

Lynching at the Curve

Ida B. Wells

Introduction

Lynching refers to a murder at the hands of a vigilante mob without legal consequence, usually justified as necessary for public safety. Lynchings dramatically increased following the end of Reconstruction, peaking in the 1890s when 1,450 people were lynched throughout the country. The majority of lynchings occurred in the southern states where domestic terrorism like lynching worked in tandem with the local and state government. Any African American who challenged segregation or refused to engage in the demeaning behavior expected by white southerners faced the possibility of a public murder at the hands of an angry mob. Mississippi led the country in lynching – 581 lynchings between 1882-1968, followed by Georgia (531), Texas (493), Louisiana (391), and Alabama (347).

The vast majority of lynching victims were black men, especially in the South. A significant number of black women were lynched as well, most accused of having an inappropriate sexual relationship with a white man. Black men constituted the majority of lynchings in the rest of the country as well, although white men involved in the labor movement or identified (correctly or not) as communist or socialist were lynched in almost equal number. Outside of the 1890s, the worst year on record for lynching was 1919 – the year after World War I ended and the first Red Scare reached its height. It was also the year black veterans returned from fighting in Europe “to keep the world safe for democracy” and hoping for democracy at home.

White southerners often justified lynchings as the only way to protect white womanhood. Black men were frequently accused after their deaths of having raped a white woman. In almost all cases, however, it was “a bare lie,” as Ida B. Wells wrote in a newspaper editorial in 1892. Wells was born a slave in Holly Springs, Mississippi in 1862, the year before the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect. Her parents, both formerly enslaved, became active in Reconstruction politics, particularly the fledgling Republican Party in Mississippi. After her parents died when she was 16 years old, Wells moved to Memphis, Tennessee where she worked as a teacher and raised her three younger siblings. While in Memphis, she founded a newspaper called the Memphis Free Press. She frequently wrote articles and editorials in the Free Press shining light on the violence and lawlessness the black community faced in a segregated society.

In 1892, Wells wrote a scathing editorial recounting the lynching of three of her friends at the hands of a white mob a few days earlier. In retaliation, a white mob burned her newspaper office and printing press to the ground while she was

visiting Mississippi overnight. Fearing for her own life as well as her siblings, Wells moved to Chicago where she published a collection of her essays about lynching in the South based on her own research during the two years prior.

Her book, Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases, was the first to describe the extended process of lynching from the accusation leveled at a black man (or men), the arrest and complicity of law enforcement, description of the lynching in gruesome detail, and the aftermath of the lynching. White northerners were shocked by her account, to the point where many did not believe they were as horrific as Wells' description. "Lynching at the Curve," the first essay in her book, made Wells' a respected public intellectual, writer, and political activist on par with Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Wells published her book in 1892, three years before Washington's Atlanta Speech. Few people knew who DU Bois was in 1892 – he was at Harvard finishing his PhD when Wells' fled Memphis for Chicago because of her book. Below is an excerpt from her groundbreaking essay¹.

Primary Source

While I was thus carrying on the work of my newspaper, happy in the thought that our influence was helping people and that I was doing the work I loved and had proved that I could make a living out of it, there came the lynching in Memphis which changed the whole course of my life.

Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart owned and operated a grocery store in a thickly populated suburb. Moss was a letter carrier and could only be at the store at night. Everybody in town knew and loved Tommie. An exemplary young man, he was married and the father of one little girl, Maurine, whose godmother I was. He and his wife Betty were the best friends I had in town. And he believed, with me, that we should defend the cause of right and fight wrong whenever we saw it.

He delivered mail at the office of the *Free Speech*, and whatever Tommie knew in the way of news we got first. He owned his little home, and having saved his money he went into the grocery business with the same ambition that a young white man would have had. He was the president of the company. His partners ran the business in the daytime.

They had located their grocery in the district known as the "Curve" because the streetcar line curved sharply at that point. There was already a grocery owned and operated by a white man who hitherto had had a monopoly on the trade of this thickly populated colored suburb. Thomas's

¹ Booker T. Washington donated a significant amount of money to Wells' Anti-Lynching campaign. Du Bois recruited her to be one of the founding members of the NAACP. Nevertheless, both men – and many other African Americans – thought Wells too radical to be effective. During WWI, the brand-new Federal Bureau of Investigations placed her and her family (she married in 1895 and had four children while carrying on with her activism, writing, and publishing) under surveillance, labelling her a "race traitor." Full text of [Southern Horrors](#), including the excerpt provided here, is believed to be in the public domain. Her autobiography, [Crusade for Justice](#), was discovered and published in 1971 (40 years after her death in 1931).

grocery changed all that, and he and his associates were made to feel that they were not welcome by the white grocer. The district being mostly colored and many of the residents belonging either to Thomas's church or to his lodge, he was not worried by the white grocer's hostility.

