

## The 1879 Lynching of Jackson Overstreet

by Timothy Dean Hudson

W. Jackson Overstreet's arrival in the fall of 1879 briefly shattered the peaceful calm that typically prevailed throughout nineteenth century Union Parish. He was a fugitive, a wanted man on the run from the authorities in Alabama, lured to the Union Parish countryside by the possibility of finding a safe haven among relatives. Had he remained quiet and inconspicuous, Overstreet would likely have escaped notice, given the remoteness of the Bayou D'Arbonne region from the rest of the country. However, that was not his nature, and he brought his temper and nefarious habits with him to the Piney Hills, soon leaving a trail of bloody corpses in his wake.

Jack Overstreet had rather humble beginnings, much like that of most Union Parish farm boys of the era. Born in 1843, he grew up on the farm of his parents, Richard and Sarah Overstreet, in the Grove Hill community of Clarke County, in southwestern Alabama. He received a typical education, remaining in school until age 18. Richard Overstreet died in the 1860s, leaving Jack to support his widowed mother and younger sisters. In 1865, Jack married Rebecca Osborne, and they settled on his father's farm in a house near his mother. He did not take well to farming, for in 1870 he only raised a little corn but no cotton, at that time the only source of cash for most Southern farm families. It appears that he soon lost the family farm, and it is not clear how he supported his family afterwards

As a man in his mid-30s, Overstreet had a striking appearance that left a memorable impression on those he encountered. His acquaintances described him as above average height, about 5'8", "*powerful and well built*" at 165 pounds, with one index finger missing. Overstreet's eyes were his unforgettable feature: one was blue and the other, brown. His sly look and unusually sullen and ugly disposition gave his face a strange and sinister expression.

This saga began on 5 April 1879 in Coffeetown, a small town located in Clarke County Alabama. Jackson Overstreet drove his wagon from his farm near Grove Hill to Coffeetown and spent the afternoon drinking in the town saloon. Soon inebriated, Overstreet quarreled with a man in town and threatened to shoot him. Angered over that incident, Overstreet got in his wagon and headed home. When almost home, he stopped at the farm of Charles Wells to ask for a drink of water. Overstreet and Wells grew up together, as their fathers had lived on adjoining Grove Hill farms since the 1840s.

Upon hearing Overstreet's call for water from his front gate, Wells and his wife walked out to the fence. Still drunk, Overstreet accused Wells of an unlawful deed. Wells strongly denied the

charge, replying that anyone making such an assertion “...told a damned lie.” Angered, Overstreet fired his double barrel shotgun at Wells, killing him instantly. Overstreet fled Wells’ farm in his wagon and then managed to abscond, fleeing to Mississippi where his wife had relatives. She and their children joined Jack there shortly thereafter. Meanwhile, back in Clarke County Alabama, Overstreet’s uncle, William M. Overstreet, offered a \$100 reward for the arrest and confinement of his nephew.

In the early summer of 1879, Jack Overstreet abandoned his family in Mississippi and disappeared for a few months. Rebecca and their children initially returned to Alabama, but in August, she decided to join her brother, Napoleon Osborne, in the Mosely’s Bluff neighborhood on Bayou D’Arbonne, a few miles south of Farmerville. She reportedly carried their infant daughter while the two older children walked the bulk of the trip from Alabama to Louisiana, arriving in early September.

Jack managed to learn of their whereabouts, and about three weeks after their arrival, he joined them at Osborne’s farm. Overstreet appeared happy to see Rebecca and the children and soon revealed a desire to move to Arkansas. He asked her to find a neighbor to watch after the children so they could make a trip to look at property in Arkansas, and he took \$20 of her money to buy a wagon in which to make the trip. However, instead of going to buy a wagon, Overstreet took Napoleon Osborne’s gun and inexplicably disappeared for a few weeks.

