



(Above) 19-year-old Haywood Patterson During the Second Trial in April 1933. New York Attorney, Samuel Leibowitz is to the Left (National Archives and Records Administration) **(Below)** Victoria Price on the Witness Stand during the 1933 Trial of Haywood Patterson (National Archives and Records Administration)



The trial of the nine boys arrested in Scottsboro, Alabama brought to the surface many of the ugly realities of racial tension, segregation, and Jim Crow laws in the early 20th century. Ms. Towns makes clear the racial bias surrounding the initial allegations, according to her:

“the fact that these two women were alleged prostitutes, they did not have a good moral character. Had it been black women, nothing would have been done at all. Had they been white men, nothing would have been done, because of the character of these two women. But it showed us that in the South no matter what moral character you were, you could lie and because of that lie, nine men were accused, falsely accused of rape and sentenced to die in Alabama’s electric chair, Yellow Mama.”

Despite the racist bias of the time, some truly profound changes to the federal court system came as a result of the injustices of this trial. The 1932 ruling required that criminal representation be provided for those who could not afford it and that the defendant’s lawyers must be competent. The other ruling referred to jury selection. The Scottsboro boys were not allowed to be judged by a jury of their peers. In the Jim Crow South, people of color were never chosen for jury duty. While researching, Ms. Towns says that

“one of the most outstanding things that I’ve found, because of a 1935 supreme court ruling, Cree Conyers was the first African American to ever sit on a jury in Jackson County, [Alabama]. But then, I found the first blacks, who sat on a jury here in Morgan County. That kind of information was just astounding to me.”

"Because of These Brave Men..."

The educated, prosperous, and respected members of the African American community in Decatur were pivotal in changing this nation’s jury selection laws. While Ms. Towns has long known the story of the



(Above) Dr. R.R. Bridges, Who Initially Examined the Accusers, on the Witness Stand in 1933 with Judge James E. Horton Leaning behind Him (National Archives and Records Administration)

Scottsboro Boys, it was when she was conducting local research for a walking tour that she stumbled across some pertinent information. She recalls:

“That’s when I found out about the 11 blacks, who testified, to say ‘Yes, blacks are competent to serve on Alabama juries.’ Now, at that time, no black served on juries in the South unless it was a federal jury. And because of these brave men, because of their testimony, the whole dynamics of our legal system changed, because from their testimony came another supreme court ruling. We call it simply ‘jury of your peers,’ but what it did was say that no one can be barred from a jury because of their race.”

Ms. Towns continues with caution, “keep in mind, this was a time when women did not serve on juries – period. In Alabama, they actually did not start serving on a jury until 1966.”