Shots in the Back: Exhuming the 1970 Augusta Riot (Episode 1 - The Forgotten Riot)

HOST: A warning, this episode contains multiple descriptions of graphic violence.

KALEYAH: So, do you know what the Augusta Riot is?

WOMAN: No, no I don't.

QUENTIANA: Do you know about the 1970 riot?

STUDENT: No.

MAN: That was a long time ago, right?

KALEYAH: It was like in the 1970s.

HOST: You're hearing the voices of Kaleyah Turmon and Quentiana Philpot, two of my after-school students at Jessye Norman School of the Arts, here in Augusta, Georgia. They're at the entrance of a downtown festival, helping me investigate Augusta's May 1970 Riot.

WOMAN: Oh, that's before we lived here.

MAN: Yeah.

KALEYAH: Oh.

HOST: Most of my kids are middle schoolers, but a few, like Thomas, are in high school.

THOMAS: I am Thomas Collins with the Jessye Norman Podcasting Group. And I would like to ask you a few questions about the Augusta riots. Have you heard any information about this?

MAN: Never heard of the Augusta riost, ever.

HOST: The riot started as a protest outside Augusta's municipal building on May 11, 1970. It ended two days later after six Black men were killed by police, all of them shot in the back.

DIANE: I was modeling nude for an art class at the Gertrude Herbert Institute of Art. And the woman came in and said, 'Diane, get dressed. Everyone.' But — and we came out from there and there were armed people everywhere. It was so scary. Don't take this street, don't take that street.

HOST: This was the first major Civil Rights Era riot in the Deep South. And it started

KALEYAH: ...because this boy, this young teen, named Charles Oatman, he went to jail and he was, like, suspiciously killed. Like the police just let it happen. And so this started like a lot of anger and rioting and like a lot of people got really mad about it, and a whole bunch of arsoning and, like, looting happened.

WOMAN: Oh, well that is — that is new information to me. I have only lived here for 14 years, and so I never have heard about that. Kinda sounds like what goes on in the world today, doesn't it?

HOST: It does. Police-involved shooting deaths remain common amongst Black men. Police killed over 1000 people in 2019. A quarter of them were Black. But Black people only make up 13% of the population.

Not many people have heard of Charles Oatman or the Augusta Riot. But many of the circumstances and the outcry of Black people remains the same.

FLOYD: Please, please — please, I can't breathe. Please, man.

NPR: There were protestors clashing with police and stopping traffic in Minneapolis last night. This after the death of George Floyd.

HOST: After days of violent protests in Minneapolis, one activist and author gave a speech that went viral. It could have been recorded after Augusta's riot 50 years ago. In it, Kimberly Jones responds to the people who have condemned the destruction of property and businesses during the riots.

JONES: "As long as we're focusing on the what, we're not focusing on the why... When they say why do you burn down the community, why do you burn down your own neighborhood — it's not ours. We don't own anything."

HOST: Those same complaints came after Augusta's riot. And, just like today, reporters in 1970 were cognizant that stories of racial injustice and uprisings are far too familiar. Here's an ABC reporter speaking at a march after Augusta's riot.

REPORTER: And as this march begins, I suppose what one most feels is that he's seen it all before. And perhaps that's what this story is really all about. That after nearly a decade, they're still marching through the Black Belt of Georgia.

HOST: None of my Black or white students had heard of Augusta's riot. But when I told them, they were surprised. They wondered if others would be, too.

THOMAS: Why would you be surprised that something like this has happened here?

SPEAKER: Well, I'm not surprised that it has happened here, I'm surprised we're not talking about it. You know, when something like that happens, when people lose their lives, it's really important. And particularly if it's still affecting us as a community.

HOST: African American Studies professor Akinyele Umoja says it's not too late to talk about it.

UMOJA: You know the old saying: that people who don't remember their history are doomed to repeat it. And, so its — and, of course, I'm sure things aren't exactly the same in Augusta as they were in the 1970, but some of those conditions still exist. And In the United States, this problem of race — this problem of racism — hasn't been resolved.

HOST: From what we've seen and heard, the Augusta riot of 50 years ago is still affecting the city. But adults aren't so different from kids when it comes to talking about hard stuff — we don't like to do it. To talk about the riot is to talk about racism, which is part of what this podcast will do. We'll be telling the story of the riot, the murder and the coverup that prompted it, and all that led up to it and then followed in its wake.

And what 12-year-old really wants to discuss racism during after school when they could be sculpting or acting? Out of our 125 students, about 10 were even willing.

GABBIE: It makes me feel kind of awkward because there's a mix of black and white people in this room — which I'm okay with, but sometimes it just makes me feel awkward.

