

THE  
america's shameful pastime

# lynchings

LYNCHINGS WERE PUBLIC  
EVENTS ATTENDED BY THE  
TOWN'S LEADING CITIZENS.  
THEY WERE ALMOST A  
SPORT THAT PERSISTED  
FROM RECONSTRUCTION  
UNTIL 1968.

BY LEON F. LITWACK





WOMEN AND CHILDREN  
GATHERED IN FORT  
LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA,  
IN 1935 TO SEE RUBIN  
STACY HANDCUFFED AND  
HANGING FROM A TREE.

I got to keep moving  
I got to keep moving  
blues falling down like hail  
blues falling down like hail  
Uumh, blues falling down like hail  
Blues falling down like hail  
And the days keeps on worryin' me  
There's a hellhound on my trail  
Hellhound on my trail  
Hellhound on my trail  
Hellhound on my trail

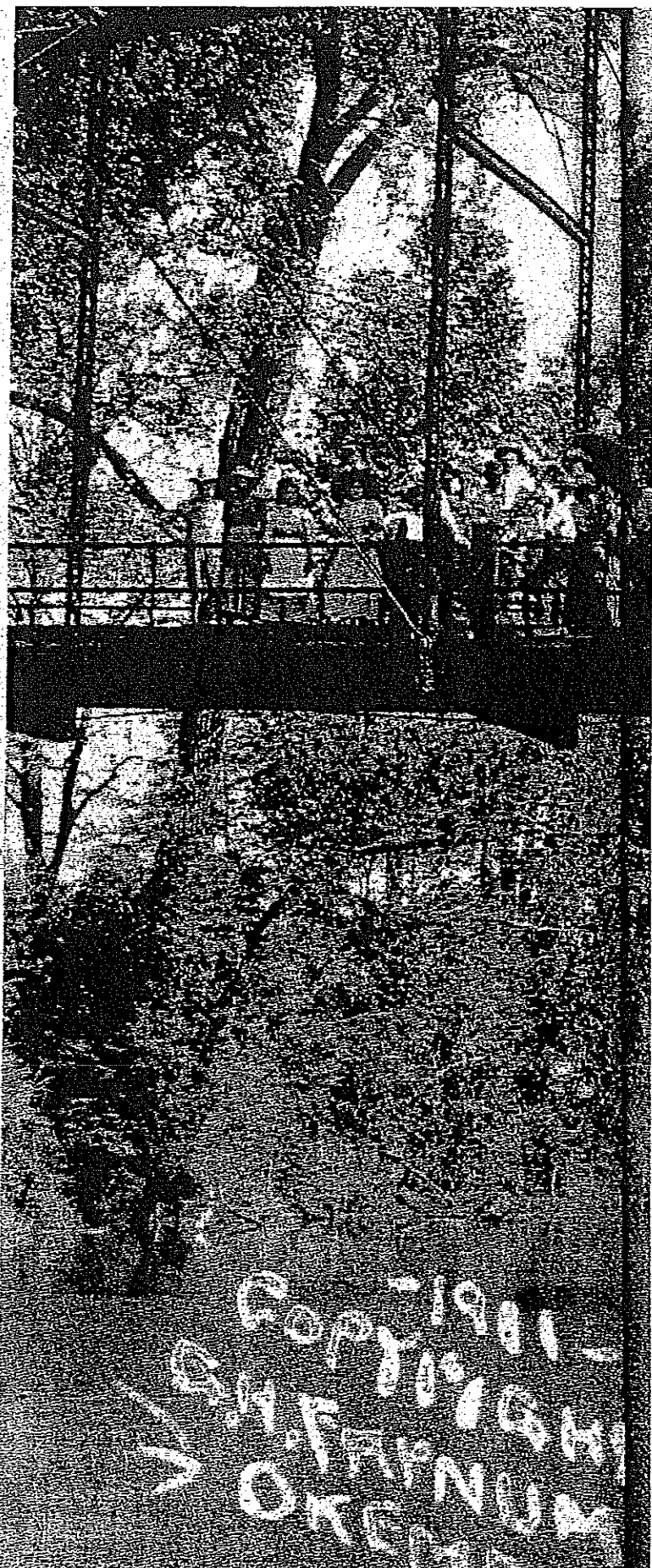
—ROBERT JOHNSON, *bluesman*

On a Sunday afternoon, April 23, 1899, more than 2,000 white Georgians, some of them arriving from Atlanta on a special excursion train, assembled near the town of Newman to witness the execution of Sam Hose, a black Georgian. The event assumed a familiar format. Like so many lynchings, this one became a public spectacle. As in most lynchings, the guilt of the victim had not been proven in a court of law. As in most lynchings, no member of the crowd wore a mask, nor did anyone attempt to conceal the names of the perpetrators; indeed, newspaper reporters noted the active participation of some of the region's most prominent citizens. And as in most lynchings, the white press and public expressed its solidarity in the name of white supremacy and ignored any information that contradicted the people's verdict.

