

WITHOUT

LYNCHING PHOTOGRAPHY IN AMERICA

SANCTUARY

James Allen

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Congressman John Lewis

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HELLHOUNDS

by *Leon F. Litwack*

From the Mississippi Delta in the early twentieth century, Robert Johnson, a black bluesman, articulated a lonely and terrifying sense of personal betrayal and anguish that transcended both time and region. With his songs and guitar licks, his chilling and relentless matter-of-factness, he suggested a society impossible to change or overcome and a new generation of interior exiles like himself, exiles in their own land, empty of belief or hope, vulnerable, without sanctuary.

*I got to keep moving, I got to keep moving
blues falling down like hail
blues falling down like hail
Uumb, 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.*

On a Sunday afternoon, April 23, 1899, more than two thousand 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 (some reported he had tried to collect wages already owed him) and for permission to visit his ill mother. The planter refused, precipitating a harsh exchange of words. On the following day, while Hose chopped wood, 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. Within two days, newspapers reported an altogether different version. Cranford had been eating dinner when Hose—"a monster in human form"—sneaked 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 some in the crowd plunged knives into the victim's flesh, others watched "with unfeigning satisfaction" (as one reporter noted) the contortions of Sam Hose's body as the flames rose, distorting his features, causing his eyes to bulge out of their sockets, and rupturing his veins. The only sounds that came from the victim's lips, even as his blood sizzled in the fire, were, "Oh, my God! Oh, Jesus." Before Hose's body had even 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. Shortly after the lynching, one of the participants reportedly left for the state capitol, hoping to deliver a slice of Sam Hose's heart to the governor of Georgia, who would call Sam Hose's deeds "the most diabolical in the annals of crime."

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,*" and one prominent Georgia woman, Rebecca Felton, gave voice to that sentiment: "*The premeditated outrage on Mrs. Cranford was infinitely more intolerable than the murder of her husband.*" As for Hose, Felton claimed any "*true-hearted husband or father*" would have happily dispatched the "*beast,*" with no more concern than if he were shooting down a mad dog; indeed, "*The dog is more worthy of sympathy.*"

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, homeloving and just. There is among them no foreign or lawless element.*" The newspaper then provided the "facts" of Hose's alleged offenses, rendering his fate that much more explicable. "*When the picture is printed of the ravisher in flames, go back and view that darker picture of Mrs. Cranford outraged in the blood of her murdered husband.*"

In a subsequent investigation, conducted by a white detective, Cranford's wife revealed that Hose had come to the house to pick up his wages and the two men had quarreled.

When her husband went for his revolver, Hose, in self-defense, picked up and hurled the ax, which killed Cranford instantly. Hose then fled the scene. He never entered the house, she told the detective, nor did he assault her. Still another investigation, conducted by Ida B. Wells, a black journalist who had been driven from Memphis in 1892 for her "*incendiary*" editorials on lynching, reached the same conclusions. The results of neither investigation were of any apparent interest to the white press or presumably to the white public.'

Thousands of black men and women met the same fate. Varying only in degrees of torture and brutality, these 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 such lurid headlines as "COLORED MAN ROASTED ALIVE," describing in graphic detail the slow and methodical agony and death of the victim and devising a vocabulary that would befit the occasion. The public burning of a Negro would soon be known as a "*Negro Barbecue,*" reinforcing the perception of blacks as less than human.

The use of the camera to memorialize

lynchings testified to their openness and to the self-righteousness that animated the participants. Not only did photographers capture the execution itself, but also the carnival-like atmosphere and the expectant mood of the crowd, as in the lynching of Thomas Brooks in Fayette County, Tennessee, in 1915:

Hundreds of kodaks clicked all morning at the scene of the lynching. People in automobiles and carriages came from miles around to view the corpse dangling from the end of a rope. . . . Picture card photographers installed a portable printing plant at the bridge and reaped a harvest in selling postcards showing a photograph of the lynched Negro. Women and children were there by the score. At a number of country schools the day's routine was delayed until boy and girl pupils could get back from viewing the lynched man.²