ADIAN: Lots of the time, I feel like I shouldn't be talking about this. Like, I'm a white person and like, and I'm in, like a, like a whole school that's like a majority of black people. I have like — sometimes I'll have this fear where I'll accidentally say something racist without even knowing it.

ATTICUS: I do think that everything is going to end up terrible, though. I just feel like this is going to end either perfectly or terribly and…

HOST: When you say 'it' what do you mean?

ATTICUS: The podcast. And like, what — the fallout, sort of.

ESSENCE: Because of the different opinions of races?

ATTICUS: Yeah.

HOST: That's Gabbie Stallings, Adian Allen, Atticus Dillard-Wright, and Essence Willingham. Gabbie and Essence are Black, and Adian and Atticus are white. They're also spread in age from 10 to 16.

You'll be hearing from them and others throughout this podcast.

And Atticus is right, this is a tricky subject, and a sensitive one. I'll go ahead and address the elephant in the room — I'm a white woman reporting for a primarily white news outlet. And I'm trying to tell the story of very tragic events in the lives of Black people.

To address that gulf, I've done years of research and interviews and self-reflection. But all that learning hasn't changed the fact that what is shocking and unfamiliar to me might be piercing and triggering to you. I hope, though, that this podcast does more good than harm.

We had planned to release this series later in the year, but given recent events and the current climate, we feel this story needs to be told now.

From Jessye Norman School of the Arts and Georgia Public Broadcasting, this is "Shots in the Back: Exhuming the 1970 Augusta Riot." I'm your host, Sea Stachura.

REPORTER: The contrast is stark. Just 24 hours ago, these streets were filled with rioters, looters and burners. The national guard was called in — more than 2000 of them — and they took up arms in much of the business district and around several white neighborhoods.

HOST: The riot took place near downtown Augusta and engulfed nearly seven miles of primarily black businesses and neighborhoods. Dr. James Carter lived in the area and he was driving home with his family when the riot started.

JAMES CARTER: We — we lived down there. And by the time I got down there, we saw people milling around in the streets. Just everywhere. You know, people were outside, they were standing on corners, they were up and down the block and youngsters were running up and down the street. We didn't know what was going on, so I pulled in my driveway and put my car in the garage. And we were gonna to have to sit on the porch to look.

HOST: Shortly after 6 o'clock, the mood shifted and the streets filled curb to curb.

CARTER And before long, you know, things really begin to heat up. These people running on down the street, "We are gonna burn the town down." They were yelling "Black Power" and all this stuff that Stockley Carmichael and all the militants had taught them.

HOST: The worst of it took place the night of May 11. More than 80 people reported injuries and more than 100 businesses were robbed or burned. Most of those were white or Chinese-American-owned. As the fires raged on, Gov. Lester Maddox called in the National Guard. Meanwhile, reporters were trying to arrange an unruly event in an orderly fashion.

REPORTER: Mr. Mulherin, what happened here last night, and more important — let me just rephrase that , why did it happen here?

MULHERIN: I wish I could give you a pat answer as to why. I think it was an accumulation of a great number of problems that exist in our community. I think it was possibly agitated to some degree by the Kent situation.

HOST: Mulherin refers to the Kent State killings. That's when National Guardsmen in Ohio killed four white, college students protesting the Vietnam War. That was just a week before Augusta's uprising.

National media — made up of largely white journalists — swarmed the Kent State campus with reports on the atrocity. And Augusta's local activists had moved from advocating solely for the equal rights of Black Americans to equal rights for all people, including the Vietnamese.

Reporters were fascinated by the events, and followed them for months. But Augusta's riot confused them. Here are two reporters asking city councilman Grady Abrams and Sheriff E.R. Atkins about the turn of events.

REPORTER: Detroit and Newark went in 1967. What took black people til 1970 in Augusta?

ABRAMS: Maybe it took a little longer for the air to get into bloom.

REPORTER: Sheriff, over the past few years, there have been a lot of serious urban riots in the north. Most of them — most of them stemming from a sense of, a sense of desperation in the black community, a feeling of neglect and despair and bitterness. Are the same reasons present here?

SHERIFF: Maybe to a degree it is. We've always — we've been fortunate in this community to have good relations, up until now, with the black community. We've friendly basis all the time. And frankly, I'm disappointed and discouraged that this thing happened last night.

HOST: Gov. Lester Maddox had another theory as to the cause. Maddox was a staunch segregationist who had gained notoriety when he chased Black patrons out of his restaurant with an axe handle. He called this uprising an external, Communist conspiracy.

