The following selection is excerpted from a longer paper prepared for the Atticus Finch program at the State Bar Annual Meeting. To read the full article, which includes discussions of discrimination against Latinos and women in jury service, and the problem of pre-emptory challenges, go to www.texasbar.com/tbj.

The Jury in To Kill A Mockingbird: What Went Wrong?

BY JUDGE ROYAL FURGESON

How could the jury in To Kill A Mockingbird find Tom Robinson guilty? It is clear, beyond a reasonable doubt, that he was not guilty. How could that very jury ignore the superb final argument of Atticus Finch, when he implored, “In the name of God, do your duty”? The simple answer to the question is that the Mockingbird jury was not representative of Maycomb County, Ala., in 1935. While that jury had no women or minorities, we are certain that Maycomb County had lots of both. Rather than being diverse in gender, race, and ethnicity, the jury was monochromatic, populated by 12 white men. Scout describes the jury as “[s]unburned, lanky, they seemed to be all farmers, but this was natural: townsfolk rarely sat on juries, they were either struck or excused. One or two of the jury looked vaguely like dressed-up Cunninghams.”

Scout’s description confirms what history tells us about the composition of juries at that time: All white, all men. I believe it was this lack of diversity that prevented the Mockingbird jury from providing Tom Robinson with his guaranteed right to a fair trial “by an impartial jury of the State.”

As history teaches us, “[t]he diverse and representative character of the jury must be maintained ‘partly as assurance of a diffused impartiality and partly because sharing in the administration of justice is a phase of civic responsibility.’” In 1879, the U.S. Supreme Court held in Strauder v. West Virginia that the 14th Amendment forbids a state to bar men from jury pools based on race or color. But in 1935, our country, especially in southern states like Alabama, still had far to go before juries and courts would truly be “the great levelers” that Atticus Finch envisioned.

For more than a century, racial minorities had been protected against jury discrimination in theory, but in practice these laws provided little actual protection. Congress enacted a law in 1875 making it a crime to engage in racial discrimination. But there has only been a single recorded prosecution under this statute, despite a long history of racial jury discrimination in the South.

The Supreme Court first dealt with the question of whether minorities could protect their own rights against discrimination in Strauder, which challenged an 1873 West Virginia statute that limited jury service to white males over the age of 21 who were not elected officials. Justice Strong, in the Court’s opinion, found that singling out African Americans from service as jurors was “practically a brand upon them” and that it prevented “equal justice which the law aims to secure to all others.” Accordingly, the Court struck down the statute because it “excluded every man of [the defendant’s] race, because of color alone, however well qualified in other respects.”

But Justice Strong’s final qualification would prove to be a useful weapon for those seeking to exclude racial minorities. Indeed, the exception swallowed the general rule: [The State] may confine the selection to males, to freeholders, to citizens, to persons within certain ages, or to persons having educational qualifications. We do not believe the Fourteenth Amendment was ever intended to prohibit this. Looking at its history, it is clear it had no such purpose. Its aim was against discrimination because of race or color.
Thus, while the Supreme Court would not allow states to use race as the basis for exclusion, it appeared to have no qualms with other qualification requirements that could have the same effect, given the Supreme Court’s view that African Americans were generally “abject and ignorant.” Decided the same day as Stroud and Commonwealth of Virginia v. Rives, the Court’s decision in Rives narrowed the limited effectiveness of Stroud. Justice Strong found that there was no 14th Amendment violation when an African-American defendant was faced with the prospect of an all-white jury. Rather, an African-American defendant’s right was the same as any other citizen: That jurors would be selected based on various qualifications with “no discrimination against them because of their color.”

Notwithstanding the hurdles that Justice Strong put in the way of African Americans challenging all-white juries in Rives, the Court’s decision in Stroud was met by strong opposition in the South. William Royall, a well-known Virginia lawyer, wrote in his magazine, Commonwealth, that the Stroud decision amounted to a complete overthrow of federalism and a continuation of the Reconstruction.

It was not supposed that [the 14th Amendment] would ever receive the wide construction now given to it [in Stroud], yet thinking men looked upon its provisions with alarm. ... After Stroud, minorities could not be excluded from juries solely on account of their race, provided that a state law or constitutional provision that excluded African Americans was the same as any other citizen: That jurors would be selected based on various qualifications with “no discrimination against them because of their color.”

Subsequent to Stroud, Rives, and Neal, the Supreme Court took a deferential approach to dealing with jury discrimination. An example of the deference is seen in Smith v. Mississippi. Here, the defendant made allegations about African-American jury discrimination similar to those made in Neal, but was unsuccessful because the state did not concede to the allegations and the defendant provided only his own affidavits. Absent any viable remedy in federal court, states were free to exclude minorities from juries so long as they did not concede that race was the motivating factor. A 1910 study on the racial makeup of juries found that African Americans rarely served in Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, South Carolina, and Virginia, and did not serve at all in Alabama and Georgia.