During a lynching at Durant, Oklahoma, in 1911, the exuberant and proud lynchers bound their victim to some planks and posed around him while photographers recorded the scene. A black-owned newspaper in Topeka, Kansas, in printing the photograph, wanted every black newspaper to do likewise, so that *"the world may see and know what semi-barbarous America is doing."* Many photographs of lynchings and burnings (such as the burning of Sam Hose)

would reappear as popular picture postcards and trade cards to commemorate the event. 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."*³

Some thirty years after emancipation, between 1890 and 1920, in response to perceptions of a New Negro born in freedom, undisciplined by slavery, and unschooled in proper racial etiquette, and in response to growing doubts that this new generation could be trusted to stay in its place without legal and extra-legal force, the white South denied blacks a political voice, imposed rigid patterns of racial segregation (Jim Crow), sustained an economic system—sharecropping and tenantry—that left little room for ambition or hope, refused blacks equal educational resources, and disseminated racial caricatures and pseudo-scientific theories that reinforced and comforted whites in their racist beliefs and practices.

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 or relieve their fears of “uppity,” “troublesome,” ambitious, and independent-minded black men and women who had not yet learned the rituals of deference and submission. The quality of the racial violence that gripped the South made it distinctive in this nation’s history. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, 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 black. 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. As many if not more blacks were victims of legal lynchings (speedy trials and executions), private white violence, and “nigger bunts,” murdered by a variety of means in isolated rural sections and dumped into rivers and creeks.

Even an accurate body count of black lynching victims could not possibly reveal how hate and fear transformed ordinary white men and women into mindless murderers and sadistic torturers, or the savagery that, with increasing regularity, characterized assaults on black men and women in the name of restraining their savagery and depravity. Nothing so dramatically or forcefully underscored the cheapness of black life in the South. The way one black Mississippian recalled white violence in the 1930s applied as accurately and even more pervasively to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “*Back in those days, to kill a Negro wasn’t nothing. 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.’*” Whatever their value as laborers, black people were clearly expendable and replaceable. “In those days it was ‘*Kill a mule, buy another. Kill a nigger, hire another.*’” a black southerner remembered. “*They had to have a license to kill anything but a nigger. We was always in season.*”⁴

The cheapness of black life reflected in turn the degree to which so many whites by the early twentieth century had come to think of black men and women as inherently and permanently inferior, as less than human, as

little more than animals. "*We Southern people don't care to equal ourselves with animals,*" a white Floridian told a northern critic. "*The people of the South don't think any more of killing the black fellows than you would think of killing a flea . . . and if I was to live 1,000 years that would be my opinion and every other Southern man.*" A former governor of Georgia, William J. Northen, after canvassing his state in the interest of law and order, found the same disregard for black life. "*I was amazed to find scores and hundreds of men who believed the Negro to be a brute, without responsibility to God, and his slaughter nothing more than the killing of a dog.*"⁵

Lynching was hardly a new phenomenon. For many decades, it had served as a means of extra-legal justice in the Far West and Midwest, and most of the victims had been white, along with numbers of American Indians, Mexicans, Asians, and blacks. 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. During slavery, blacks had been exposed to violence on the plantations and farms where they worked and from the patrollers if they ventured off those plantations. The financial investment each slave represented had operated to some degree as a protective shield for blacks

accused of crimes, but in the event of an insurrection—real or imagined—whites had used murder, decapitation, burning, and lynching to punish suspected rebels and impress upon all blacks the dangers of resistance.

The violence meted out to blacks after emancipation and during Reconstruction, including mob executions designed to underscore the limits of black freedom, anticipated to a considerable degree the wave of murder and terrorism that would sweep across the South two decades later and become one of its unmistakable trademarks. What was strikingly new and different 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.*"⁶

The story of a lynching, then, is more than the simple fact of a black man or woman hanged by the neck. It is the story of slow, methodical, sadistic, often highly inventive forms of torture and mutilation. If executed by fire, it is the red-hot poker applied to the eyes and genitals and the stench of burning flesh, as the body slowly roasts over the flames and the blood sizzles in the heat. If executed by hanging, it is the convulsive movement of the limbs. Whether by fire or rope, it is the dismemberment and distribution of severed bodily parts as favors and souvenirs to participants and the crowd: teeth, ears, toes, fingers, nails, kneecaps, bits of charred skin and bones. Such human trophies might reappear as watch fobs or be displayed conspicuously for public viewing. The severed knuckles of Sam Hose, for

example, would be prominently displayed in the window of a grocery store in Atlanta.⁷ The brutalities meted out in these years often exceeded the most vivid of imaginations. After learning of the lynching of her husband, Mary Turner—in her eighth month of pregnancy—vowed to find those responsible, swear out warrants against them, and have them punished in the courts. For making such a threat, a mob of several hundred men and women determined to "*teach her a lesson.*" After tying her ankles together, they hung her from a tree, head downward. Dousing her clothes with gasoline, they burned them from her body. 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.*"⁸

