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Ardmore, Oklahoma

Monday, October 13, 1930

Negro Who Fatally Shot Babe Pruitt Is

Shot Down as He Fled

Negro, Wounded in Gun Battle With Babe Pruitt,

Is Slain By Claude Pruitt as He Fled

From Hospital to Escape Vengeance.

Less than five minutes after M.E. "Babe" Pruitt, 40, Berwyn constable, had died Sunday afternoon of gunshot wounds inflicted by Semi Roberts, 36, negro, Claude Pruitt, brother of the dead officer, had extracted summary and sanguinary vengeance on Roberts and provided Carter county with one of the most sensational incidents in its long and bloody record of crime.

Pruitt is being held in jail. He has told officers that he slew the negro and witnesses verify the report. He refuses, however to discuss the matter in further.

A through investigation into the affair was in progress Monday under the direction of John L. Hodge, county attorney. Walter Colbert, sheriff, Jess F. Dunn, police chief and Con Keirse, deputy sheriff are assigned to the case. In all probability the matter will be presented to the grand jury.

The strange tragedy has two primary episodes, it was revealed Monday.

Negro Shoots Pruitt

Late Saturday night, Babe Pruitt and Cecil Crosby, as officers of the Berwyn community, staged a raid on a negro dice game in the hills near Berwyn. Roberts said to have a bad reputation, showed resistance. He grabbed a gun and shot Pruitt through the groin and lower bowels inflicting a fatal wound. Pruitt returned the fire, his bullet plowing through Robert's right lung. This wound was critical and physicians said that it would probably have proven fatal to the Negro.

Both patients were brought to the Von Keller hospital. The Negro was kept for a time in the office of the proprietor of the hospital because it is against policy of the institution to house negroes in the regular ward.

Negro Removed to Small Building

Later, possibly around 10 o'clock Sunday morning, the negro was removed to a wooden structure on the hospital grounds, a few rods west of the main hospital building. There are two rooms in this building and emergency negro cases are sometimes kept in these quarters.

Pruitt's condition was declared as hopeless at the time he was brought to the hospital but his rugged constitution kept him alive until shortly after 1:30 o'clock Sunday afternoon.

His relatives, including his father, Byrd Pruitt, were at his bedside at the time of his death - excepting Claude Pruitt.

Apparently Claude, bent on avenging the almost certain death of his brother, reached the hospital almost at the same moment that his brother died.

He seems to have made a systematic search of the premises, especially the lower floor, for the negro. Several persons relate that he asked, "Where is the negro?" Eventually he learned that the negro was in the wooden structure.

He strode into the room, where Roberts lay on the bed surrounded by relatives. Drawing an automatic pistol, Pruitt is said to have fired four or five times. At least one of the bullets struck the wounded negro. The mattress on the bed is pierced by two bullets and the battered pellets were on the floor underneath the bed. Two other bullets buried themselves in the wall. Blood on the floor shows that the negro was newly wounded here as it was revealed that the lung injury was packed and could not have caused the blood.

Negro Tries to Escape

At the rate, Roberts climbed from his bed and with superhuman strength leaped through a window and raced around the shack to the west. He climbed a barbed wire fence and ran through the plowed field, grown high in weeds, toward the Joy tourist camp on highway 77, approximately 300 yards from the hospital.

Pruitt came out of the building, spectators said, walked to the east of the wooden building and fired at the fleeing negro. His gun jammed and some unidentified man handed him another gun.

The two men then ran around the corner to where a Chevrolet roadster was parked. Somehow, Byrd Pruitt, father of Claude and Babe, had reached the scene in the interval between the time of Babe's death and the shooting in the shack. He was in the car with Claude, several witnesses say, when it left the hospital grounds. Claude was at the wheel.

Meantime, Jess Dunn and Bill Guess of the police force, called to the scene by the shooting, gave chase in a police car.

The Chevrolet had a good lead and was traveling at high speed along highway No. 77. According to report, the older Pruitt left the car at the filling station and tourist camp and proceeded on foot across the field to the northeast.

Increases Speed

Roberts, clad only in hospital gown which was red with blood, was running across the field toward the northeast. Perceiving he was pursued by the elder Pruitt, said to have been armed with a rifle, he increased his speed. It is a matter of much wonderment that the negro, wounded as he was, had the strength to make his way across the rough field as rapidly as he did.

Meantime, the Chevrolet with Pruitt at the wheel had turned northeast where the section line road intersects with the highway, approximately half a mile north of the Joy tourist camp. The car, traveling at full speed, roared along the road to where a fence line divides the field from an open pasture to the north.

Less than a quarter behind came the police car with Dunn and Guess.

Pruitt spun the car to the south at the fence line and despite the fact that there is no road, dashed, without lessening his speed, along the fence toward the point where Roberts, almost doubled up with distress and fear, would have to cross, leaving the field. Three or four hundred yards behind the Negro came Byrd Pruitt, witnesses said.

The Negro crawled through the fence. He did not see the car, or, if he did, did not heed it. The speeding roadster crashed full into him, hurling him 20 steps ahead. The grass and weeds show that the brakes were applied and that the car skidded.

"We were less than 100 feet behind," said Jess Dunn, chief of police. "Claude leaped from the car and ran to where the Negro lay writhing on the ground. You could hardly see him for the tall grass and weeds."

"Pruitt drew two guns from his pocket as he left the car."

"We brought our own car to a halt and both of us (Dunn and Bill Guess) leaped out and ran toward Pruitt, shouting at him."

"He leaned forward with both guns and fired them into Roberts' body."

Pruitt Taken to Jail

"About that time, Byrd Pruitt climbed through the fence. Claude threw his two guns down and walked back to this car. Bill Guess climbed in and drove him back to the county jail. I followed in our car with the old man."

