

A True Crime History Series · Independence, Louisiana

Blood & *Strawberries*

The Murder of Dallas Calmes and the Hanging of Six Sicilians

Written by Larry Calmes, Great Great Nephew of Dallas Calmes · Based on First-Hand Accounts ·

May 1921

I · THE LAST NIGHT · II · THE MURDER · III · THE CHASE · IV · TWO TRIALS · V · THE GALLOWS



The Last Night in *Independence*

A record strawberry season. A trusting community. A man about to step out his back door and into history. This is the story of Dallas Calmes — and the midnight that changed everything.

Independence, Louisiana · May 7, 1921



The strawberries were almost done. It had been the best season anyone in Independence,

Louisiana could remember — a bumper crop that had filled the Farmers and Merchants Bank vault to bursting, kept restaurants lit until midnight, and turned this small farming town into a buzzing hub of commerce, sweat, and strawberry-stained cash. Everyone was exhausted.

Everyone was happy. And in just a few more days, it would finally be over.

Dallas Calmes could not wait. He and his wife Bessie had temporarily moved back into their old apartment above their restaurant — the one squeezed right next to the bank — just to make the brutal hours manageable. Their real home was the beautiful new Calmes Hotel just down the street. But during the height of the season, when the restaurant opened at 6 a.m. and didn't close until well after dark, dragging yourself a full block home every night felt like a luxury neither of

them could afford. Just a few more nights, they told themselves. Then they'd go back to the hotel, sleep in their own bed, and put this glorious, exhausting season behind them.

May 7, 1921 would be their very last night above the restaurant. Tomorrow, they were going home. Bessie later said she even remembers thinking about it as she tried to sleep — that tomorrow night, she would finally be rid of the bank's interior lights shining through her window and keeping her awake. One more night. Just one more.

"The death of Dallas Calmes was a devastating loss to all of us."

— Mayor Charles Anzalone, neighbor and lifelong friend

Who was Dallas Calmes? By all accounts, he was the kind of man a town is built around. He owned the only restaurant in Independence and the newly constructed Calmes Hotel. He had a hand in several other businesses and was already planning more. But his real currency wasn't money — it was trust. In a time when Sicilian immigrants flooded into the Louisiana strawberry fields, barely speaking English, unable to read contracts, and wary of being cheated, Dallas Calmes was one of the only non-Sicilian men they believed in.

Mayor Charles Anzalone — himself a Sicilian immigrant who only ran for office because Dallas convinced him to — explained it plainly: Dallas would sit down with buyers, sellers, and attorneys, read every scrap of paperwork, and give his honest opinion, always free of charge. "He was their usual choice," the mayor said. When the immigrants needed a voice, they called on Dallas. When Dallas needed support at the polls, they showed up for him. It was a rare and beautiful kind of civic trust — the sort that holds a fragile community together.

Now, somewhere out on Robertson Road that evening, a large Hudson automobile was rolling slowly toward Independence. Six men sat inside. They had a map, a plan, and guns. And they had one other thing: a number — the exact

amount of cash sitting in that bank vault. They didn't know the roads. They'd gotten lost trying to find the town and had to pick up a local man to show them the way. But somehow, impossibly, they knew precisely how much money was waiting for them behind those bank doors.

Dallas Calmes went to bed that night thinking about hotel sheets and sleeping in. He had no idea what was creeping through the darkness toward his back fence.

Key Figures — Post I

Dallas Calmes Restaurateur, hotelier, trusted community figure.

Murdered May 8, 1921.

Bessie Calmes Wife of Dallas. Eyewitness to the murder. Her testimony would prove pivotal.

Mayor Charles Anzalone Sicilian immigrant elected mayor with Dallas's help. Close neighbor and friend.

Rene Calmes Dallas's brother, Chief Deputy Sheriff, and the Calmes family patriarch.

Coming in Post II

*It starts with a sound — boards being pried from a wooden fence in the dark. Bessie shakes Dallas awake. He grabs a lantern and his pistol, thinks it's chicken thieves, and steps outside into the night. **What follows in the next sixty seconds will shatter this town for decades.***