



A Peculiar Tribe of People: Murder and Madness in the Heart of Georgia

Richard Jay Hutto

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On May 12, 1960, as John F. Kennedy campaigned for the presidency, Chester Burge, slumlord, liquor runner, and the black sheep of the proud (and wealthy) Dunlap family of Macon, Georgia, lay in a hospital bed, recovering from surgery. He listened to the radio as the news reported that his wife had just been murdered. Police soon ruled out robbery as a motive, and suspicion centered upon the Ku Klux Klan, which two weeks earlier had descended upon his house to protest his renting of homes in white neighborhoods to black families. Then, on June 1, Chester was charged with the murder, and when the trial finally began, the sweet Southern town of Macon witnessed a story of epic proportions—a tale of white-columned mansions, an insane asylum, real people as “Southern grotesque” as the characters of Flannery O’Connor, and a volatile mix of taboo interracial relationships and homosexuality.

This was a story as fantastical as a Greek tragedy, complete with a stunning conclusion. It is told in riveting detail in Richard Jay Hutto’s *A Peculiar Tribe of People*.

Chester Burge was a walking streak of deception and sex. After weaseling his way to be the caretaker of the last Dunlap sister and forcing his way into her will, Burge and his family inherited a fortune as well as one of the family mansions. Then came his numerous assignations with men—including his black chauffeur—and, either single-handedly or with help from a lover, the murder of his wife.

The trial would spawn the first testimony in Georgia history of a black man disclosing that he had been a white man’s sexual partner. Burge would be acquitted of murder, but convicted of sodomy. And yet, this Southern grotesque tale would take even more twists and turns before coming to an explosive conclusion.

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