On Saturday evening, 10 October 1879, a few days after Overstreet vanished from the Osborne farm, Mrs. Elizabeth C. Ward left her home on the Farmerville Road nine miles from Trenton, near the Ouachita-Union Parish line. She planned to walk three or four miles to visit a neighbor, intending to spend the weekend and return home Sunday evening. When she failed to return the next day as expected, her husband went in search of her. While walking across the Choudrant Bridge towards the neighbor’s house, he spotted her body in Choudrant Bayou. Mrs. Ward had suffered a vicious assault. Her assailant had raped her, cut her throat so severely as to sever every artery, stabbed one eye out, inflicted three fatal stab wounds in her breast, as well as stabbing her in the forehead, thigh, and genitalia. Despite an intensive search of the neighborhood, local investigators could find no clues to identify the perpetrator.

A few days after Elizabeth Ward’s murder just a few miles from the Osborne farm, Overstreet returned without the wagon he intended to purchase. He claimed that he had encountered a crowd of men trying to take him. Napoleon Osborne demanded the return of his gun and the \$20, which he had given his sister. Overstreet refused and left the house. The next morning, October 23<sup>rd</sup>, Osborne left before dawn for Farmerville to obtain a warrant for Overstreet’s arrest for the theft

of his gun and the money. Osborne left Rebecca in the kitchen, cooking breakfast for the children. About sunrise, Overstreet returned to the Osborne house, sneaked up behind his wife and smashed an iron maul into her head. Osborne arrived home from Farmerville later in the day to find his sister still in the kitchen, senseless and weltering in blood. She died twelve or fifteen hours later.

As Osborne raised the alarm regarding his sister's fate, the court of public opinion immediately convicted W. Jackson Overstreet for the rape and vicious murder of Elizabeth Ward as well as for the murder of his own wife. A large posse formed to pursue him, but for eight days he remained on the lam. Just when they suspected that he had fled the region, the posse found him hiding in a neighbor's cotton house. In the ensuing gunfight, his pursuers severely wounded Overstreet in his leg and mouth, resulting in the loss of several teeth. He somehow managed to escape the farm and flee into the D'Arbonne Swamp (now inundated by Lake D'Arbonne), but in the process he lost his powder. The sheriff brought in hound dogs to follow the scent of the blood from Overstreet's leg, and in his weakened state and unable to return the posse's fire, they finally apprehended him. Authorities brought him to the Farmerville jail, which a newspaper reporter described as "*a miserable edifice...utterly unfit for the purpose to which it is put.*"

The senseless brutality Overstreet used to dispatch Elizabeth Ward and his wife had already aroused public opinion against him. After his arrest, a telegraph notice revealed his murder of Wells a few months earlier and details of how he had repeatedly evaded the Alabama authorities. This sealed Overstreet's fate: the news from Alabama convinced Union Parish residents that he would manage to make his escape from the Farmerville jail once he recovered from his injuries. Late on Wednesday night, October 29<sup>th</sup>, a crowd of seventy-five to one hundred men went to the Farmerville jail and demanded the keys to Overstreet's cell. Witnesses claim that the mob included many of the best-known Union Parish citizens, none of whom made any attempt to conceal their identity.

The jailor handed over the keys without resistance, and the mob stormed into the jail through the main entrance to find Overstreet asleep in his cell. As they clamored into the room, the prisoner sprang to his feet to confront his attackers, looking quite haggard but still defiant. He barely managed to stand due to his leg wound, and so two men grabbed him, one on each side, and dragged him out of the jail. They went a short distance from the jail to a dense grove of trees. With the noose around his neck, the crowd asked if he had anything to say in his defense, but he refused to answer. His expression revealed absolutely no pangs of conscience for his crimes, and he appeared utterly indifferent to his own fate. As he was swung from a tree, his facial muscles barely twitched, and he died without a struggle.

In the days following Overstreet's lynching, Deputy Sheriff John Martin Lee wrote to Judge Tompkins of Mobile, Alabama, saying, "*I never saw the deed, but learned that he confessed to the murder in Alabama.*" However, while in the Farmerville jail, Overstreet had refused to acknowledge the murders of his wife or Mrs. Ward.

Despite the illegal vigilante activities, the local law enforcement agreed with public sentiment that rightful justice had been properly served, and they took no action against Overstreet's executioners. The next week, the "*Ouachita Telegraph*" reported that the mob had given Overstreet "*his just dues, a short shrift and a long rope,*" with "*Judge Lynch presiding.*"