Apprehended for allegedly killing his white employer, Luther Holbert and his wife found themselves subjected to mob justice in Doddsville, Mississippi, in 1904. Some one thousand people stood and watched as the self-appointed executioners went about their business, engaging in the increasingly familiar ritual of torture, mutilation, and murder. A reporter for the *Vicksburg Evening Post* described the execution of the Holberts.

When the two Negroes were captured, they were tied to trees and while the funeral pyres were being prepared they were forced to suffer the most fiendish tortures. The blacks were forced to hold out their hands while one finger at a time was chopped off. The fingers were distributed as souvenirs. The ears of the murderers were cut off. Holbert was beaten severely, his skull was fractured and one of his eyes, knocked out with a stick, hung by a shred from the socket...The most excruciating form of punishment consisted in the use of a large corkscrew in the hands of some of the mob. This instrument was bored into the flesh of the man and woman, in the arms, legs and body, and then pulled out, the spirals tearing out big pieces of raw, quivering flesh every time it was withdrawn.

Holbert and his employer had quarreled before the murder, but there was no evidence

to implicate Holbert's wife. Two blacks, mistaken for Luther Holbert, had already been slain by a posse.⁹

When a mob meted out lynch justice in Fort White, Florida, in 1893, they did so with a ferocity that was becoming all too typical. Trains brought in additional participants and spectators from surrounding cities. After a mock trial, the prolonged execution began. "Every one knew what the crowd meant," a resident noted afterwards, "but no one expected such horrible butchery." They sawed at his throat, cut off both his ears, cut out one eye, and stuffed handkerchiefs in the victim's mouth to stifle his "awful screams." Stabbing him repeatedly, the lynchers came close to cutting out his backbone. He was then dragged two blocks before the crowd emptied their guns into his body. One year earlier, near Memphis, the same kind of violence had been inflicted on Lee Walker, removed from the county jail and hanged from a telegraph pole after his skin had been cut to ribbons by the mob. As Walker swung on the pole, blood streaming down his body from the knife wounds, the crowd hurled expletives at him. "The Negro died hard," one observer wrote. "The neck was not broken, . . . and death came by strangulation. For fully ten

minutes after he was strung up the chest heaved occasionally and there were convulsive movements of the limbs." But the crowd had not finished. Throwing the body into a fire, they watched with "astonishing coolness and nonchalance" as it burned. Finally, the relic hunters moved in to retrieve portions of the rope and what was left of the charred body.¹⁰

Once having settled on lynch justice, mobs were not 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. A jury rendered the usual judgment in such cases, deciding she had come to her death at the hands of persons unknown.¹¹

Neither women nor entire families escaped the savagery of white mobs. Bessie McCroy, along with her son and daughter, were removed from a jail in Carroll County, Mississippi, and taken to the edge of town, where a crowd of five hundred men hanged

them and riddled their bodies with bullets. Members of a mob in Okemah, Oklahoma, entered the local jail to seize Laura Nelson, accused of murdering a sheriff, then raped the black woman before hanging her along with her teenage son. When a white farmer in Gray, Georgia, was found dead in his home, suspicion fell on Will Green and his seventeen-year-old son. Despite their pleas of innocence, a mob lynched both of them and riddled their bodies with bullets. Authorities subsequently determined that neither the father nor the son had anything to do with the farmer's death.¹²