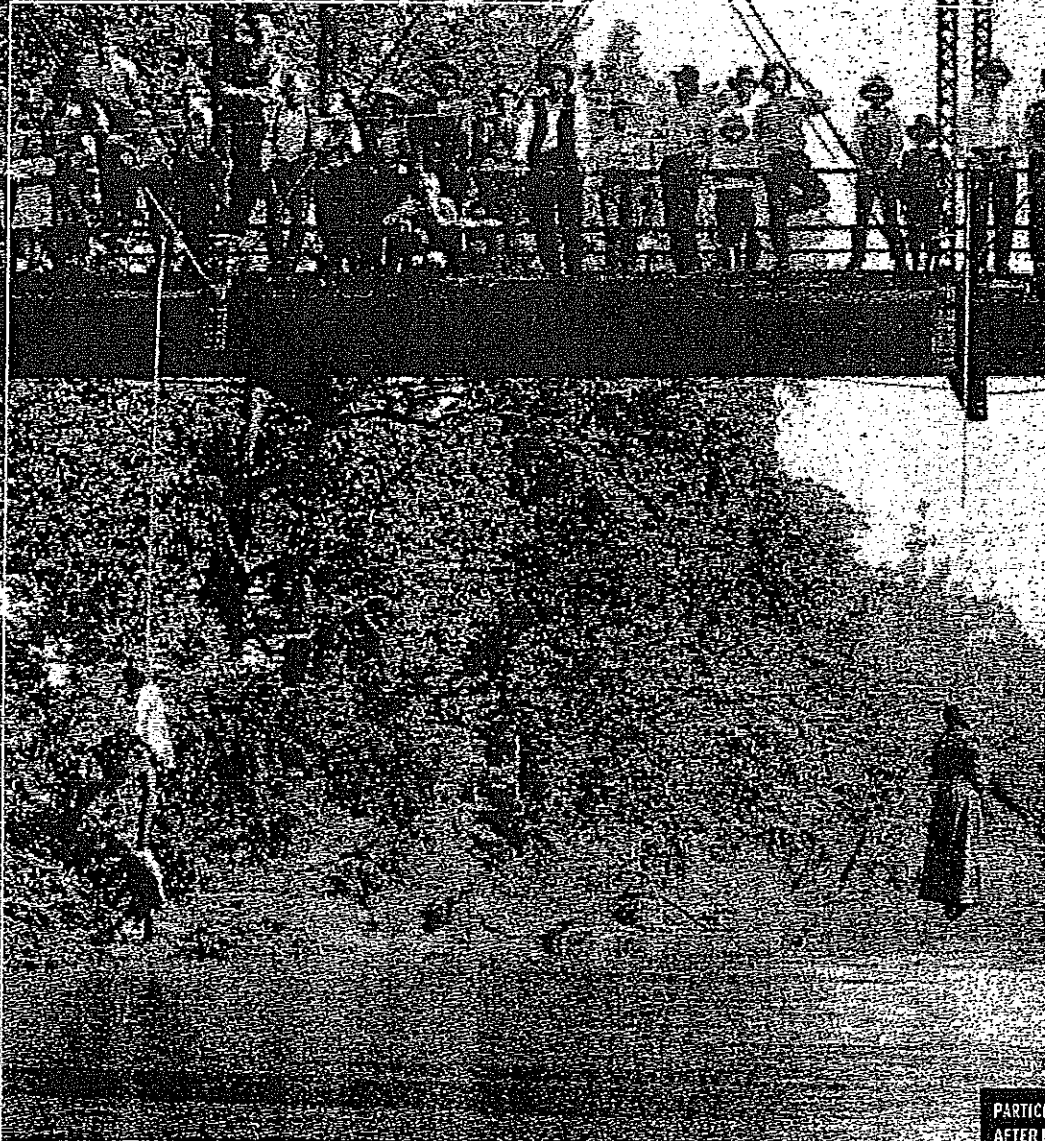
Sam Hose worked for a planter, Alfred Cranford. He asked his employer for an advance in pay and for permission to visit his ill mother. The planter refused, precipitating a harsh exchange of words. On the following day, Cranford resumed the argument, this time drawing his pistol and threatening to kill Hose. In self-defense, Hose flung his ax, striking Cranford in the head and killing him instantly. That is precisely what happened, according to a subsequent investigation conducted by a white detective.