Thus, Neal prohibits state officials from barring minority service on juries even when there is no law that bans certain classes of individuals from serving on juries based on racial grounds. But it is easy to overstate the strength of Neal. Delaware conceded in Neal that an African American had never served as a juror in the entire State of Delaware. Thus, the defendants in Neal were allowed to argue in federal court only because the Supreme Court saw how openly hostile to African Americans the Delaware courts were. Justice Harlan’s discussion of the history of discrimination could have served as a basis for creating a burden-shifting mechanism — if states treated African Americans too discriminatorily over a period of time, then they would have the burden of proof. Unfortunately, subsequent courts minimalized Harlan’s discussion as dicta.

Thus, all Neal appears to stand for is that states should not concede the dearth of minority representation on juries.
It was not until the Supreme Court’s opinion in Norris v. Alabama29 that states would be required to do more than assert that minorities were not being excluded on the basis of race. Counsel for the defendants in Norris produced exhaustive evidence of the pervasive discrimination in Jackson County against African Americans.29

In the face of all this evidence, the Court found that the Neel standard was met,30 and reversed the convictions.31 Perhaps the most important evidence put forward by the defense counsel was the decision to bring copies of the tampered jury rolls — the names of six African-American men were added to make the rolls not appear to be exclusionary.32 In a moment that indicated how the Court would rule, Justice Van Devanter was heard whispering to Chief Justice Hughes: “Why it’s as plain as punch.”33

By 1940, only five years later, the situation for African Americans appears to have improved, at least in the cities. A Carnegie Foundation Study found that African Americans now served quite frequently on juries in larger southern cities and in all southern federal courts.34 But “the vast majority of rural courts in the Deep South … made no pretense of putting Negroes on jury lists, much less calling or using them in trials.”35 Thus, the all-white jury that convicted Tom Robinson was typical for rural Alabama, but Atticus Finch would have had grounds for an appeal, based on Norris, if nothing else. Yet, regardless of the strides made against discrimination, racism in jury selection continued even though the states were now subject to some oversight. There was still no requirement that jurors be randomly selected, so states could exclude jurors who were not “generally reputed to be honest and intelligent and … esteemed in the community for their integrity, good character and sound judgment.”36 Even though this vested states with great discretion to exclude jurors, the statistical requirements of the Supreme Court have gradually increased, and the federal government moved to random jury pools in 1968.37

Professor Valerie Hans and Neil Vidman have been researching juries from their first jury book, Judging the Jury (1986) to their latest jury book, American Juries: The Verdict (2007). It is clear that juries get it right, so long as they are representative: A key element contributing to jury competence is the deliberation process. A representative, diverse jury promotes vigorous debate. One of the most dramatic and important changes over the last half century is the increasing diversity of the American jury. Heterogeneous juries have an edge in fact finding, especially when matters at issue incorporate social norms and judgments as jury trials often do.38

There is an interesting portion of Atticus’ closing argument: “A court is only as sound as its jury, and a jury is only as sound as the men who make it up.”39 Atticus pinpoints exactly how the Mockingbird jury got it wrong. A court is only as sound as its jury, but that jury must be selected free from discrimination. Unfortunately, Tom Robinson’s case was an example of the flawed institution of its day. But Atticus was not wrong to believe in the integrity of our courts and in the jury system, because while it may not be perfect, it is vital to the success of this great democracy.

Notes

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2. Lee, supra note 1, at 175.
5. 100 U.S. 303 (1879).
8. See Michael Meltsner, Equality and Health, 115 U. PA. L. REV. 22, 22 n.2 (citing Ex parte Virginia, 100 U.S. 339 (1880) as the only recorded prosecution under the statute).
9. Strader, 100 U.S. at 305.
10. Id. at 308.
11. Id. at 309.
12. Id. at 310.
13. Id.
14. 100 U.S. 513 (1879).
15. Id. at 322.
16. Id. at 323.
18. 103 U.S. 370 (1880).
19. Id. at 377.
20. Neel, 100 U.S. at 397.
21. Id.
22. Id. at 393.
23. Schmidt, supra note 21 at 1457.
24. Id. at 1458.
26. Id. at 601.
29. Id. at 592 (quoting the state court).
30. Id.
31. Id. at 599.
32. Schmidt, supra note 21 at 1478.
33. Id. at 1479.
34. Alschuler, supra note 31 at 895.

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