

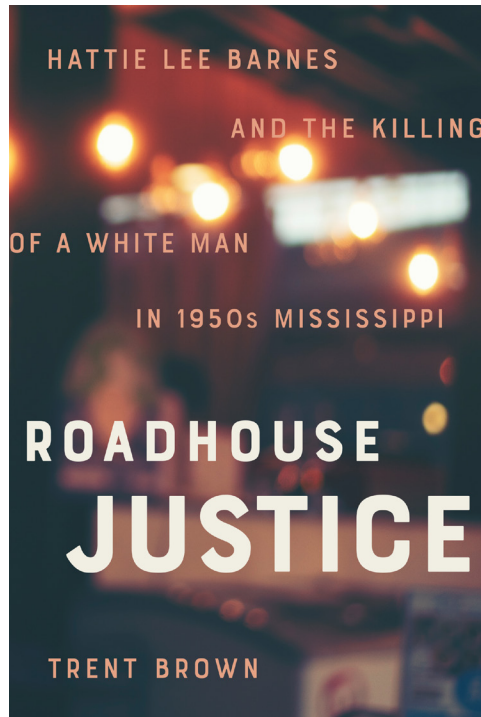
# New Book Examines a Case of Racially Distorted Justice in 1950s America

DR. TRENT BROWN IS THE AUTHOR of *Roadhouse Justice: Hattie Lee Barnes and the Killing of a White Man in 1950s Mississippi* (2022), an in-depth study of a case in which a young Black woman, defending herself from probable sexual assault, killed a young white man and was put on trial for murder and acquitted, but her difficulties continued for some time after that. We interviewed Brown about his latest monograph from Louisiana State University Press.

## What did Hattie Lee Barnes do and why is it important?

Hattie Lee Barnes was a young Black Mississippi woman. In 1951, she killed a white man from a prominent family. That shooting placed her in grave peril. The Mississippi legal system took Black on white crime seriously. Barnes stood trial for murder and was acquitted. That fact itself led me to want to know more about the case. The story is complex. Before Barnes was tried, she survived an assassination attempt. She testified at the trials of the two men who tried to kill her. She also survived months of legal and extra-legal interrogation and detention.

Through her own determination and the assistance of a diligent attorney and reporter, she survived. This book attempts to explain how that happened. Her story shows the unpredictable nature of Jim Crow justice, a system in which personal connections and



power mattered a great deal. The 1951 timing of the case was also highly important. A decade or so earlier, a woman like Barnes might have been disposed of—and I use the term deliberately—without much of a trace. Just a few years later, when the social revolution of the civil rights movement was becoming apparent to all Mississippians, the legal system might have decided to railroad Barnes to make an example of her. But in the early 1950s, her own efforts—and those of her advocates—allowed her eventually to escape the hands of Mississippi justice.

## You imply that Barnes might have died in the electric chair if Defense Attorney Joe Pigott and Reporter Charles Gordon had not taken a sincere interest in her case. How and why did they help Barnes?

Joe Pigott was a young attorney, only twenty-six years old. Mississippi had no public defender system in that era. He was appointed by the court to defend Barnes. For that work, he received \$75. Under the circumstances, some attorneys might have advised Barnes to plea to a lesser charge to try to avoid the death penalty.

Instead, Pigott saw that Barnes should not have been charged with murder in the first place. She was simply defending herself. What is striking about Pigott is that in this era of intense prejudice, he had the courage and the clarity to see the issue not through the lens of race, but instead as a matter of right and wrong.

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Reporter Charles Gordon knew a good story when he saw one. He also had a keen sympathy for the underdog. He insisted that local people know what was happening to Barnes. He wrote thousands of words as the story developed, kept it on the front page of the paper, and even persuaded his newspaper's publisher to write strong editorials on behalf of Barnes.

Hattie Lee Barnes was a strong woman. But without the work of Pigott and Gordon, it is easy to imagine her coming to a grim end. In the Deep South in that era, people were sent to prison or the electric chair for less than Barnes did.

**How and why did the powerful Craft family try to change the narrative about Richard Lamar Craft's death, and why did their effort ultimately fail?**

Lamar Craft was shot to death while climbing into the window of a closed beer joint. He clearly intended to sexually assault Hattie Lee Barnes. Craft's father was mortified by the circumstances of his son's death. He began to work immediately to cast the blame on someone other than Barnes.

Edd Craft and his attorney pressured Barnes, trying to make her say that Rob Lee, the bar owner and a white man, shot Lamar Craft. When he failed to persuade local authorities that Lee was the guilty party, he filed suit against a life insurance company. That lawsuit was not really about money. Instead, Edd Craft wanted a public forum—a courtroom, in this case—in which he could tell a story of his son's death that did not feature Barnes as the shooter.

The Crafts worked to “clear the good name” of their son, as they would have seen their efforts. He was shot under unsavory circum-

stances, they admitted. But they did not want his attempted assault of Barnes, a Black woman, to be the public story.

They failed in these attempts because Barnes resisted these pressures to change her story to suit the Crafts. Also, the life insurance company saw the lawsuit as a matter of business. They had no interest in anyone's hurt feelings.