Within two days of the incident, newspapers reported an altogether different version. Cranford had been eating dinner when Hose—"a monster in human form"—snuck up on him, buried an ax in his skull, and, after pillaging the house, dragged Mrs. Cranford into the room where her husband lay dying and raped her.

If versions of Cranford's death varied, the story of Sam Hose's fate did not. After stripping Hose of his clothes and chaining him to a tree, the self-appointed executioners stacked kerosene-soaked wood high around him. Before saturating Hose with oil and applying the torch, they cut off his ears, fingers, and genitals, and skinned his face. While

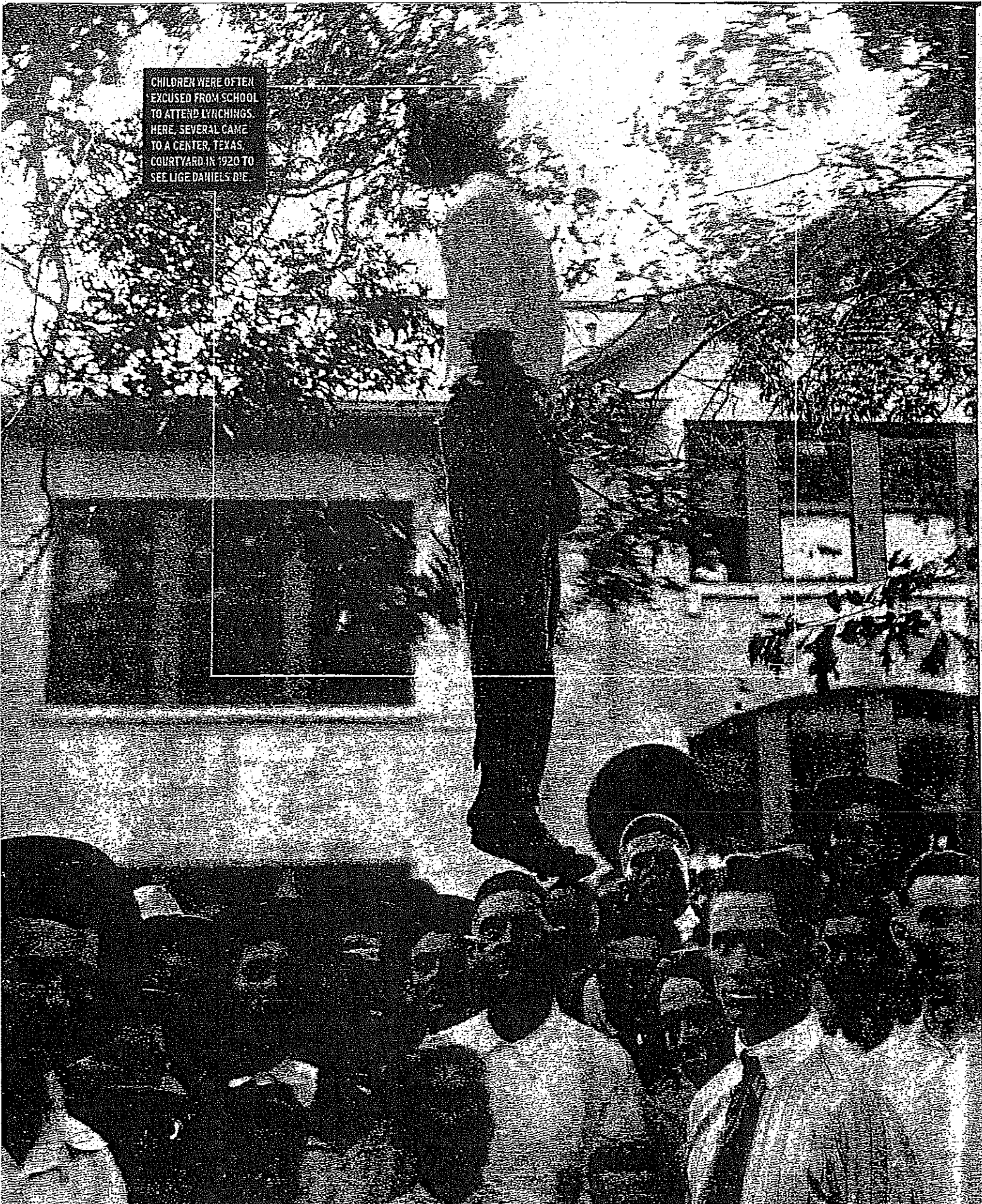






PARTICIPANTS POSED  
AFTER LYCHING  
LAURA NELSON AND  
HER SON IN 1911 IN  
OKEMAH, OKLAHOMA.

CHILDREN WERE OFTEN  
EXCUSED FROM SCHOOL  
TO ATTEND LYNCHINGS.  
HERE, SEVERAL CAME  
TO A CENTER, TEXAS,  
COURTYARD IN 1920 TO  
SEE LIGE DABIELS DIE



some in the crowd plunged knives into the victim's flesh, others watched the contortions of Sam Hose's body "with unfeigning satisfaction" (one reporter noted) as the flames rose. The only sounds that came from the victim's lips were, "Oh, my God! Oh, Jesus."

Before Hose's body had cooled, his heart and liver were removed and cut into several pieces and his bones were crushed into small particles. The crowd fought over these souvenirs. Hose's severed knuckles were later prominently displayed in an Atlanta grocery store. The next morning, smoldering ashes and a blackened stake were all that remained. On the trunk of a tree near the scene, a placard read: WE MUST PROTECT OUR SOUTHERN WOMEN.

The leading newspaper in Atlanta urged its readers to "keep the facts in mind" when they judged the actions of the lynchers. "The people of Georgia are orderly and conservative, the descendants of ancestors who have been trained in America for 150 years. They are a people intensely religious, home-loving, and just. There is among them no foreign or lawless element."

Thousands of black men and women met the same fate as Sam Hose. Some of the atrocities are pictured here, and are part of an exhibit that will remain at the New York Historical Society in New York City until August 13. The need for this grisly photographic display may be disputed as catering to voyeuristic appetites and perpetuating images of black victimization. This is not an easy history to assimilate. It is a necessarily painful and ugly story, as it includes some of the bleakest examples of violence and dehumanization in the history of humankind.

