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Book Review: Blood & Bone: Truth and Reconciliation in a Small Town

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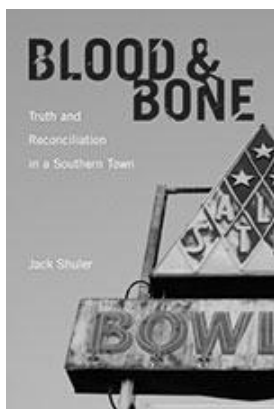
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Shuler, Jack. *Blood & Bone Truth and Reconciliation in a Small Town*. Columbia, South Carolina; University of South Carolina Press. 2012. 240 p. ISBN 978-1-61117-048-1. \$29.95

In *Blood & Bone*, author Jack Shuler does more than take a second look at the shooting deaths of three unarmed student-protesters at an historically black college in Orangeburg, South Carolina on February 8, 1968. He writes about this little known incident in the context of race relations, segregation, tragedy, and a community's efforts to heal from the event.

Shuler, a Denison University English professor who grew up in Orangeburg, states that he "had to write" this book, as many people remember the Kent State University shootings but few outside South Carolina know of the "Orangeburg Massacre."

The shooting deaths of the three male college students by South Carolina State Highway patrolmen took place two days after college students also protested a segregated bowling alley in Orangeburg during the Jim Crow era.

On the night of the shootings, 150 students gathered at a bonfire at what was then known as South Carolina State College campus to protest the whites-only bowling alley. (The institution is now known as State Carolina State University).

Students were throwing bricks and bottles prior to the shooting by law enforcement officers. Sometime after an object hit Officer David Shealy around 10:30 p.m., State Highway Patrolmen began shooting, killing three students and injuring 25 others.

Shuler spends much of his text talking to students, professors, patrolmen and townspeople who lived in Orangeburg at the time of the shooting. He also refers to police and FBI reports that described the students as having "malicious intentions" the night the students were shot—a point of view disputed by other witnesses that Shuler interviews.

Shuler himself to take a reluctantly active role in his own book, writing about how he got "depressed" when talking

to an Orangeburg resident who said race relations "can't get any worse" in present-day Orangeburg. Shuler also wrote that writing the book was "exceedingly difficult" as he had nightmares in which he met one of the grieving families of the men who were killed.

Perhaps another reason Shuler wrote the book is that, in some people's minds, there was no closure after the incident.

One year after the shooting, the nine patrolmen were put on trial for their actions in the deaths of the three students. A jury of ten white people and 2 African Americans acquitted the accused officers. The only person involved in the incident who did jail time was then-South Carolina State College professor and veteran organizer Cleveland Sellers who served seven months in prison on a rioting charge. Sellers later got a pardon for his imprisonment.

Sellers was an organizer of the student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee the year of the Massacre. Sellers is now president of Voorhees College.

Shuler writes about the racial tensions in a town that has a majority population of African American citizens yet is "controlled" by white people. He documents some of the racial history of Orangeburg, noting attempts to desegregate both girl scout troops and schools in Orangeburg; and of white people who risked a lot to "do the right thing" to improve race relations.

Shuler notes how the Orangeburg elected officials in 1968 engaged in a blame game for responsibility for the shootings. Then-South Carolina Governor Robert McNair blamed student Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizer Sellers for what happened. The prosecution of the patrolmen stated there was no danger to the lawmen posed by the protesters. But the defense focused on the events earlier in the week as well as the perceived role of Cleveland Sellers.

The author states that this book is not meant to be a historical account of the Orangeburg Massacre. Yet Shuler did a thorough job interviewing all sides in the massacre who were willing to talk.

Shuler didn't make any definitive conclusions about if the Orangeburg community has healed from its past; if lessons have been learned from the tumultuous events; or if race relations are better.

But he did revisit an incident about three young men whose lives ended too soon. And now relatives, friends and interested parties of the late Samuel Hammond, Delano Middletown and Henry Smith now have a more complete picture of what happened years ago than they did before.

This book is recommended for academic and public libraries.

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