MADDOX: It happened because of the conspiracy that has — was planned here more than 40 years ago in this country and particularly in the last two decades, has had support of the elements, both within and without this country, that have one goal and that only — that of bringing this country to its knees and destroying the rights of the people both Black and white.

HOST: But most of the 300 people arrested for rioting were local. A student at a local college was found guilty for inciting the uprising. All six men killed were from Augusta. Grace Stewart's brother was one of its victims.

STEWART: It going back what the, what the state patrol say. They don't think nobody looking, they do it — so how many black family got to continue to lose their life in state of Georgia for them to see that we got a problem here with the police department.

GREEN: The Black people in Augusta are tired of being told that there is no racial problem here. Chief Bequest said that we have no racial tension.

HOST: This is Henry Allen Green. He was then-Augusta College's first black student body president.

GREEN: Mayor Beckham has said that there is no problem here in Augusta. Whereas our local officials have not seen a problem, now the nation knows that Augusta has a problem.

HOST: Quite a few, in fact. But even today, many of the white people who do know about the riot have been inclined to believe it had no point and served no purpose. That includes former Superior Court Judge and state legislator, Bill Fleming. He presided over the 95 cases of burglary and arson committed during the riot. I spoke with him in 2013, prior to his death.

FLEMING: I've never known why the people rioted. I don't know anyone knew why they — why this so-called riot took place. And I don't want to say that everybody who was involved in the riot was a thug, but a lot of them were just criminals who were out stealing.

HOST: The most immediate cause of the riot was actually the talk of the town the day before. As Kaleyah mentioned earlier, it was the death of Charles Oatman in the Richmond County Jail. We decided to visit his grave.

SPEAKER: Arrived.

ATTICUS: Oh, we're here.

OATMAN: Go around that tree.

HOST: Oh, this is really pretty.

ESSENCE: This is really big.

HOST: That's Lenton Oatman. He's directing us into Flat Rock Cemetery, where his nephew, Charles Oatman, is buried. He directs us behind a church, to a grassy road and that leads us into the woods.

OATMAN: On back to the end. To the last — all this is family, all the way there.

HOST: All this is family?

OATMAN: huh?

HOST: All this is family?

OATMAN: Uh-huh.

HOST: We've come here to turn this idea of a boy into a person with an actual family. His high school yearbook photo is the kind every mother would want. He looks kind and calm with a sweet smile and flared ears. His eyes are big and they have small pouches beneath them.

TIARA: I don't like walking through graveyards because
I always get sad that I might step on somebody's unmarked grave.

ESSENCE: It's Charles Oatman.

ATTICUS: Charles Oatman… Oct. 16, 1953 to May 9, 1970.

HOST: Charles's grave has a plain marble headstone. Next to it are the graves of his adopted parents, Cornelia and Grover Oatman.

ESSENCE: There is Cor… Cor… Cor-something.

KIDS: Cornelia.

ESSENCE: Cornelia P. Oatman. There are more Oatmans up there. Go, go go go.

HOST: Court records indicate that he was never formally adopted. But I'm using "adopted" because that's how his family refers to him. Charles had been an Oatman since at least 3 years old. And as Lenton can attest, he has stayed an Oatman in death.

ESSENCE: Um, I heard that you knew Charles when he was younger.

LENTON: Yeah, about 2 or 3 years old when I first got to know him.

HOST: Lenton says in 1956, he came home from Alabama to visit his brother. And when he woke up on the couch the next morning, he discovered he had a nephew.

OATMAN: And I was asleep when he woke me up that morning, playing with my hair and my face — I thought, oh, it was my brothers were playing. But it was Charles.

I have never, I didn't know there was, had a child. And so I stayed all day around our house that Saturday, waiting, playing, talking to him. When I got ready to leave, he cried.

HOST: Charles was Cornelia's only child. Lenton described his nephew as tiny and delicate.

OATMAN: You couldn't — you couldn't holler at him, you couldn't slam a door around him. If you slammed a door, he'd go hollering or crying. That's the way he was. He just couldn't take abusing or being whooped.

HOST: He was also intellectually disabled. A court ordered psychological evaluation stated he had the intelligence of a second grader, though he was attending A.R. Johnson Junior High. His principal at the time told the paper that he was well-liked and not a boy to get in trouble.

In the spring of 1970, Charles wasn't the only child in the house. Charles' dad, Grover, had a daughter from a previous marriage. Her child, Jo Ann Robinson, was 5 years-old and she was staying with the Oatmans. Charles and JoAnn spent a lot of time together, including the day that Jo Ann went into her grandparents' bedroom and crawled under their bed.