The photographs stretch our credulity, even numb our minds. But they must be examined if we are to understand how normal men and women could live with, participate in, and defend such atrocities. The men and women who tortured, dismembered, and murdered in this fashion understood perfectly well what they were doing and thought of themselves as perfectly normal human beings. Few had any ethical qualms about their actions. This was not the outburst of crazed men or uncontrolled barbarians but the triumph of a belief system that defined one people as less human than another.

Some 30 years after emancipation, between 1890 and 1920, in response to perceptions of a "New Negro" born in freedom and undisciplined by slavery, the white South denied blacks a political voice, imposed rigid racial segregation (Jim Crow), sustained an economic system—sharecropping and tenantry—that left little room for

ambition or hope, and refused blacks equal educational resources. White southerners also disseminated racial caricatures and pseudo-scientific theories that reinforced and comforted many of them in their racist beliefs and practices. And the criminal justice system (the law, the courts, the legal profession) operated with ruthless efficiency in upholding the absolute power of whites to command the subordination and labor of blacks.

But even this overwhelming display of superiority did not afford white southerners the internal security they sought against "uppity," independent-minded black men and women who had not yet learned the rituals of deference and submission. Open displays of racial violence gripped the South. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, two or three black southerners were hanged, burned at the stake, or quietly murdered every week. In the 1890s, lynchings claimed an average of 139 lives each year; 75 percent of them of black people. The numbers declined in the following decades, but the percentage of black victims rose to 90 percent. Between 1882 and 1968, an estimated 4,742 blacks met their deaths at the hands of lynch mobs.

Varying only in degrees of torture and brutality, the execution rituals were acted out in every part of the South. Sometimes in small groups, sometimes in massive numbers, whites combined the roles of judge, jury, and executioner. Newspaper reporters dutifully reported the events under lurid headlines. The public burning of a Negro became known as a "Negro Barbecue."

Cameras memorialized lynchings. Photographers captured not only the execution itself but also the carnival-like atmosphere and the crowd's expectant mood.

