

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING



C. Lewis Alexander and the Battle of Lake Anna

By: Sarah Hays, Local History Librarian

In 1931, area newspapers were filled with vivid details of the mysterious disappearance of C. Lewis Alexander. Race relations during this time were an area of social tension; therefore, when C. Lewis Alexander, a thirty-one year old African American and a declared communist organizer, arrived in Barberton in the summer of 1930, he undoubtedly made some enemies. Rumors circulated widely that the Barberton police had abducted and possibly killed him. This situation led to protest, riots, and stories that received media attention for months.

According to witnesses, on the night of February 2, 1931, the Barberton police took Alexander from his strawboard hut near Snyderstown, beat him, and ordered him to leave, presumably because of his activities in connection with the Barberton Council of Unemployed.

The next day, too afraid to return home, Alexander returned to the Barberton home of Mrs. Hattie Simpson at 152 National Avenue. According to a testimony by Mrs. Simpson, on the night of February 4, several Barberton police officers forced their way into the house and took Alexander from it.

After this incident, no one heard from or saw Alexander again. Rumors quickly began to fly about his whereabouts. His mysterious disappearance coupled with stories of men in uniforms throwing a large box into the Columbia Chemical Lime Lake caused many people to assume he was murdered.

On Wednesday, May 27, 1931, a group of out-of-town communists held a meeting at the Serbian Hall in Barberton to protest the handling of the Alexander's case. When police officers attempted to stop the meeting, it quickly became chaotic. Dean Shannon, one of the patrol officers who would eventually be under fire in the Alexander case, attempted to halt a speech by Jennie Cooper of Cleveland.

The meeting adjourned to the street outside the hall, and the police officers tossed tear bombs to try to break up the protest. The *Akron Beacon Journal* reported that five of the communists were treated for club wounds and injuries due to exposure to gas. The *Barberton Herald* only reported injuries to two police officers, one of which was Dean Shannon, who had been vigorously beaten inside the hall. The "riot" coverage by the *Akron Beacon Journal* aggravated local Barberton officials, who announced, "The entire matter was but a minor disorder and still remains such despite the falsehoods and sensational coloring of the affair by the Akron [news]paper." Mayor Decker warned all "law-abiding citizens" to stay away from any further communist meetings held in Barberton.

On June 22, come and hear the rest of the story as the Local History Room presents C. Lewis Alexander and the Battle of Lake Anna. The program will be held in the Spillette Meeting Room at 6 pm. Light refreshments will be served.