One day some colored and white boys quarreled over a game of marbles and the colored boys got the better of the fight which followed. The father of the white boys whipped the victorious colored boy, whose father and friends pitched in to avenge the grown white man's flogging of a colored boy. The colored men won the fight, whereupon the white father and grocery keeper swore out a warrant for the arrest of the colored victors. Of course, the colored grocery keepers had been drawn in to the dispute. But the case was dismissed with nominal fines. Then the challenge was issued that the vanquished whites were coming on Saturday night to clean out the People's Grocery Company.

...Accordingly, the grocery company armed several men and stationed them in the rear of the store on that fatal Saturday night, not to attack but repel a threatened attack. And Saturday night was the time when men of both races congregated in their respective groceries². About ten o'clock that night, when Thomas was posting his books for the week and Calvin McDowell and his clerk were waiting on customers preparatory to closing, shots rang out in the back room of the store. The men stationed there had seen several white men stealing through the rear door and fired on them without a moment's pause. Three of these men were wounded, and others fled and gave the alarm.

Sunday morning's paper came out with lurid headlines telling how officers of the law³ had been wounded while in the discharge of their duties, hunting up criminals whom they had been told were harbored in the People's Grocery Company, this being "a low dive in which drinking and gambling were carried on: a resort of thieves and thugs." So ran the description in the leading white journals of Memphis of this successful effort of decent black men to carry on a legitimate business. The same newspaper told the arrest and jailing of the proprietor of the store and many of the colored people. They predicted that it would go hard with the ringleaders if these "officers" should die. The tale of the peaceful homes of that suburb were raided on that quiet Sunday morning by police pretending to be looking for others who were implicated in what the papers had a conspiracy, has been often told. Over a hundred colored men were dragged from their homes and put in jail on suspicion.

All day long on that fateful Sunday white men were permitted in the jail to look over the imprisoned black men. Frenzied descriptions and hearsays were detailed in the papers, which fed the fires of sensationalism. Groups of white men gathered on the street corners and meeting places to discuss the awful crime of Negroes shooting white men.

² Here's where the Vagrancy Law, now part of the segregation laws, were most effective. A group of men gathering on a Saturday night to play cards, have some drinks smoke some cigarettes, and generally relax for a short time. The same thing the men at the white grocery store were doing. Black men out on a Saturday night in Memphis, however, were subject to the same laws we read in the Black Codes, meaning they could be arrested just for being there.

³ The newspaper referred to the mob of white men as "officers of the law."

There had been no lynchings in Memphis since the Civil War, but the colored people felt that anything might happen during the excitement⁴...The manhood which these Negroes represented went to the county jail and kept watch Sunday night. This they did also on Monday night, guarding the jail to see that nothing happened to the colored men during this time of race prejudice, while it was thought that the wounded white men might die. On Tuesday following, the newspapers which had fanned the flame of race prejudice announced that the wounded men would recover. The colored men who had guarded the jail for two nights felt that the crisis was past and that they need not guard the jail a third night.

While they slept, a body of picked men was admitted to the jail, which was a modern Bastille⁵. The mob took out of their cells Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart, the three officials of the People's Grocery Company. They were loaded on a switch engine of the railroad which ran back of the jail, carried a mile north of the city limits, and horribly shot to death. One of the morning papers held back its edition in order to supply its readers with the details of that lynching.

From its columns was gleaned the above information, together with details which told that "It is said that Tom Moss begged for his life for the sake of his wife and child and his unborn baby;" that when asked if he had anything to say, told them to "tell my people to West – there is no justice for them here;" that Calvin McDowell got hold of one of the guns of the lynchers and because they could not loosen his grip a shot was fired into of McDowell's right hand had been shot to pieces and his eyes were gouged out. This proved that the one who wrote that news report was either an eyewitness or got the facts from someone who was.

The shock to the colored people who knew and loved both Moss and McDowell was beyond description. Groups of them went to the grocery and elsewhere and vented their feelings in talking among themselves, but they offered no violence. Word was brought the city hall that Negroes were massing at the "Curve" where the grocery had been located. Immediately an order was issued by the judge of the criminal court sitting on the bench, who told the sheriff to "take a hundred men, go to the Curve at once, and shoot down on sight any Negro who appears to be making trouble."