Many photographs of lynchings and burnings would reappear as popular picture postcards and trade cards to commemorate the events. A Unitarian minister in New York, John H. Holmes, opened his mail one day to find a postcard depicting a crowd in Alabama posing for a photographer next to the body of a black man dangling by a rope. Responding to the minister's recent condemnation of lynching, the person who sent the card wrote, "This is the way we do them down here. The last lynching has not been put on card yet. Will put you on our regular mailing list. Expect one a month on the average."

These savage assaults on black men and women in the name of restraining their "savagery" and "depravity" forcefully underscored the cheapness of black life in the South. "To kill a Negro wasn't

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THIS POSTCARD FROM ROBINSON, TEXAS, MEMORIALIZED A 1916 LYNCHING. YOUNG JOE, SECOND FROM THE LEFT OF THE POLE, SENT IT PROUDLY TO HIS PARENTS.





## AMERICA'S SHAMEFUL PASTIME

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nothing," one black Mississippian recalled. "It was like killing a chicken or killing a snake. The whites would say, 'Niggers jest supposed to die, ain't no damn good anyway—so jest go on an' kill 'em.'"

"They had to have a license to kill anything but a nigger," another black southerner remembered. "We was always in season."

For many decades, lynching had served as a means of extralegal justice in the West and the Midwest, and most of the victims had been whites. But in the 1890s, lynching and sadistic torture rapidly became exclusive public rituals of the South, with black men and women as the principal victims. What was strikingly new and different about these lynchings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was the sadism and exhibitionism that characterized white violence. The ordinary modes of execution and punishment no longer satisfied the emotional appetite of the crowd. To kill the victim was not enough; the execution became public theater, a participatory ritual of torture and death, a voyeuristic spectacle prolonged as long as possible (once for seven hours) for the benefit of the crowd.

Newspapers, on a number of occasions, announced in advance the time and place of a lynching; special "excursion" trains transported spectators to the scene; employers sometimes released their workers to attend; parents sent notes to school asking teachers to excuse their children for the event; and entire families attended, the children hoisted on their parents' shoulders to miss none of the action and accompanying festivities.

Returning from one such occasion, a nine-year-old white youth remained unsatisfied. "I have seen a man hanged," he told his mother. "Now I wish I could see one burned."

The story of a lynching was more than the simple fact of a black man or woman hanged by the neck. After learning of the lynching of her husband, Mary Turner—in her eighth month of pregnancy—vowed to find those responsible, and have them punished in the courts. A mob of several hundred men and women determined to "teach her a lesson" for making such a threat. After tying her ankles together, they hung her from a tree, head downward. While she was still alive, someone used a knife ordinarily reserved for splitting hogs to cut open the woman's abdomen. The infant fell from her womb to the ground and cried briefly, whereupon a member of this Valdosta, Georgia, mob crushed the baby's head beneath his heel. Hundreds of bullets were then fired into Mary Turner's body, completing the work of the mob.

The Associated Press, in its notice of the affair, observed that Mary Turner had made "unwise remarks" about the execution of her husband, "and the people, in their indignant mood, took exceptions to her remarks, as well as her attitude."

Nor were the mobs overly scrupulous about determining the guilt of the black victim. The idea, after all, as one black observer noted, was to make an example, "knowing full well that one Negro

swinging from a tree will serve as well as another to terrorize the community." After a barn-burning near Columbus, Mississippi, suspicion fell on the son of Cordelia Stevenson. Unable to locate him, a mob of whites settled on his mother, seized and tortured her, and left her naked body hanging from the limb of a tree for public viewing.

When permitted to speak before being lynched, some of the victims professed their guilt and asked for forgiveness, while others insisted on their innocence. But many simply tried to make peace with their God. One such black youth, Jesse Washington, who had been retried after a judge had expressed doubt over a guilty verdict, pleaded, but to no avail. The crowd, made up of "the supposed best citizens of the South," looked on with approval as the flames enveloped the squirming youth. Souvenir hunters then proceeded to hack his body with penknives, carrying away their human loot. One white spectator failed to share the carnival mood of the crowd. "I am a white man, but today is one day that I am certainly sorry that I am one," he wrote afterward. "I am disgusted with my country."

Whites came to accept most lynchings as justifiable homicide, in part by differentiating between "good" lynchings and "bad" lynchings. A newspaper reported the "orderly" execution of Elmo Curl in Mastadon, Mississippi, this way: "The best people of the county, as good as there are anywhere, simply met there and hanged Curl without a sign of rowdiness. There was no drinking, no shooting, no yelling, and not even any loud talking." What characterized a "good" lynching appeared to be the quick dispatch of the victim "in a most orderly manner" without prolonging his or her agony for the crowd's benefit.