The way whites in Monticello, Georgia, dealt with a black family in 1915 was no doubt meant as a warning to all blacks who dared to challenge white authority. When the local police chief came to the home of Daniel Barber to arrest him on a bootlegging charge, Barber and his family forcibly resisted the officer. After police subdued and arrested the Barbers, some two hundred enraged whites stormed the jail and dragged Barber, his son, and his two married daughters to a tree in the very center of the black district. The mob chose to hang the entire family, one by one. Daniel Barber had to watch each of his children die before the noose was tightened around his neck.¹³

When permitted to speak before being lynched, some of the victims professed their guilt and asked for forgiveness, while others protested their innocence. Many simply tried to make peace with their God. Before his burning, Henry Noles of Winchester, Tennessee, confessed his crime and asked his friends to “*meet him in glory.*” He mounted the stump “*stolidly*” and laughed as he told the mob, “*Tell all my sisters and brothers to meet me in glory. I am going to make that my home. Tell my mother to meet me where parting will be no more.*” Taken from the stump, he was then chained to a tree and his body saturated with oil. Soon “*the quivering body was enveloped in flames.*” A lynch mob in Cuthbert, Georgia, agreed to the victim’s request that they take his picture and send it to his sister. She collapsed upon receiving the photo showing him hanging on a tree. Jesse Washington, a black youth, pleaded his innocence with the lynch mob (he had been retried after a judge had expressed doubt over a guilty verdict), 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.*”¹⁴

The degree to which whites came to accept lynching as justifiable homicide was best revealed in how they learned to differentiate between “*good*” lynchings and “*bad*” lynchings. A newspaper reported the execution of Elmo Curl, at Mastadon, Mississippi, as “*a most orderly affair, conducted by the bankers, lawyers, farmers, and merchants of that county. The best people of the county, as good as there are anywhere, simply met there and hanged Curl without a sign of rowdyism. 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. When a mob made up of “*prominent citizens,*” including a member of the South Carolina state legislature, lynched a black man near Charleston, the local newspaper thought it had been done in the “*most approved and up-to-date fashion.*”¹⁵

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 two thou-

sand 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. 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, and 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 life time. Five thousand Texans are irremediably debased."*¹⁶

Even some ordinarily unsympathetic white Mississippians thought the lynching of Lloyd Clay in Vicksburg in 1919 might have been misguided. A twenty-two-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 one thousand 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."*¹⁷

Some executions were more spectacular than others, but none of them were particularly exceptional. If Sam Hose's execution appeared prominently in the southern press, hundreds of lynchings were accorded only a brief mention, particularly as they became routine affairs by the end of the century, requiring no more notice or comment in some newspapers than the daily weather.

"Now-a-days," 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 its merits, basing any verdict on 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.¹⁸

It became convenient for some whites and portions of the press to blame lynching on lower-class whites. Although the "best people," like other whites, took for granted the inferiority of blacks, they were said to be more paternalistic and less likely to carry their

views to a violent conclusion. "Ravaging mobs are not composed of gentlemen," affirmed Atlanta's leading newspaper. But the evidence suggested otherwise. Perhaps "rednecks," "crackers," and "peckerwoods" played a more public role in lynchings, but they often did so with the tacit approval and at times the active and zealous participation of upper- and middle-class whites. Exceptions existed among all classes, but invariably "gentlemen" and "ladies," especially the newer generation of whites who had grown up after the Civil War, were no more sympathetic to black people and their aspirations than lower-class whites. If they sometimes displayed a greater sympathy, they felt less of a threat to their exalted position in southern society.

Drawn from all classes in southern white society, from the "rednecks" to the "best people," lynchers came together in an impressive show of racial and community solidarity. Neither crazed fiends nor the dregs of white society, the bulk of the lynchers tended to be ordinary and respectable people, few of whom had any difficulty justifying their atrocities in the name of maintaining the social and racial order and the purity of the Anglo-Saxon race. The mobs who meted out "summary justice"¹⁹ were pronounced by one Georgian as "composed of our best citizens,

who are foremost in all works of public and private good." In the same spirit, a Meridian, Mississippi, newspaper concluded, "*The men who do the lynchings . . . are not men who flout law but men who sincerely believe they have the best interest of their fellow men and women at heart.*"²⁰

