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Arrest of Bombing Victim is Grave Disservice

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Hazel Brannon, "Arrest of Bombing Victim is Grave Disservice" (1963). *Clippings*. 165.
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THIS editorial was awarded the
GOLDEN QUILL EDITORIAL AWARD
by the International Conference of weekly
newspaper editors in July, 1963, meeting
near St. Louis -

(This editorial by Editor Hazel Brannon Smith of Lexington, Mississippi, appeared in the May 16, 1963, edition of The Lexington Advertiser and The Durant News. The same edition of both papers carried pictures of the bombing victim and his home. A detailed story of the bombing incident was carried by these papers the week before on the same day it happened.)

Racial Relations Worsened

Arrest Of Bombing Victim Is Grave Disservice

It is not moral or just that any man should live in fear, or be compelled to sleep with a loaded gun by his bedside.

Holmes County Deputy Sheriff Andrew P. Smith's action in arresting a 58-year-old Negro farmer, Hartman Turnbow, for fire bombing his own home, has come as a numbing shock to the people of Holmes County.

It is a grave disservice to our county and all our people in these days of increasing racial tension and strife.

White and Negro citizens of Holmes County alike simply could not believe that something like this could happen in our county, that a man and his wife and 16-year-old daughter could be routed from sleep in the small hours of the morning and be forced to flee their home literally in terror, only to be shot at by intruders outside — then to have the head of the family jailed the same day for doing the dastardly deed by an officer sworn to uphold the law and protect all citizens.

The only evidence presented against the aged Negro man at the preliminary hearing was testimony given by Deputy Smith and that was only an account of the bombing and shooting incident, as reported by Turnbow, to him. Mr. Smith added his own opinions and suppositions, as did County Attorney Pat M. Barrett, who prosecuted the case. As a result the man was bound over under \$500 bond for action by the Holmes County Grand Jury in October.

Mr. Barrett, who said he was "not a demolition expert" nevertheless told the Court that "it just couldn't have happened. There is no way on God's earth for that situation over there to have happened like he said it happened."

Four other Negroes, who had been arrested the same day in connection with the same case, were released for lack of evidence. Not one shred of evidence was presented against them. But they had been held in jail five days and five nights.

This kind of conduct on the part of our highest elected peace officer has done serious injury to relations

between the races in Holmes County — where we must be able to live in peace and harmony, or not live at all.

It is distressing that no statement has come from Mr. Smith saying that he is continuing his investigation. Perhaps he is. We hope so.

But irreparable damage has been done, and let no one doubt it.

We have always taken pride in being able to manage our affairs ourselves. When we become derelict in our duty and do not faithfully execute our obligations, we may rest assured it will be done for us.

FBI agents and U. S. Justice officials have already made an exhaustive investigation of this bombing and shooting incident.

A suit has already been filed against Deputy Smith, Mr. Barrett and the District Attorney, stating these Negroes were arrested "on false and baseless charges," which were in effect an effort to coerce and intimidate Negro citizens of Holmes County and get them to cease voter registration activity.

The Federal suit asks for a permanent injunction to prohibit these officers from interfering with voter registration activities, including the prosecution of the charges now filed against Turnbow, who attempted to register to vote here April 9th, and Robert Moses, director of SNCC, a voter registration project.

* * * *

This kind of situation would never have come about in Holmes County if we had honestly discharged our duties and obligations as citizens in the past; if we had demanded that all citizens be accorded equal treatment and protection under the law. This we have not done.

But if we think the present situation is serious, as indeed it is, we should take a long, hard look at the future.

It can, and probably will, get infinitely worse — unless we have the necessary character and guts to do something about it — and change the things that need to be changed.