No doubt the mob in Howard, Texas, thought itself orderly, even democratic, in its ritualistic execution of a black man. Farmers in the surrounding neighborhood were notified to attend, and some 2,000 spectators responded. The victim was given two hours for prayers, and the mob heeded his request to see his brother and sister before the execution. The question of how he should be executed was submitted to the crowd, and a majority voted for death by burning.

But neither the orderliness of the proceedings nor the democratic proclivities of the mob in any way alleviated the agony of the victim. "The Negro's moans were pitiful," a reporter noted. "He struggled, his great muscles swelling and throbbing in an effort to break the chains which bound him." Five minutes after the mob applied the match, the victim was dead.

At least one newspaper found the "hellish deed" unjustifiable. "The deliberately planned and calmly executed spectacle was over. The crowd dispersed." But the legacy of this lynching, the editor insisted, would linger. "That five minutes of a return to primal savagery cannot be wiped out within the course of one brief lifetime."

Even some ordinarily unsympathetic white Mississippians thought the lynching of Lloyd Clay in Vicksburg in 1919 might have been misguided. A 22-year-old day laborer from a respected family,

Clay was accused of rape, even though the victim denied he had been her assailant. Overly zealous to remove Clay from the jail, the mob accidentally shot two whites. Still, they carried off the execution, clumsily trying to hang him and finally burning him alive near the center of town.

Newspapers called it "hideous" and "horrible," "one of the worst lynchings in history," and at least one newspaper thought Clay was "probably an innocent man, and one wholly out of the classes of the 'bad Negro.'" Another newspaper labeled the lynchers rank amateurs who lacked the necessary skills to dispatch their victim. The more than 1,000 spectators reportedly remained passive during the execution, though some thought the executioners had been clumsy and inflicted "needless suffering" on Clay. The lynching incurred further criticism for having taken place in a white neighborhood. At least six white women fainted, and others reported that their "sensibilities" had been "shocked."

Hundreds of lynchings were accorded only a brief mention in the press, particularly as they became routine affairs by the end of the century, meriting no more notice or comment in some newspapers than the daily weather. "Nowadays," a bishop of the Southern Methodist Church noted, "it seems the killing of Negroes is not so extraordinary an occurrence as to need explanation; it has become so common that it no longer surprises. We read of such things as we read of fires that burn a cabin or a town."

Few members of a lynch mob were, in fact, ever apprehended, and only rarely did the leaders or the participants seek to conceal their identity. The confident manner in which they went about their business was matched only by the complacency, the matter-of-factness, and often the good humor with which it was viewed. Occasionally, editorialists and political leaders voiced concern and condemned lynchings, but the public tended to praise the lynchers for fulfilling their responsibilities as white males.

The Memphis newspaper chose to judge each lynching according to the nature of the victim's crime. It had no problem with lynching a Negro rapist but thought it wrong to lynch a Negro who refused to be vaccinated.

Few of the perpetrators were ever brought to trial. Eyewitnesses refused to testify, and grand juries refused to bring indictments against easily identifiable mob participants. Even if they had, juries would have refused to convict, whatever the evidence. In an Alabama community, 110 whites examined for a jury that would judge members of a lynch mob were asked, "If you were satisfied from the evidence beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant took part with or abetted the mob in murdering a Negro, would you favor his conviction?" Seventy-six answered no, and the remaining 34 would certainly have weighed very carefully the consequences of rendering a guilty verdict.

Not only did distinguished public officials at all levels of government hesitate to condemn lynching, but some also chose to participate in lynch mobs. "I led the mob which lynched Nelse Patton,

and I am proud of it," a former U.S. senator from Mississippi, William Van Amberg Sullivan, boasted in 1908.

In the public burning of John Hartfield in Jones County, Mississippi, the district attorney, who would later be elected to Congress, not only witnessed the burning but used the occasion for some electioneering and refused to bring charges against the mob leaders.

