

Torn From The Land A Man is Jailed for Defending His Land

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*Part Two of a series
Part 1 available in The Authentic Voice*

FRANKLIN, Ky. -- George and Mary Dinning were in bed, asleep, when riders came to drive them from their land. By morning, a man lay dead, and George Dinning was on his way to jail.

What happened that raw night in January 1897 is told in depositions and trial testimony from Dinning, his wife, Mary, and members of the mob that attacked their tobacco farm. The accounts were similar; sometimes, even the same words appear. Contemporary news accounts from The Courier-Journal newspaper of Louisville and the papers of Gov. William O. Bradley add to the story.

**"The next night after leaving, my house and everything on Earth we had ... was destroyed by fire."
--Mary Dinning**

About 11 p.m., 25 white men on horseback surrounded Dinning's farm, a 124-acre spread that spilled over the hills of southern Kentucky into Tennessee. Then came pounding at the front and back doors.

"I will give you just 10 days to get away from here, and don't you stop within 40 miles," a man said.

"What have I done?" Dinning asked.

You stole turkeys and chickens, the man answered. Dinning began to explain that he could account for everything he owned.

Boom! The back door exploded.

Bleeding from a wound in his arm, Dinning ran through gunfire up the stairs, past his wife and six children. He grabbed his shotgun, opened a front bedroom window and fired. A man named Jodie Conn fell dead. The mob retreated with his body, but not before a bullet creased Dinning's head.

Dinning turned himself in to the sheriff of Simpson County, who moved him to Bowling Green, a three-day journey, and further still to Louisville, to escape white mobs.

Riders came for Mary Dinning the next day.

Leave or hang, they told her. She begged for more time; her 12-year-old daughter was feverish. She and the children could stay inside the burning house, the mom retorted.

An all-white jury convicted Dinning of manslaughter, and he was sentenced to seven years in prison. The men who attacked his home were never arrested.

"Near sundown," she later testified, "I started with my six children, the youngest being 4 months old, the oldest 13 years. I was so badly frightened when I left, that I did not take time to put wrappings on myself or children.

"The next night after leaving," she continued, "my house and everything on Earth we had ... was destroyed by fire."

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Petitions to pardon Dinning poured in from prominent whites including Louisville Mayor George Todd. After much pressure, Bradley granted a pardon, on July 17, 1897.

Dinning moved to Indiana and sued his attackers, almost unheard of for blacks at that time. A U.S. District Court awarded him \$50,000, but he received only \$1,750 after the defendants claimed poverty.

The Dinning family never returned. Their land was folded into the holdings of their white neighbors, who took control simply by paying taxes on it, county land records show. The land has since been broken up into smaller lots that have a total assessed valuation of nearly \$250,000.

EDITOR'S NOTE – Associated Press Writer Allen G. Breed contributed to this report.