

# Witness: Jewish lynch victim didn't kill Atlanta teen

The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984); Mar 7, 1982;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution

pg. 2B

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From Wire and Staff Reports

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Leo Frank, convicted and lynched in a sensational Atlanta murder case that led to a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan 70 years ago, was not guilty, a witness contends in a copyright story Sunday by the Tennessean.

Frank, a Jew from New York, was sentenced to death in 1913 for killing 14-year-old Mary Phagan at the National Pencil Co. on Forsyth Street in Atlanta, where he was a supervisor and where Miss Phagan worked. After his sentence was commuted, a group kidnapped him from a state prison in Milledgeville and took him to Marietta, where he was lynched by an angry mob.

Alonzo Mann, 83, who was a 14-year-old office boy there when Miss Phagan was killed April 26, 1913, told the Tennessean he did not tell lawyers that he had seen Jim Conley, a black janitor at the company, carrying the white girl's limp body.

"If you ever mention this, I'll kill you," Mann quoted Conley as telling him when he came upon them. Conley died in 1962.

Mann said he wants the truth known before he dies.

He was also interviewed by WXIA (Channel 11) in Atlanta in a broadcast aired Saturday night.

Mann's account of the events on the day of Miss Phagan's death he gave to the television station was similar to his statements in the Tennessean story.

"In my heart I'm glad to get it out," Mann told Channel 11. "I hope it will clear the name of Leo Frank as a murderer."

Frank's trial, flamed by anti-Semitism and dislike and suspicion of Northerners, helped revive the Klan, but also led to the formation of the B'Nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League, which opposes anti-Semitism.

"I believe in the sight of God that Jim Conley killed Mary Phagan to get her money to buy beer," Mann told the Tennessean. "Leo Frank was innocent."

"... The testimony which Conley gave at the trial to convict Frank was a lie from beginning to end."

John Seigenthaler, president and publisher of the Tennessean, said Mann passed two lie detector tests administered by Ball Investigative Agency for the newspaper. Mann also passed a psychological voice stress test, Seigenthaler said.

Mann, of Bristol, Tenn., told the newspaper he worked the day of the murder, left briefly and returned to find Conley carrying a limp girl in his arms.

During Frank's trial, Conley testified that he and Frank were together at all times after the girl's death and that they carried her body to the basement on an elevator, the newspaper said.

Mann told The Tennessean, however, that he saw Conley alone with the girl near a trapdoor that led to the basement. After the trial, it was revealed the elevator was not working.

Conley told the court he saw Frank with a rope right after he said the murder was committed in Frank's office. When the body was found, it had a rope around the neck. However, Mann said he didn't see a rope.

Mann told the Tennessean he refused to give Conley a dime for two beers the morning of the murder before Miss Phagan went to see Frank for \$1.20 in pay.

"I am convinced that she left the pay window and was coming down the stairs or had reached the first floor when she met Conley. . . . I am confident that I came in just seconds after Conley had taken the girl's money and grabbed her. . . . Her pay was never found in the building after she died."



NANCY WARNECKE/The Tennessean

**EYEWITNESS TODAY:** Alonzo Mann, 14 when girl was killed, returns to what once was murder site.

Mann told the newspaper he ran home after Conley's threat and told his mother what he had seen.

"She insisted that I not get involved. She told me to remain silent," Mann said, adding that "she knew Conley had threatened to kill me."

Mann, who testified at the trial, added: "I never fully realized until I was older that if I had told what I knew, Leo Frank would have been acquitted and gone free. Instead, he was imprisoned. . . . I was too young to understand."

Conley, who became the prosecution's star witness in the trial, was himself convicted as an accessory to the murder and sentenced to a year on the chain gang.

In the two years between Frank's conviction and his lynching, three witnesses — Conley's ex-girlfriend, his attorney, and a prisoner in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary — all claimed that Conley had been the killer. But

he was never again brought to trial.

The only other individual believed to be an eyewitness in the murder was the night watchman at the factory, Newt Lee, who discovered the girl's body.

Frank, to his death, denied he killed the girl. His death sentence was commuted by then-Gov. John Marshall Slaton. In August 1915, a vigilante group called the Knights of Mary Phagan stormed the jail in Milledgeville where Frank was confined, dragged him out at gunpoint, and took him to a grove outside Marietta, where he was lynched.

"Leo Frank was convicted by lies, heaped on lies," Mann said. "It wasn't just Conley who lied. Others said that Leo Frank had women in the office for immoral purposes and that he had liquor there. There was a story that he took women down in the basement. . . . That was all false."

"At last I am able to get this off my heart."



LEO FRANK: At time of sensational trial.



MARY PHAGAN: Killing touched off storm.