

Lockamy, Fred: Sorrow Valley ^[1]

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Fred Lockamy: Sorrow Valley

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 12/11/2005. Copyrighted.
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On April 9, 1968, 16-year-old Fred Lockamy and four of his longtime friends decided to strike back at the Ku Klux Klan by burning down its local meeting hall. They lived in a black neighborhood in Benson called Sorrow Valley, a close-knit community built around a trash dump and famed for its juke joints and hard luck. He and his friends were tight. "We played basketball together, we caught tadpoles together, we did everything together," Lockamy remembers. From the time that they were little children, they were also taunted, harassed and even chased on horseback by the Ku Klux Klan together. Then, on the night that Martin Luther King Jr. was buried, Klansmen brandishing firearms paraded through Sorrow Valley. They were celebrating the civil rights leader's assassination. For the five friends, it was the last straw. At his home in Clayton, Fred Lockamy told me what happened next.



Fred Lockamy. Photo by Chris Seward, 2005. To request permission to use this photo, please contact the News & Observer.

"I can never forget that evening. My heart was just racing. We were all nervous as heck. We went down there and we gathered up some gasoline. The Ku Klux Klan building was only a few blocks from Sorrow Valley. We drove by it all the time. So we set this thing on fire and then we see it start to burn and we ran back down to Sorrow Valley. We're out of breath. Then we hear the firetrucks and we say, OK, we're successful. We're going to watch it go up in flames and these folks are. Now we're talking about it. We're scared, I'll be straight. This is a crime and we're new at this. We were good guys. We were the guys that were going to go to college. We were the guys that never got into trouble. We say yes ma'am and no n. So we went to sleep that night. We got up, went to school the next morning. They talked about how somebody had tried to set the place afire. Tried to now, because the only thing that burned was the front door, not even \$100 in damage. It was. Somebody had seen the boys though. They were arrested a few days later and released on bail.

We went back to high school. Of course now all the other kids think we're freaking heroes. Even our teachers were proud of us. Well, shoot, after going through that night at the police station, I didn't feel like a hero. I was scared. So we're going to have this trial at the Johnston County Courthouse in Smithfield. The newspapers are telling us that we can get life in prison, and yet people are still proud of us. And my grandmother, all of the old people, were praying for us. So trial time comes. We go up to the courthouse and the place was packed, full of black people. So we're waving and all that kind of good stuff, and everybody is hello there, hello there, and all that kind of mess, like it was a daggone party. So we get up there and they call us up and we sit down. The D.A. talks about what happened. ... And all the teachers and administrators get up and tell what nice guys we were and how we had never been in trouble. So they finish and the judge says, "Do any of you young guys have anything to say?"

At this point I'm really nervous. I'm serious. I've been listening to the prosecutor. So I stood up, I say, "Yes, your honor." I'm not supposed to shake in front of all these people, and I'm shaking. I say, "Your honor, I realize what we did was wrong. I'll never forget this. This is what the guy said: "You look like an intelligent young man, Mr. Lockamy. But if I let you go, do you think these folks in Johnston County would vote for me again?"

I said, "Oh, man," and I really slumped down. I thought, "Man, this is crazy!"

He says, "All right, I'm ready to pass sentence now." Of course, this was the first time we've ever been in any trouble. Everybody had told us we should get probation. Our people assured us. But I'm nervous now because of what he just said. So the first name he called, who was it? Fred Lockamy. So I'm standing up, man. He said, "Mr. Lockamy, I sentence you to 12 years of hard labor."

All down the line, 12 years of hard labor. Unbelievable. By this time, I'm crying and people are hollering and screaming. All our parents and aunts and everything are just going crazy, and Judge Bickett is banging his gavel.

And here comes the sheriff and they're coming to get us. They put us in handcuffs and they take us upstairs and put us inside this daggone cage, right? All of us are pretty much damn crying by now. Twelve years of hard labor and I'm only 16.

The severity of the teenagers' sentences made headlines everywhere from Newsweek to NBC's hit TV show "Laugh-In." The irony escaped few: the state's Klan had never been prosecuted for any of its hundreds of acts of racial violence. In response, the local NAACP and a new, biracial Johnston County group called the Committee for Equal Justice campaigned for the young men's release. A year later, Gov. Bob Scott did grant them clemency. To an important degree, the trial was the spark that ignited Johnston County's civil rights movement. Now a successful family man, Lockamy asked that I "please tell everybody how much their support meant to us."

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Authors:

[Cecelski, David S.](#) ^[7]

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