Although some whites found lynchings unacceptable and barbaric, few of the perpetrators were ever brought to trial. Townspeople closed ranks to protect their own kind, thereby becoming partners in the crimes committed. 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 the vast majority of reported lynchings, the courts, coroners' juries, or other official bodies chosen to investigate the murders concluded routinely that black victims had met their deaths "*at the hands of unknown parties,*" "*at the hands of persons unknown,*" or "*by persons unknown to the jury.*" 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 favour his con-*

viction?" Seventy-six answered no, and the remaining thirty-four would certainly have weighed very carefully the consequences of rendering a guilty verdict.²¹

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. "*I directed every movement of the mob and I did everything I could to see that he was lynched.*" 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. The mob that carried out the grisly dismemberment of Willis Jackson in Honea Path, South Carolina, in 1911 was led by Joshua W. Ashleigh, who represented the district in the state legislature. His son, editor of the local newspaper, also participated in the lynching; 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*.”²²

If political leaders failed to act, judges, sheriffs, jailers, and local police often stood by helplessly during a lynching or, on occasion, actively participated in the ritual. It was not uncommon for members of a lynch mob to pose for news photographers with the sheriff and the intended victim. 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*.”²³

Before lynching two men in Morganton, North Carolina, in 1889, the mob held prayer services. That spoke quite eloquently to the degree to which lynchings took place in some of the most churchified communities of the South. If white churches showed a relative indifference to lynching violence, there were some compelling reasons. The lynch mobs often included their 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*.” Some clergymen, however, denounced lynchings, and a few took action. In Bulloch County, Georgia, the Rev. Whitely Langston expelled parishioners who had participated in a lynch mob—a most unpopular action that resulted in the loss of twenty-five members of the congregation. 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 hell-fire to save the lives of black ones from present burning in fires kindled by white Christians*.”²⁴

When whites condemned lynching, they seemed less concerned over the black victims than over the very real possibility that

white civilization itself was on trial. Even as whites could readily agree on the inferiority of blacks and the need to maintain white supremacy, some also perceived and expressed alarm over the destabilization of the social order and the descent of their region into anarchy and barbarism. "*The greater peril at this hour where outbreak and lawlessness are at the surface,*" a southern minister declared, "*is not that the negro will lose his skin, but that the Anglo-Saxon will lose his soul.*" The mayor of Statesboro, Georgia, like some of the more conscientious public officials, expressed alarm over the breakdown of law and order, even as he confessed his helplessness in preventing lynchings. "*If our grand jury won't indict these lynchers, if our petit juries won't convict, and if our soldiers won't shoot, what are we coming to?*"²⁵

But 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. Speaking to an audience at the University of Chicago, John Temple Graves, the influential Atlanta newspaper publisher, was swept up in a wave of emotion as he

sought to communicate the imminent peril facing every white female in the South. Under the circumstances, he likened the lynch mob to an "*engine of vengeance, monstrous, lawless, deplorable,*" but, nonetheless, "*the fiery terror of the criminal and the chief defense of woman.*"²⁶ Of course, if Graves's characterization of the imperiled white female had any merit, the epidemic of lynchings he condoned had obviously done nothing to enhance the woman's security. Nor would the eminent publisher have even contemplated the same mob justice being meted out to whites belonging to his own social class who were guilty of ravishing black women.

It took little time before a "*folk pornography*" emerged in the South, playing on themes from the past and adding some new dimensions.²⁷ To endorse lynching was to dwell on the sexual depravity of the black man, to raise the specter of the black beast seized by uncontrollable, savage, sexual passions that were inherent in the race. That is, the inhumanity, depravity, bestiality, and savagery practiced by white participants in lynchings would be justified in the name of humanity, morality, justice, civilization, and Christianity. And there was little reason to question the deep 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. This generation, a Memphis newspaper insisted, had “*lost in large measure the traditional and wholesome awe of the white race which kept the Negroes in subjection. . . . There is no longer a restraint upon the brute passion of the Negro.*”²⁸

