



Barkwell Defense Lawyer
George Starrett

Bio & Character Sketch of George Starrett

December 15, 1884 - December 28, 1958

Age in April, 1923: 38 Age at Death: 74

Age when picture was taken: (est) 38

George Starrett was born December 15, 1884 in Buchanan County, Missouri to Thomas Gallatin Starrett and Margaret Davis Starrett.

He graduated from the University of Missouri Law School in 1909 and soon became Columbia's City Attorney before serving two terms as the Boone County Prosecutor. He was the county prosecutor immediately before Ruby Hulen was elected to the role. Later, Starrett served as the County Probate Judge, also for two terms.

Starrett was active in the Democratic Party as well as several social organizations including the Masons and the Elks. He was the Grand Site of the Sovereign Grand Lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.

Starrett was an outgoing, extrovert who often made speeches to civic groups throughout the county. He was self-deprecating and would never miss an opportunity to make people feel good. Not everyone liked Starrett, but all would agree that he had the reputation for being a likable guy.

Starrett was twice married and twice widowed. He first married Anna Brady in 1935 at the age of fifty-one. After she died, he married Ellen Arnold in 1942. Arnold died just a few months before Starrett.

On December 28, 1958 at then age of seventy-four, George Starrett died at home from a heart attack.



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Character Sketch

George Starrett may not have liked George Barkwell – their personalities likely clashed – but Starrett knew that Barkwell’s trial would be a big one and he likely jumped at the opportunity to use his skills to defend his client.

Based on his marrying at such a late age (55) and his outgoing personality, it’s easy to see George Starrett as a handsome, professional, wealthy bachelor who liked the ladies. An accomplished ham-actor, Starrett played in charity baseball games, made patriotic speeches to all types of groups and probably had some time available for socializing. (He was obviously a snappy dresser as well.) The combination of his good looks, smart lawyer skills and wealth as a result of his single life must have been intoxicating to many of the single women in Boone County.

As a former Prosecutor for Boone County – and Ruby Hulen’s direct predecessor – Starrett was singularly fitted for the role of defense attorney. While he did not have the prestige of his fellow defense team members, a state senator and a US congressman, Starrett did know the inner workings of the Boone County Prosecutor’s Office. He likely still had contacts that he could lean on.

Based on his cleverly written closing argument, Starrett felt that the Prosecution, namely Ruby Hulen, had backed himself into a corner well before the lynching even took place. He showed the jury that even Ruby Hulen felt the man that Barkwell murdered deserved what was coming to him because Hulen indicted him.

And Starrett’s coup de gras to the prosecution was yet to come. He closed his argument by bringing all the national media attention about the lynching to his service. By invoking the biblical story of casting the first stone, Starrett recognized that many members of the jury probably felt guilty (if not responsible) for the lynching – at least in the media’s eyes - so why would they throw stones and convict someone else who was perhaps only slightly more guilty than they were?



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SIDE

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Hulen returns to the prosecution table. Attorney Starrett rises and approaches the jury box.

STARRETT

Those of us who live in Columbia know it as a peaceful place, and a safe one for men and women alike, for adults and for children. But on April 20th that peace was shattered by a fiendish crime. A white girl was ravished and despoiled by a black man.

HULEN Objection, your honor.

GANTT

We've discussed this. I'll allow it.

STARRETT

A week later, Mr. Hulen there charged James Scott with that hideous crime. You've heard the charge: "Now comes the prosecuting attorney for the state and files his information for the crime of rape." Now, I used to be a prosecuting attorney myself, and I know that a prosecuting attorney is bound by his oath of office only to bring charges that he believes to be true. An honest man wouldn't make the charge unless he found the evidence convincing.

Was Mr. Barkwell present when Mr. Scott was lynched? Yes, as were hundreds of others. Because he was present at the jail and at the bridge, Mr. Hulen and Mr. Davis have chosen to try him for first degree murder. But what did he do at the jail? He did exactly what the Sheriff and the Judge asked him to do: he held up his hand for silence so that they could plead with the mob. A young man has testified that he also monkeyed with the torch, but there's no evidence that he did anything other than monkeying with it. Another boy has testified that he put a rope around the negro's neck and threw him from the bridge.

Gentlemen, someone is lying, but who is it? Who is Nutter? He's a stranger in this town, a mere passerby. He's one of those reporters who is always running around after news. All of them feed on publicity. I do not believe a word of what Nutter said. If you are to believe him, you will have to call Emmett Smith, one of our best citizens, a liar. As for me, I'd rather believe a man I know than a man I don't know. I'd rather believe Emmett Smith than a whole basketful of Nutters.

So let's think this through, gentlemen. What is going on? A lynching took place in Columbia in April. The Governor, the Attorney General and Mr. Hulen here were outraged, as many people were. They wanted to make it clear that this sort of thing wouldn't be tolerated, so they looked around for someone to punish. They might have picked a dozen people, or two dozen, or more. As Mr. Davis said at the time, everyone who shouted "Take him to Stewart Bridge!" or "Throw him over!" could have been charged with the murder.

But they decided to focus on just one man, George Barkwell, not because they had good evidence against him, but because he was a convenient target. He was a prominent citizen, a former city councilman. Naturally, people remembered seeing him around that night. Mr. Barkwell isn't on trial today because he committed murder.

He is here because the authorities needed a scapegoat. He is here as a human sacrifice, offered up to atone for the sins of Columbia's entire white community. But the age of human sacrifice, the age of offering up scapegoats, has passed. Jesus ended that era with a single phrase: "Let him among you who is without fault cast the first stone."