OATMAN: I don't know who left the gun up under the bed with the shells in it. It was a gun, it had a broken stoke. Wouldn't had known that but just a barrel. He — the baby went up under the bed and pulling it out.

HOST: Lenton wasn't there for what happened next. He found out what happened from his father, brother and sister-in-law, who heard it from the front porch.

OATMAN: So he had the gun, messed around and cocked the handle on it. He didn't know nothing about no gun — shooting one or nothing. And the gun went off and killed the child, and Charles sat there with the baby after he shot them, took the baby, sat on the floor, and just rocked the baby — he didn't know the baby was dead.

HOST: Charles was arrested and, despite not having an arrest record, the judge denied him bail and sent him to the county jail.

ABRAMS: And he should not have been in the county jail. He should have been out at Youth Development Center.

HOST: That's Grady Abrams, he was one of Augusta's few Black city councilors at the time of the riot.

ABRAMS: But he was incarcerated with adults as well as other youth there at the county jail on 4th Street.

HOST: The district attorney later told reporters the YDC's director had refused to accept Charles, even though they had the space. Sheriff ER Atkins told a reporter the jail wasn't safe.

REPORTER: Do you think the supervision is proper in your jail, that two inmates could kill another?

ATKINS: No. We, we — we get down to the fact that we do have an old outdated jail. This was put up in the 30s and now it is overcrowded.

HOST: The jail was designed to temporarily house 50 inmates. At the time of Charles's death, it held 150. A 1966 grand jury had found the jail was filthy and unsalvageable.

Clifford Graham was in jail at the same time as Charles, and he says it was all of those things. He can recall the cake slices the jailers sold at the commissary.

GRAHAM: They got the cakes at the bakery that was a month old — and sold them to us. You know, we had to buy them. And, and — and the cake was just kinda moldy, man. It was, you know, like that. And then for breakfast, you had powdered eggs and peas.

I went to jail — when I went to jail, I weighed 190 pounds. When I got out of jail, I was 6’2” weighing 157.

HOST: Graham doesn’t know if this was the case for whites. The jail was still segregated six years after Jim Crow laws were abolished. But he does remember the stink and waking up at 6 a.m. every day to go down to breakfast.

GRAHAM: We stayed down there in the recreation room, gambling, shooting dice — whatever you want to do. All kind of stuff. So you stay down there from 6:00 that morning to 11 o'clock.

HOST: But that wasn’t Charles’s experience. Since juveniles weren’t supposed to be at the jail, they weren’t allowed to mix with adults. Charles was put in a cell with five other people. Three were 16 or younger, one was 17 and one was a wheelchair-bound adult. That’s six people in an 8-by-10 room along with a television, a sink and a toilet.

Some news reports say that room had four beds, others say eight. This crowded cell was where Charles and the others spent 24-hours a day. Clifford Graham says they were never in the rec room, and we know they ate their meals in the cell.

One of Charles’s cellmates said they had card games and wrestling matches because, “there was nothing else to do but sit up in the cell.”

Lenton remembers Charles called him from the jail.

OATMAN: He was just crying and hollering about can you, can you come get me because they're beating me up, making me do things — nasty things — and they're burning me with fire, stuff like that.

HOST: When he told you that he was — they were making him do nasty things — was your impression that they were raping him?

OATMAN: Mmhm. Yeah, cause he told me about it one time. They're raping me down here, they're making me do nasty things.

HOST: Charles also told Lenton that his cellmates were pouring salt in his eyes. He spent six weeks in that cell, from March 30 to May 9, the day he died.

Black leaders had long complained that even in a jail known for suffering, Black men and boys were made to suffer more than whites. Sheriff Atkins obliquely denied that at the time of the riot.

REPORTER: The charge has been made by the Black leaders that there's a different set of circumstances for a young Black boy and a young white boy.

ATKINS: No, we have whites and Blacks in the same place down there — and, think, that there are white and Blacks in there today.

HOST: It's unclear if there were white juveniles in the county jail, but we do know there wasn't 24-hour guard coverage in the jail — at least not on its Black side.

Saturday night, May 9, Carrie Mays answered the phone at Mays Funeral Home. The hospital was asking her to come pick up a body. It was Charles. And when she saw him, she called city councilor Grady Abrams. I spoke with Abrams in 2012 before he died.

ABRAMS: The explanation that she had been given for the injuries on the body just didn't rhyme with what she had heard. And the call was made to me, and she invited me to the funeral home to look at the body for myself.

HOST: Mays was told by sheriff's deputies that Oatman's cellmates hit him several times after losing a card game. In the process, he fell off his bunk and no one noticed that he had died. But the marks on his body told a different story.