Whites seemed incapable of grasping the fundamental hypocrisy that condemned black rape of white women and condoned or ignored white rape of black women. For a black man, sexual advances to a white woman, or what might be perceived as sexual advances, were a certain invitation to a tortured death. For a white man, the exploitation of a black woman for his sexual initiation or pleasure enjoyed community toleration. The most expedient way to dispose of the issue was to deny the existence

of the white rapist, as black women were said to give themselves willingly, even wantonly, to white men. Not all whites actually believed this argument, however, even if they routinely invoked it for public consumption. While condemning black rape in no uncertain terms, some whites suggested that blacks had been provoked not by white women but by white men taking liberties with black women and thereby inviting retaliation. When T. W. Walker, a Georgia black man, was sentenced to death for killing a wealthy white planter, the first news dispatches could find no reason for the attack; a black editor, however, charged that the planter had brutally assaulted Walker's wife. Before Walker could be removed from the courtroom, he was shot by the planter's brother; severely wounded, he was then hanged. The planter's brother escaped prosecution, but not the black editor, who was immediately arrested for libel.²⁹

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. What Walter White would call "*the Southern white woman's proneness to hysteria where Negroes are concerned*," based on his investigation of scores of lynchings, created situations of imagined rather than actual sexual assaults in which both innocent white and black lives were lost in the name of preserving the sanctity of white womanhood.⁴⁰

As long as blacks cast their "*lustful eyes on white women*," a Little Rock newspaper declared, and "*as long as any of them seek to break down the barrier that has been between the Negro and white man for a thousand years*," whites would not be "*slow or timid*" in the methods they employed to mete out an appropriate punishment. "*This may be 'Southern brutality' as far as the Boston Negro can see, but in polite circles, we call it Southern chivalry, a Southern virtue that will never die.*"⁴¹ But chivalry in defense of imperiled white womanhood was only a rationalization, not an explanation of the epidemic of mob murder that consumed the South. Rape and sexual indiscretion, in actuality, proved to be a relatively minor cause of mob violence. Of the nearly three thousand blacks known to have been lynched between 1889 and 1918, for example, only 19 percent were accused of rape. But in many 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 and improved means of communication, was invariably that a sexual crime by black men had precipitated it. "*Having created the Frankenstein monster (and it is no less terrifying because it is largely illusory)*," Walter White concluded, "*the lyncher lives in constant fear of his own creation.*"⁴²

The offenses which precipitated mob violence related less to sex-related crimes (as sensationalized in the press) than to questions of physical assault and murder (the most common charge), theft, arson, violations of the racial code, economic competition, and disputes over crop settlements. Many of the transgressions by blacks would have been regarded as relatively trivial if committed by whites and were not grounds anywhere else for capital punishment: using disrespectful, insulting, slanderous, boastful, threatening, or "*incendiary*" language; insubordination, impertinence, or improper demeanor (a sarcastic grin, laughing at the wrong time, a prolonged silence); refusing to take off one's hat to a white person or to give the right-of-way (to step aside) when encountering a white on the sidewalk; resisting assault by whites; "*being troublesome*

generally”; disorderly conduct, petty theft, or drunkenness; writing an improper (“*insulting*”) letter to a white person; paying undue or improper attention to a white female; accusing a white man of writing love letters to a black woman; or living or keeping company with a white woman; turning or refusing to turn state’s evidence; testifying or bringing suit against a white person; being related to a person accused of a crime and already lynched; political activities; union organizing; conjuring; discussing a lynching; gambling; operating a “*house of ill fame*”; a personal debt; refusing to accept an employment offer, “*jumping*” a labor contract; vagrancy; refusing to give up one’s farm; conspicuously displaying one’s wealth or property; and (in the eyes of whites) trying to act like a white man.³³

Victims of lynch mobs, more often than not, had challenged or unintentionally violated the prevailing norms of white supremacy, and these offenses ranged from the serious (in the eyes of whites) to the trivial. Charles Jones, a youth from Grovetown, Georgia, was lynched by 150 whites for stealing a pair of shoes and “*talking big*.” Henry Sykes was lynched in Okolona, Mississippi, for calling up white girls on the telephone and annoying them. A Texas youth

was jailed for writing an insulting letter to a young white woman; a mob broke into the jail and shot him to death. Jeff Brown accidentally brushed against a white girl as he was running to catch a train; a mob hanged him for “*attempted rape*.” For their “*utter worthlessness*,” John Shaw and George Call, two eighteen-year-old youths from Lynchburg, Virginia, were shot to death after the mob’s attempt to hang them failed.³⁴ A South Carolina editor acknowledged in 1917 that some three-fourths of lynchings were for “*trivial offenses*,” and sometimes entirely innocent men were “*butchered*.”³⁵