The loafers around the courts quickly spread the news, and gangs of them rushed into the hardware stores, armed themselves, boarded the cars⁶ and rushed out to the Curve. They obeyed the judge's orders literally and shot into any group of Negroes they saw with as little compunction as if they had been on a hunting trip. The only reason hundreds of Negroes were not killed on that day by the mobs was because of the forbearance of the colored men. They

⁴ While lynching was usually a public event, no one documented the murders as lynchings until Ida B. Wells published *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States*, in 1895, containing 14 pages of statistics related to lynching between 1892 (when the Memphis lynchings occurred) and 1895, as well as details about the people who were murdered.

We know now that dozens of lynchings happened in Memphis following the Civil War, including a [riot in 1866](#), which killed 46 African Americans and two white people.

⁵ The Bastille was a medieval fortress (fortified castle) on the edge of Paris, France used as a prison during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

⁶ Train cars.

realized their helplessness and submitted to outrages and insults for the sake of those depending upon them.

This mob took possession of the People's Grocery Company, helping themselves to food and drink, and destroyed what they could not eat or steal. The creditors had the place closed and a few days later what remained of the stock was sold at auction. Thus, with the aid of city and county authorities and the daily papers, that white grocer had indeed put an end to his rival Negro grocer as well as to his business....

Like many another person who had read of lynchings in the South, I had accepted the idea meant to be conveyed—that although lynching was irregular and contrary to law and order, unreasoning anger over the terrible crime of rape led to the lynching; that perhaps the brute deserved death anyhow and the mob was justified in taking his life.

But Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell and Henry Stewart had been lynched in Memphis, one of the leading cities of the South, in which no lynching had taken place before, with just as much brutality as other victims of the mob; and they had committed no crime against white women. This is what opened my eyes to what lynching really was. An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and "keep the nigger down."

I then began an investigation of every lynching I read about. I stumbled on the amazing record that every case of rape reported in that three months became such only when it became public. Many cases were like that of the lynching which happened in Tunica County, Mississippi. The Associated Press reporter said, "The big burly brute was lynched because he had raped the seven-year-old daughter of the sheriff." I visited the place afterward and saw the girl, who was a grown woman more than seventeen years old. She had been found in the lynched Negro's cabin by her father, who had led the mob against him in order to save his daughter's reputation. That Negro was a helper on the farm.

In Natchez, Mississippi, one of the most beautiful homes of one of the leaders of society was pointed out to me. I was told the story of how the mistress of that home had given birth to a child unmistakably dark, and how her colored coachman left town on hearing the news. The *Memphis Scimitar* published the story of how a young girl who had made a mistake had been awaiting confinement in the home kind-hearted women provided for such cases; how she, too, had given birth to a colored child, and because she would not tell the name of her 'rapist' she was bundled out of the home to the public ward of the county hospital.

I also had the sworn statement of a mother whose son had been lynched that he had left the place where he worked because of the advances made by the beautiful daughter of the house. The boy had fallen under her spell, and met her often until they were discovered and the cry of rape was raised. A handsome young mulatto, he too had been horribly lynched for "rape." It was with these and other stories in mind in that last week in May 1892 that I wrote the following editorial:

Eight Negroes lynched since last issue of the Free Speech. They were charged with killing white men and five with raping white women. Nobody in this section

*believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men assault white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will overreach themselves and a conclusion will be drawn which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women*⁷.

This editorial furnished at last the excuse for doing what the white leaders of Memphis had long been wanting to do: put an end to the *Free Speech*. The paper appeared the Saturday after I left home. On the following Monday morning the *Commercial Appeal* appeared, reproducing that editorial in the first column on the editorial page, and called on the chivalrous white men of Memphis to do something to avenge this insult to the honor of white women. “the black wretch who had written that foul lie should be tied to a stake of the corner of Main and Madison streets, a pair of tailor’s shears used on him and he should then be burned at the stake.”

This editorial was written by a man named Carmack...the people of Memphis met in the Cotton Exchange Building the same Monday evening after the appearance of the heated editorial. There was much speech making, led by Mr. Carmack and others. As a result, a committee was sent to the *Free Speech* office by this gathering of leading men. This committee destroyed our type and furnishings, and then put out a notice of warning.⁸

Having lost my paper, had a price put on my life, and been made an exile from home for hinting at the truth, I felt that I owed it to myself and to my race to tell the whole truth now that I was where I could do so freely. Accordingly, the fourth week in June, the *New York Age* had a seven-column article on the front page giving names, dates and places of many lynchings for alleged rape. This article showed conclusively that my editorial in the *Free Speech* was based on facts of illicit association between black men and white women.