**You are a white man born in Pike County, Mississippi, where the killing of Craft occurred. How is your account of Barnes' story “inflected through the lens of a white person” (p. 178)? Does your training as a historian help you to avoid or minimize such inflections?**

The story of Barnes is inflected through the lens of white people in several senses. In the first place, she was enmeshed in the Mississippi legal system, a process and structure that was by design forbidding to her. Every person of authority that she encountered—from the sheriff to the attorneys to the juries and judges—were white men. Even when we have her own words, as in the case of newspaper interviews or court proceedings, Barnes was speaking to white men. I do not doubt that her words in those sources were correctly recorded, but Barnes was well aware, as were all Black Mississippians, of the prudence of carefully considering one's words in those contexts.

In writing this book, I was fortunate to have access to many hundreds of pages of legal documents and many thousands of words written by reporter Charles Gordon. My challenge as a historian was to understand the uses and the limitations of these sources. My experience in writing about Mississippi in the late twentieth century helped me, I hope, to read these sources with a careful eye. But I also know that Barnes's own thoughts, character, and personality are not contained in the files of a Mississippi county courthouse.

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**Mississippi Justice, Jim Crow Justice, Roadhouse Justice — are they all synonyms for injustice in this case? Why did you choose the title you did?**

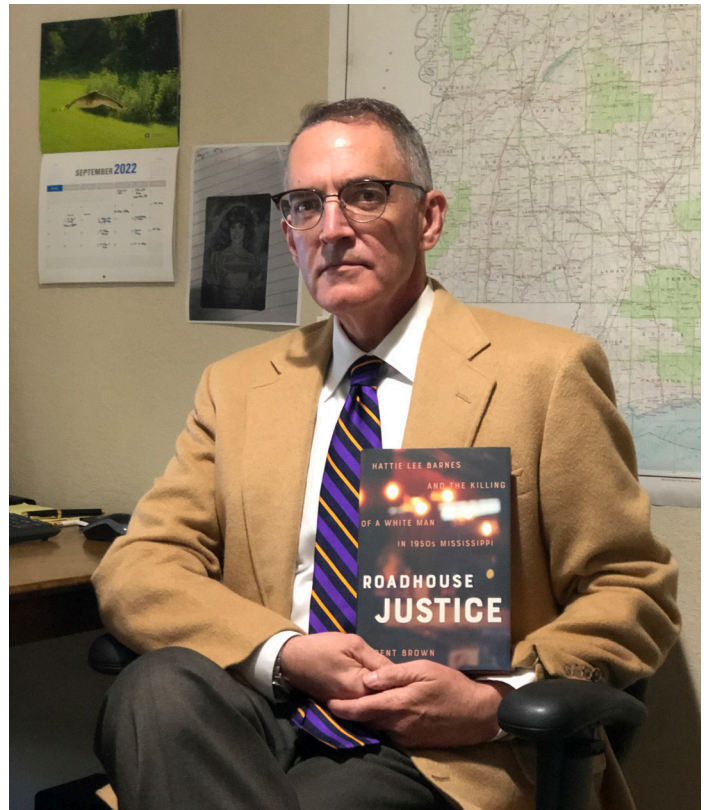
Events of this story occurred about seventy years ago. Still, some people in the area do remember the story, if not Barnes herself. The families of Joe Pigott and Charles Gordon are rightly proud of the work that those men did on Barnes's behalf. To the degree that the story is remembered, it is recalled as an example of justice being achieved despite the Jim Crow context of the era.

What I have tried to do here, however, is to suggest that the Barnes saga says as much about injustice as it does about justice. Yes, Barnes was acquitted. She eventually did leave Mississippi as a free woman. But it was a very close thing. In a just system, Barnes would not have needed the intervention of well-placed white men such as Pigott and Gordon to secure her freedom. The Mississippi legal system was chancy and capricious. Barnes no doubt valued the advocacy of Pigott and Gordon, but she, like other Black Mississippians, obviously would have preferred a social order built upon fairer lines.

The book's title, I should say, comes from LSU Press. I have never been any good with book titles. Here, I think they did a great job with both the title and the cover design.

**How does this study fit into the larger body of your work, past, present, and future?**

*Roadhouse Justice* is my sixth book. I have written almost exclusively about Mississippi. I suppose that I have tried for a long time to understand the place where I grew up. Beyond the



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personal connection, however, I think that I see in these stories connections with broader issues that have engaged and will continue to engage historians. Americans are periodically reminded, as we have been in recent years, that issues of race and racism are not matters on which the books have been closed, but instead are living, vital concerns. In these southern stories, I have also been interested in the ways that gender, sexuality, and social class shape and complicate our understandings of race.

This book grew directly from my last book, *Murder in McComb*. In 1971, Joe Pigott, by then a district attorney, prosecuted a police officer for the murder of a twelve-year-old girl. Late in his career, Pigott gave an interview in which he expressed regret for not winning a conviction in that case. He also spoke with satisfaction of his work on the Barnes case. I knew then that I wanted to know more about that story.