All too often, black southerners, innocent of any crime or offense, were victims of lynchings or burnings because they were black and in the wrong place at the wrong time. The only evidence against Jim Black, Thomas Ryor, and James Ford, implicated in the murder of the wife of a white farmer of Hendersonville, South Carolina, was that they had been spotted in the neighborhood; the three black youths were quickly lynched. The white farmer later confessed to murdering his wife and concealing her body. Fred and Jane Sullivan were accused of burning a barn; a mob lynched the couple, ignoring their four-year-old child. After emptying their guns into Bob Kennedy for assaulting a

white man, a mob discovered he was not the man wanted for the crime and immediately continued their chase for "*the guilty one.*"¹⁶

Men lynch most readily, a southern critic observed, when the black victim has "*offended that intangible something called 'racial superiority.'*" That offense, in fact, with no suggestion of sexual impropriety, precipitated scores of brutal lynchings. "*When a nigger gets ideas,*" a federal official in Wilkinson County, Mississippi, declared, "*the best thing to do is to get him under ground as quick as possible.*" 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 soon other whites joined in the attack, some of them severing 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 to a tree and ordered her to remove them quickly or the farm would be burned to the ground. The eighty-year-old woman cut the bodies

down and placed them in a large oats bag for burial. The coroner's inquest decided Moncrief had come to his death at the hands of parties unknown to the jury.¹⁷

Investigators frequently found no easily ascertainable reason for a lynching, except perhaps white emotional and recreational starvation. For some, "*nigger killing*" had simply become a sport, like any other amusement or diversion, and its popularity prompted a black newspaper in 1911 to call it "*The National Pastime.*"¹⁸ Like any other amusement or recreational diversion, Walter White said of lynching, it 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 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, as if that were more than sufficient explanation. "*And,*" Pat added, "*he was the best nigger in town. Why, he would even take off his hat to me.*"¹⁹

Although seldom cited as the reason for mob violence, the assumption persisted that

an occasional lynching, for whatever reason, served a useful purpose, that periodically it became necessary to remind a new generation of blacks of their place in southern society. "You don't understand how we feel down here," a young white southerner explained to a northern visitor; "when there is a row, we feel like killing a nigger whether he has done anything or not." It was imperative that blacks understand their limits. "A white man ain't a-goin' to be able to live in this country if we let niggers start gettin' biggity," a white Mississippian said of a black being held for trial. "I wish they'd lemme have him. I'd cut out his black balls and th'ow 'em to the hawgs." Some years later, when the number of lynchings subsided, a white resident of Oxford, Mississippi, told a visitor that lynching still had a reaffirming and cathartic quality that benefited the entire community. "It is about time to have another lynching," he thought. "When the niggers get so that they are not afraid of being lynched, it is time to put the fear in them."⁴⁰

Some lynchings took place for no other apparent reason than to bring down a black person who had managed to achieve a measure of economic success. Anthony Crawford, born of slave parents in 1865, had become a substantial landowner and farmer in Abbeville, South Carolina. He had twelve

sons and four daughters, most of them living nearby. As secretary of the local African Methodist Episcopal Church, he was a pivotal figure in the black community. Few blacks—or whites—had done more to embrace the gospel of self-help. "Anthony Crawford's life and character," one observer noted, "embodied everything that Booker T. Washington held to be virtuous in a Negro." On October 21, 1916, Crawford came to town to sell his cotton. He exchanged harsh words with a local white businessman over the offering price. When a store clerk wielding an ax handle went after Crawford, he backed away only to be arrested and placed in jail, securing him initially from a white mob angry over his reported insolence. "When a nigger gets impudent we stretch him out and paddle him a bit," the store manager boasted. The president of the National Bank of Abbeville concurred, "Crawford was insolent to a white man and he deserved a thrashing."

Released on bail, Crawford headed toward the gin, where his cotton was waiting. The white mob quickly regrouped and attacked him. Crawford resisted, injuring one of the whites, but the men finally overpowered him and kicked him until he had lost consciousness. The sheriff persuaded the mob to permit him to regain custody of Crawford.