Similarly, in 1911, the mob that carried out the grisly dismemberment of Willis Jackson in Honea Path, South Carolina, was led by Joshua W. Ashleigh, who represented the district in the state legislature. His son, editor of the local newspaper, also participated; indeed, he proudly told his readers that he "went out to see the fun without the least objection to being a party to help lynch the brute." When some shocked South Carolinians demanded a state investigation, Governor Cole Blease demurred. Rather than use his power of office to deter whites from "punishing that nigger brute," he vowed that, if necessary, he would gladly have resigned as governor "and come to Honea Path and led the mob." The newspaper in Spartanburg warned that any attempt to indict the murderers "would make heroes of the lynchers and eminently qualify them for public office."

Even if a conscientious law enforcement official chose to remain committed to his oath of office, he was likely to encounter insurmountable obstacles, such as the will of the community, which was usually more than sufficient to prompt him to submit to the seemingly inevitable. "I went into that cell block with every intention of fulfilling my oath and protecting that man," an officer reported, "but when the mob opened the door, the first half a dozen men standing there were leading citizens—businessmen, leaders of their churches and the community—I just couldn't do it."

Before lynching two men in Morganton, North Carolina, in 1889, the mob held prayer services. That spoke quite eloquently of the degree to which "good" lynchings took place in some of the most churchified communities of the South. The lynch mobs often included white parishioners. "The only ways to keep the pro-lynching element in the church," a white Mississippian acknowledged some years later, "is to say nothing which would tend to make them uncomfortable as church members." It was left to Ida B. Wells, a black editor and anti-lynching activist, to question the relative silence of white churches: "Our American Christians are too busy saving the souls of white Christians from burning in hellfire to save the lives of black ones from present burning in fires kindled by white Christians."

Even those who deplored lynching did so within limits, acknowledging that a higher law might sometimes have to prevail. The "better sort" of whites, who paid lip service to law and order, all too often found themselves mixing their outrage over a lynching with a more compelling sense of justice and retribution.

It took little time before a "folk pornography" emerged in the South, playing on themes from the past and adding some new dimensions: the

sexual depravity of the black man; the specter of the black beast seized by uncontrollable, savage, and sexual passions. That is, the inhumanity, depravity, bestiality, and savagery practiced by white participants in lynchings were justified in the name of humanity, morality, justice, civilization, and Christianity. And there was little reason to question the depth of the convictions on which whites acted; they came, in fact, to believe in their own rhetoric, much as the defenders of slavery had.

The Negro-as-beast became a fundamental part of the white South's racial imagery, taking its place alongside the venerated and faithful Sambo retainer, and whites were perfectly capable of drawing on both to sustain their self-image. Blacks, after all, possessed a dual nature: They were docile and amiable when enslaved or severely repressed, but savage, lustful, and capable of murder and mayhem when free and uncontrolled—like those blacks who had grown up since the Civil War.

White fears were based on the assumption that most lynchings stemmed from sexual assault. But in many cases, reports of sexual assault proved entirely baseless or, upon closer examination, revealed only that a black male had broken the rules of racial etiquette, had behaved in a manner construed as a racial insult, or had violated the bar on consensual interracial sex. Of the nearly 3,000 blacks known to have been lynched between 1889 and 1918, for example, only 19 percent were accused of rape. But in most cases, what the public thought had occurred became much more important than what did happen. The public's perception of lynching, fed by the media, was invariably that a sexual crime by a black man had precipitated it.

In fact, many of the transgressions by black lynch victims would have been regarded as relatively trivial if committed by whites, and were not grounds anywhere else for capital punishment: using disrespectful language; refusing to take off one's hat to a white person or to step aside when encountering a white on the sidewalk; and "being troublesome generally."

In short, victims of lynch mobs, more often than not, had challenged or unintentionally violated the prevailing norms of white supremacy. Rufus Moncrief made one such mistake when, on his way home from work, he encountered a group of white men. He did not display the expected humble demeanor and seemed reluctant to pull off his hat to them when they spoke to him. The men beat him badly and severed Moncrief's limbs with a saw. They dragged what remained of him to a nearby tree and strung him up as they continued to mutilate his body. For good measure, they hung Moncrief's dog next to him and then informed Moncrief's wife that she would find two black puppies hanging by a tree and ordered her to remove them quickly or her farm would be burned to the ground. The 80-year-old woman cut the bodies down and placed them in a large oats bag for burial.

For some, "nigger killing" simply became a sport; its popularity prompted a black newspaper in 1911 to call it "The National Pastime." Like any other amusement or recreational diversion,

lynching, said Walter White, secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) until 1955, provided whites with a welcome escape from "the endless routine of drab working hours and more drab home life."

