the statements were untrue, they would be stabbed with a bayonet. Because the authorities believed what the women said without a doubt, the media did too. Newspapers published articles with headlines reading, "ALL NEGROES POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED BY GIRLS AND ONE WHITE BOY WHO WAS HELD PRISONER WITH PISTOL AND KNIVES WHILE NINE BLACK FIENDS COMMITTED REVOLTING CRIME." and the like. This only fueled further hatred from those in Scottsboro. When it came time for the trial, the boys were tried in groups of 2 or 3, using attorneys who were, according to accounts, unpaid and unprepared and, on the first day of the trial showed up so drunk that he could barely walk. The boys were ultimately found guilty due to the obvious incompetence of their attorneys. But, the cases were appealed to the Supreme Court and they overturned the convictions ruling that that the right of the defendants under the Fourteenth Amendment's due process clause to competent legal counsel had been denied by Alabama. Ultimately, this case represented how extreme racial prejudice could really be. These boys were put in jail for varying amounts of time, each spent at least 6 years in prison, for a crime they did not commit. This case planted the seed for an even greater fear in the hearts of African Americans. The fear that no matter what, they would never be heard, especially within the legal system. It sent the message that despite positives public reputation, stature or achievements if you were black, you were inferior.