Such relationships between white men and colored women were notorious, and had been as long as the two races had lived together in the South. This was so much a fact that such unions had bleached a large percentage of the Negro race, and filled it with the offspring of these unions. These children were and are known as mulattoes, quadroons, and octoroons.

Many stories of the antebellum South were based upon such relationships. It has been frequently charged in narrative of slave times that these white fathers often sold their mulatto and quadroon children...All my life I had known that such conditions were accepted as a matter of course. I found that this rape of helpless Negro girls and women, which began in slavery days, still continued without let or hinderance, check or reproof from church, state, or press until there had been created this race within a race – and all designated by the inclusive term of “colored.”

⁷ This is why many people – black and white – who supported Wells’ Anti-Lynching crusade, thought she was too radical. Unlike Washington, Du Bois, or any other black regardless of how respected they were, could never publicly hold white women accountable for their part in lynching. Wells, however, made her career on speaking truth to power regardless of the consequences.

⁸ Edward Carmack was editor of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* during the 1890s, and served as a US Senator from 1901-1907. In 1908, Carmack was shot in the street by rival newspaper editor Duncan Brown Cooper after Carmack shot Cooper’s son first. Cooper was pardoned, and the city of Memphis put a statue of Carmack in front of the statehouse that still stands today, despite his role in instigating the murders of Moss, McDowell, and Stewart. The [Memphis Commercial Appeal](#) published an interesting article about Carmack and Cooper in 2015.

I also found that what the white man of the South practiced as all right for himself, he assumed to be unthinkable in white women. They could and did fall in love with the pretty mulatto and quadroon girls as well as black ones, but they professed an inability to imagine white women doing the same thing with a Negro or mulatto men. Whenever they did so and were found out, the cry of rape was raised, and the lowest element of the white South was turned loose to wreak its fiendish cruelty on those too weak to help themselves.

No torture of helpless victims by heathen savages or cruel red Indians ever exceed the cold-blooded savagery of white devils under lynch law. None of the hideous murders by butchers of Nero to make a Roman holiday exceeded these burnings alive of black human beings⁹. This was done by white men who controlled all the force of law and order in their communities and who could have legally punished rapists and murderers, especially black men who had neither political power nor financial strength with which to evade any justly deserved fate.

Here came lynch law to stifle Negro manhood which defended itself, and the burning alive of Negroes who were weak enough to accept favors from white women. The many unspeakable and unprintable tortures to which Negro rapists(?) of white women were subjected were for the purpose of striking terror into the hearts of other Negroes who might be thinking of consorting with willing white women.

The more I studied the situation, the more I was convinced that the Southerner had never gotten over his resentment that the Negro was no longer his plaything, his servant, and his source of income. The federal laws for Negro protection passed during Reconstruction had been made a mockery by the white South where it had not secured their repeal. This same white South had secured political control of its several states, and as soon as white southerners came into power they began to make playthings of Negro lives and property. This still seemed not enough "to keep the nigger down."

I found that in order to justify these horrible atrocities to the world, the Negro was being branded as a race of rapists, who were especially mad after white women. I found that whom men who had created a race of mulattoes by raping and consorting with Negro women were still doing so where ever they could, these same white men lynched, burned and tortured Negro men for doing the same thing with white women; even when the white women were willing "victims."

It seemed horrible to me that death in its most terrible forms should be meted out to the Negro who was weak enough to take chances when accepting the invitations of these white women; but that the entire race should be branded as moral monsters and despoilers of white womanhood and

⁹ Nero was Emperor of Roman from 54-68 CE. Nero lived an extraordinarily lavish life, even by Roman Emperor standards. He would invite hundreds of people to one of his many palaces where they would indulge in just about every pleasure principle known (sex, drugs, alcohol, indulgent and often cruel activities). Nero was also a brutal dictator who demanded fealty from his family, friends, advisors, and subjects. Four years before he committed suicide in 68, a massive fire broke out in Rome and destroyed whole sections of the city. The fire went on for weeks. After the fire subsided, Nero and his court undertook a massive rebuilding project, including a new palace for emperor Nero – the largest ever built by an Emperor. Many Romans accused Nero of letting certain parts of Rome burn down so he could reshape the city for his own needs. Critics claimed Nero "fiddling while Rome burned" so he could build his palace and other monuments to himself.

childhood was bound to rob us of all the friends we had and silence any protests that they might make for us.

For all these reasons it seemed a stern duty to give the facts I had collected to the world...