ABRAMS: He had three long gashes across his back, about a half an inch deep and about a foot long. The back of his skull was busted out. He had cigarette burns all over his body and fork marks all across his body, as if somebody had taken a fork and just pressed him all over his body.

HOST: Even Charles's face was poked with tiny holes. His buttocks were scraped and covered in cigarette burns. Some of the injuries were fresh, and some a few weeks old.

ABRAMS: And as I said, the only explanation was that he was in a card game and he fell off the bunk. And when I saw that, I couldn't hold it to myself.

HOST: So he took his anger to the people.

ABRAMS: I had a radio talk show. And I asked the people to meet me down at the jail and we would get answers as to what happened to Charles Oatman. Well, when I got off the air and got to the jail, the jail was surrounded by police officers. The sheriff had called in all available officers to be at the jail and surround the jail.

HOST: News reports said sheriff's deputies were even on the roof with machine guns. Despite that, 300 people gathered across the street from the jail in May Park.

One of the people mixing in the crowd was plain-clothes officer Lt. Tommy Olds. He was one of just 10 black officers on Augusta's 130-person police force.

Olds spoke to the F.B.I. and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation at length, unlike a lot of other officers. In a transcribed interview to the GBI, he said people at the rally were ready to storm the jail for answers. Here's an actor reading from the transcript.

ACTOR, OLDS: They were accusing the Sheriff's department of murder. They were accusing them of telling lies, and this and that and so on and so forth, and they were in the process of selecting people to go into the jail and talk with the Sheriff.

HOST: Grady ended up being one of the people who met with jail officials.

ABRAMS: And we inquired as to what happened to this fellow, and we got the same answer: that he had fallen off the bunk and had died from that — those injuries, from falling.

But unbeknownst to them, I guess, they didn't know that I had gone to the funeral home and had seen the body. Ordinarily, I guess the funeral home people would not have called in anybody to inspect the body. But I got a chance to see that body,

HOST: Word spread fast. Rev. Claude Harris, Pastor of New Life Worship Center, participated in the riot that would ensue. He remembers hearing about Charles's body for the first time.

HARRIS: They told me some kid had got killed in the jail. And when they told me that some kid got killed in the jail, and they told me that he had cigarette burns — they didn't have to tell me anything else about the kid but that he had cigarette burns.

And I'm trying to figure this out. Inmates can't do that. They can't have weapons in there. They can't have that many cigarettes — guards did this. Guards did this.

HOST: The thought of those cigarette burns make the students suspicious, too, because they understand cigarettes to be a commodity.

STUDENT: From like the first time I have ever heard that, it was like, in prison, you don't really have cigarettes. Maybe you have one, but you're going to smoke that cigarette. And even if they pooled together all their cigarettes, why would they burn this kid?

STUDENT: I had a question. So like, if the people in the jail cell with Charles, Charles Oatman — if they just like was just beating him up, how come the guards didn't like see it or hear it happening?

HOST: The story didn't add up. Abrams believes this was a sign of criminal negligence.

ABRAMS: I was of the opinion that the boy could not have had all of the injuries on his body — that I saw — and jail officials not know anything about it. That's my contention.

I haven't gone as far as saying that they did it. But how can all of these injuries happen to a body and you not know about it and you are responsible for each and every person in that jail?

HOST: Inside the county jail, Clifford Graham in the cell next to Charles was pretty sure he knew what had happened. He'd heard everything.

Outside, people raised their fists and threatened to rush the building. But they were powerless in the face of this lie. Just like they were powerless to get jobs in Augusta's new factories, powerless to get their roads paved, or even enough books for their schools.

Because Black residents already stomached a long list of grievances against city and county leaders, and now outside the county jail, they were being asked to swallow Charles Oatman's suspicious death, too.

That's next on "Shots in the Back."

Shots in the Back is reported and hosted by me, Sea Stachura, assistant producer, Rosemary Scott. Our editor is Keocia Howard. Additional editing from Don Smith and Grant

Blankenship. Our intern is Cheniqua Dickens and Summa Jones. Research support comes from Corey Rogers at the Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History, Mallory Millender at Paine College and John Hayes at Augusta University. Our theme was composed by Tony Aaron Music, additional music provided by De Wolf Music. Mixing by Jesse Nighswonger.

We heard archival material in this episode from WSB News film collection at the University of Georgia Libraries. Oral histories courtesy of Reese Library Special Collections at Augusta University.

Sean Powers is our podcasting director and Mary Lynn Ryan is the station's vice president of news. Gary Dennis is the executive director of JNSA. This podcast is funded in part by a South Arts grant.