

Homicidal rampage in Alabama kills 11

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12 March 2009

On Tuesday, a gunman in south Alabama, near the Florida border, went on a homicidal rampage, killing ten, then himself.

Michael McClendon, 28, began his killing spree on Tuesday afternoon in Kinston, Alabama, at the home where he and his mother lived. He pinned Lisa White McClendon, 52, on a couch with items from the house and then lit her on fire, according to Coffee County Sheriff Dave Sutton. McClendon also shot the woman's four dogs.

McClendon then drove about twelve miles from Kinston to Samson, in neighboring Geneva County. There he opened fire on the front porch of the home of his uncle, James Alford White, 55, killing five (including his uncle and two cousins), before slaying his grandmother, Virginia White, 74, who lived next door.

Two of those killed on the porch were the wife and daughter of a local sheriff's deputy, Josh Myers: Andrea Myers, 31, and Corrine Myers, 18 months. They had been visiting the Whites, but evidently had no connection to McClendon. Another four-month-old daughter, Ella Myers, was wounded.

A neighbor told the *Dothan* (Alabama) *Eagle* that he had witnessed the killings. "You wanna talk about a horrific scene, you see what I saw. I went over to get that baby, and there was blood all over that porch," he said. "The baby was covered in her mother's blood."

"He cleaned his family out," Coffee County Coroner Robert Preachers told the media. "We don't know what triggered it."

Afterwards, McClendon drove around Samson randomly shooting at people, killing three and wounding two more. Among those killed were: James Starling, 24, who was described in a police report as a "pedestrian"; Sonja Smith, 43, who McClendon shot as she walked out of a gas station; and Bruce Malloy, 51,

who was killed while driving his vehicle.

A high speed chase followed in which McClendon managed to elude police, in part by shooting up their squad cars. A policeman was shot and wounded in one of these exchanges. McClendon then proceeded to the Reliable Metal Products factory where he had been employed until 2003, again exchanging fire with police.

He shot himself inside the factory, about an hour after beginning his killing spree.

Deputy Myers participated in the chase and shootout, not knowing that his wife and baby daughter lay dead in Samson. "This is probably the worst thing that's happened in my career," Sheriff Greg Ward told the *Dothan Eagle*. "While the shootout was going on at Reliable, he had no idea what had happened to his family."

McClendon used two assault rifles for his attacks, and what police describe as "high capacity magazines taped together," in addition to a shotgun and a handgun. Police estimate that he fired more than 200 rounds during his assault.

Sutton said that McClendon had taken with him enough ammunition to kill far more. "I'm convinced he went over there to kill more people. He was heavily armed," Sutton said.

Friends and acquaintances expressed surprise that McClendon could have been capable of such an act. As often happens in these cases, the perpetrator was described as quiet and "shy." Samson Mayor Clay King, who knew McClendon, told NBC's "Today" show, "If you would have asked me two days ago if he was capable of this, I would have said certainly not."

"I went to high school with him and thought he was a cool guy," said Cecil Knowles, a neighbor of the Whites. "I don't know what tipped his lid."

McClendon had quit a job at a sausage factory six days earlier in nearby Elba, Alabama. The plant described him as a "reliable team leader." Previously,

he had worked at the Reliable plant.

McClendon had also briefly worked as a police officer in Samson, in 2003, the same year he left the employ of Reliable. He was not retained after failing to complete his state training requirements, according to news reports.

Eruptions of homicidal violence in the US have become frequent events—so much so that most multiple homicides or shootings escape significant media coverage. On Sunday, a mass shooting in suburban Miami—the third in as many months—left six wounded. Last week, a man entered a Baptist church in Maryville, Illinois, where he shot and killed the preacher and wounded two parishioners. On March 6, a Cleveland man shot and killed his wife, sister-in-law and twin nieces. On January 24, a 24-year-old shot nine people outside a Portland, Oregon nightclub, killing two.

The frequency of these cases of individual mass violence begs explanation.

Each case no doubt has its own psychopathology. Nor is there any immediate cause and effect relationship between larger social problems and the homicidal eruptions of individuals. People go mad for a variety of reasons and under a variety of seemingly unbearable pressures.

However, it will undoubtedly be found that the increasingly frequent and violent character of such breakdowns is associated with deeper social processes—particularly perhaps, the existence of immense social and economic tensions, which find no progressive or rational outlet in official political or media life.

While the vast majority of individuals suffering economic and psychological hardship will never resort to mass mayhem, those who are unstable or who struggle with undetected psychological difficulties may be more susceptible to explosions under tense social conditions. An increasingly harsh and poisonous social atmosphere will inevitably work on and drive over the edge certain of the most vulnerable.

Poverty and economic struggle seem to have played a role in McClendon's rage. A local district attorney reported that investigators discovered in his home a list of people who had "done him wrong." On the list was the sausage factory, the Reliable plant and the Pilgrim's Pride chicken processing center that had recently laid off his mother. But his mother and the relatives he

killed were evidently not on the list.

The Alabama shootings occurred in an area of acute poverty. In 2000, 20 percent of Geneva County lived below the official poverty (subsistence) line. The figure is likely significantly higher today. Per capita income was only \$14,620 and median household income \$26,448, compared to national averages in 2007 of \$21,587 and \$50,740, respectively. Alabama is among the poorest states in the union, and is to be found at or near the bottom of nearly every major social index.

Alabama is also home to one of the most reactionary state political establishments in the nation. Long a bastion of Jim Crow segregation under the Democratic Party, Alabama has now become one of the most lopsidedly pro-Republican states. The extreme-right Republican senator, Richard Shelby, hails from Alabama. The foul political climate in Alabama, fueled by a variety of right-wing demagogues and fascistic talk-radio hosts, explains in part the easy availability of assault rifles like the ones McClendon used to such horrifying effect.

At moments like these, official American society's embrace and promotion of violence must also be recalled. Politicians, including the current president, Barack Obama, unabashedly endorse extralegal violence as a legitimate means of resolving international conflict. Cultural productions, including much of what the movies, television, and popular music have to offer, tend to invest violence with a romantic quality, while rarely giving artistic attention to its social origins or its human consequences.

Whatever its immediate cause, the mass killing in Alabama is yet another expression of a diseased society.



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