In Augusta, Georgia, in 1890, a black man was found one morning in the street, his body riddled with bullets. Suspecting that a certain group of men may have been responsible, a white resident asked one of them, "Pat, who killed that nigger?" "Oh, some of the boys," he responded, with a grin. "What did they do it for?" the resident asked. "Oh, because he was a nigger," Pat replied.

If lynchings were calculated to intimidate the black community, whites succeeded. But at the same time, it exposed black men and women—in ways they would never forget—to the moral character of the white community. The impression conveyed was not so much the racial superiority of whites as their enormous capacity for savagery and cowardice.

A 1937 poem by Sterling A. Brown contained these lines:

They got the judges  
They got the lawyers  
They got the jury rolls  
They got the law  
They don't come by ones  
They got the sheriffs  
They got the deputies  
They don't come by twos  
They got the shotguns  
They got the rope  
We git the justice  
In the end  
And they come by tens.

It says much of the desperation of many blacks at the time that some chose to find a sign of hope in the intensity of white violence and repression. From his extensive investigations, Walter White concluded that "lynching is...an expression of southern fear of Negro progress." Lynching, in this view, suggested the refusal of black men and women to submit with equanimity to white repression. None other than Frederick Douglass suggested in 1892 that the racial violence and lynchings may actually be "a favorable symptom." He wrote, "It is proof that the Negro was not standing still. He is not dead, but alive and active. He is not drifting with the current, but manfully resisting it and fighting his way to better conditions than those of the past, and better than those which popular opinion prescribes for him.... The enemies of the Negro see that he is making progress and they naturally wish to stop him and keep him in just what they consider his proper place."

Henry M. Turner argued in 1904 that the extraordinary amount of attention and energy expended in holding down black southerners refuted most compellingly the charge of black inferiority: "More laws have been enacted by the different legislatures of the country, and more judicial decisions have been delivered and proclaimed against this piece of inferiority called Negro than have been issued against any people since time began." Based on the attempts to suppress the



race, Turner concluded, "it would appear that the Negro is the greatest man on earth."

What had alarmed the white South during Reconstruction was not evidence of black failure but evidence of black success, evidence of black assertion, independence, and advancement, evidence of black men learning the uses of political power. The closer the black man got to the ballot box, one observer noted, the more he looked like a rapist.

Even as whites scorned black incompetence, they feared evidence of black competence and independence. Even as whites derided blacks for their ignorance, they resented educated, literate, ambitious, and successful blacks. The Negro as a buffoon, a menial, a servant, was acceptable; that kind of Negro threatened no one. The violence inflicted on black people was often selective, aimed at educated and successful blacks, those who owned farms and stores, those suspected of having saved their earnings, those who had just made a crop—that is, black men and women perceived by whites as having stepped out of their place, "trying to be white."

Early in the twentieth century, black activists sought to arouse public opinion about the lynching epidemic in the South. Ida B. Wells mobilized public opinion early in the century, as did the newly organized NAACP. Within the South, some whites stepped forward to challenge lynchings, most notably the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, established by Jessie Daniel Ames in 1930. Both black and white activists worked in the 1930s for federal anti-lynching legislation, but not even a liberal president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was willing to endanger his southern white support by endorsing such legislation.

So, through the first three decades of the twentieth century, the mechanisms regulating the place of black men and women remained mostly intact. The number of lynchings decreased significantly after 1930 but did not cease. Nor did the intensity of the brutality toward black southerners diminish. The more spectacular lynching murders—Claude Neal in Marianna, Florida, in 1934; Cleo Wright in Sikeston, Missouri, in 1942; George W. Dorsey and Roger Malcolm and their wives in Monroe, Georgia, in 1946; Willie Earle in Pickens, North Carolina, in 1947; Emmet Till in Money, Mississippi, in 1955; Mack Charles Parker in Poplarville, Mississippi, in 1959—foreshadowed a new wave of terrorist killings that would erupt as whites used every means at their disposal to maintain their supremacy in the face of an emboldened and enlarged civil rights movement. Between 1961 and 1965, for example, 21 civil rights murders were recorded in the Deep South, and not one white man was convicted of murder in any of the crimes.

*Without Sanctuary* is a grim reminder that a part of the American past we would prefer to forget we need very much to remember. It is part of our history, part of our heritage. The lynchings and terrorism carried out in the name of racial supremacy cannot be put to rest, if only because the issues they raise about the fragility of freedom and the pervasiveness of racism in American society are still very much with us. ■