By this time a number of men, several from the Camp Joy tourist park, had reached the scene, it was shown.

The Negro's body was taken in charge by the Dillard undertaking parlors. He had been shot five times, the undertaker said. One of these was the original wound inflicted by Babe Pruitt in the raid Saturday night. The others, it was related, were new.

Two were in the right arm, one in the hip and groin and the other in the head. Roberts was married and had a wife and two children.

Funeral services for Babe Pruitt will be held at 4 o'clock Tuesday afternoon at the Pruitt school on the Ardmores-Berwyn road. The body was taken to his home on the ranch of the family, which is located near the school. It will be kept there until the services are held.

Pruitt is survived by a wife, two sons and a daughter. He is also survived by Mr. and Mrs. Byrd Pruitt, his father and mother; Byrdie Pruitt, a sister; Claude and Carl Pruitt, brothers. He has served as constable of the Berwyn district for some time and was widely known over the county.

Pallbearers are Frank Cardwell, Jess Johnson, John B. Ogden, Bert Tunnell and Lloyd R. Standfield.

Honorary pallbearers include Jack Frost, Charles Grant, Hale Dunn, Jess F. Dunn, John L. Hodge, Cecil Crosby, Walter Colbert, Vernon Cason, Ed Chancellor, Ollie Anderton, Joe Dillard, Bill Guess, Charles Hathcock, Lee Hopson, Buddy Moorhead, Newton Burkett, Hoyt Parnell, Howard Whitson, John Stroud, Otto Holden, Jess Mason, Monroe Gunter, Bill Ward, Matt Alexander, Wade Peterson, J.B. Champion, Thomas W. Champion, Charles N. Champion, Max Westheimer, Dave Daube, Sam Daube, C.R. Townsend, Sherman Joines, Bill Clemens, Leo Atkins and Clarence Atkins.

PRUITT SEEKS BOND ON WRIT HABEAS CORPUS

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Ardmore, Oklahoma

Tuesday, October 14, 1930

In Petition, He Declares He Is

Not Guilty of Murder and

There Is No Probability of Death Sentence

GRAND JURY IS INVESTIGATING

Witnesses Having Knowledge

of Shooting Called Before Grand Jury

Contending he is "not guilty of murder" and that "there is no probability of the death penalty being assessed, even in the event that your petitioner should be found to have killed the deceased," Claude Pruitt, alleged slayer of Semi Roberts, Negro, shot to death Sunday afternoon,

late Monday filed a petition for a bond on a writ of habeas corpus. The petition alleges that Pruitt understands that he has been indicted by the grand jury for the slaying of the Negro.

No time for hearing on the writ has been announced.

Apparently, no indictment has been returned by the grand jury in connection with the case since several witnesses known to have to have definite part in the case were brought in by deputy sheriffs to appear before the grand jury Tuesday. It is presumed that the shooting, which was a sensational affair staged in the vicinity of the Von Keller hospital, is still under investigation. The mother, brother and cousin of the dead Negro were before the grand jury Tuesday morning. They were in the hospital annex room when Pruitt is said to have fired his first shots at Roberts, who lay wounded, on a bed.

Other witnesses are waiting to appear before the inquisitorial body, John L. Hodge, county attorney, who directed an investigation into the case Monday, was closeted with the jurors throughout Tuesday morning.

Pruitt is charged with having avenged the death of Babe Pruitt, his brother, by slaying Roberts, who fatally wounded Babe in a gun duel in the hill country near Berwyn on Saturday night. Almost at the time that Babe died in the Von Keller hospital Sunday afternoon, Claude is said to have entered the annex to the hospital where Roberts, shot through the lung by Babe in the same exchange that cost the latter's life, lay on a bed. Roberts fled from the building, ran half a mile across the fields, pursued, it is alleged by both Claude and Byrd Pruitt, father of the two Pruitts.

Overtaken by Claude, he is said to have been run down by Pruitt's car and then shot to death as he lay on the ground.

Funeral services for Babe Pruitt were held a 4 o'clock Tuesday afternoon at the Pruitt school northeast of Ardmore. The body was taken to the ranch near the school Monday. The services were attended by a huge crowd. The Pruitt family has lived in Carter county for many years and the dead man is widely known. He was constable of the Berwyn district and was staging a raid on a Negro dice game in which Roberts is said to have been a participant when he was fatally wounded.

Under state law, murder is not aailable offense unless the slayer is made to prove that the slayer acted in self defense or otherwise was justified in his act. Pruitt contends that his case is such that the supreme penalty which would make it a capital crime is not a "probability" and that he is entitled to bail.

The writ will come up for presentation before John B. Ogden, district judge.

Services Resembled Gathering of Pioneer

Families of Southern Oklahoma

More than 1000 men, women and children attended the funeral services held Tuesday afternoon at Pruitt school for M.E. "Babe" Pruitt, constable of Berwyn township, who was fatally wounded last Saturday night in a gun duel with Semi Roberts, negro, in a raid on a dice game.

The school house was filled to capacity, hundreds of those attending being forced to stand outside while the rites were under way. Rev. C.L. Brooks of the First Methodist church officiated. Interment followed in the Pruitt cemetery, which adjoins the school property. Harvey Bros. were in charge of the arrangements.

Father and Brother Present

All members of Pruitt's immediate family, including Claude Pruitt, a brother who is under indictment with Byrd Pruitt, father of the slain man, for murder Sunday of Roberts, were present to attend the services under guard of two deputy sheriffs.

The Pruitt family has lived in Southern Oklahoma for many years and the services resembled a gathering of all the pioneer families of the district.

Babe Pruitt had served as constable for some years. He was widely known.