

Ida B. Wells, “Lynch Law,” 1893 (Excerpts)

Background: Born in 1862 to enslaved parents, Ida B. Wells worked her way through Rust College and then worked for civil rights as a teacher, writer, co-owner of a newspaper, investigative journalist, and speaker. She was also a co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and she worked tirelessly to expose the evils of lynching.

“Lynch Law,” says the *Virginia Lancet*, “as known by that appellation, had its origin in 1780 in a combination of citizens of Pittsylvania County, Virginia, entered into for the purpose of suppressing a trained band of horse thieves and counterfeiters whose well concocted schemes had bidden defiance to the ordinary laws of the land, and whose success encouraged and emboldened them in their outrages upon the community. Col. Wm. Lynch drafted the constitution for this combination of citizens, and hence ‘Lynch Law’ has ever since been the name given to the summary infliction of punishment by private and unauthorized citizens.”

This law continues in force to-day in some of the oldest states of the Union, where courts of justice have long been established, whose laws are executed by white Americans. It ... is brought to bear mainly, against the Negro. The first fifteen years of his freedom he was murdered by masked mobs for trying to vote. Public opinion having made lynching for that cause unpopular, a new reason is given to justify the murders of the past 15 years. The Negro was first charged with attempting to rule white people, and hundreds were murdered on that pretended supposition. He is now charged with assaulting or attempting to assault white women. This charge, as false as it is foul, robs us of the

sympathy of the world and is blasting the race’s good name.

The men who make these charges encourage or lead the mobs which do the lynching. They belong to the race which holds Negro life cheap, which owns the telegraph wires, newspapers, and all other communication with the outside world. They write the reports which justify lynching by painting the Negro as black as possible, and those reports are accepted by the press associations and the world without question or investigation. The mob spirit had increased with alarming frequency and violence. Over a thousand black men, women and children have been thus sacrificed the past ten years. Masks have long since been thrown aside and the lynchings of the present day take place in broad daylight. The sheriffs, police, and state officials stand by and see the work done well. The coroner’s jury is often formed among those who took part in the lynching and a verdict, “Death at the hands of parties unknown to the jury” is rendered. As the number of lynchings have increased, so has the cruelty and barbarism of the lynchers. Three human beings were burned alive in civilized America during the first six months of this year (1893). Over one hundred have been lynched in this half year. They were hanged, then cut, shot and burned.

The following table published by the *Chicago Tribune* January, 1892, is submitted for thoughtful consideration.

Negroes Murdered by Mobs

1882	52
1883	39
1884	53
1885	77
1886	73
1887	70
1888	72
1889	95
1890	100
1891	169
Total	800

Of this number, charges against those lynched are shown below.

269	rape
253	murder
44	robbery
37	incendiarism
4	burglary
27	race prejudice
13	quarreling with white men
10	making threats
7	rioting
5	miscegenation
32	no reason given
701	Total

This table shows (1) that only one-third of nearly a thousand murdered black persons have been even charged with the crime of outrage [rape]. This crime is only so punished when white

women accuse black men, which accusation is never proven. The same crime committed by Negroes against Negroes, or by white men against black women is ignored even in the law courts.

(2) That nearly as many were lynched for murder as for the above crime, which the world believes is the cause of all the lynchings. The world affects to believe that white womanhood and childhood, surrounded by their lawful protectors, are not safe in the neighborhood of the black man, who protected and cared for them during the four years of civil war. The husbands, fathers and brothers of those white women were away for four years, fighting to keep the Negro in slavery, yet not one case of assault has ever been reported!

(3) That “robbery, incendiarism, race prejudice, quarreling with white men, making threats, rioting, miscegenation (marrying a white person), and burglary,” are capital offences punishable by death when committed by a black against a white person. Nearly as many blacks were lynched for these charges (and unproven) as for the crime of rape.

(4) That for nearly fifty of these lynchings no reason is given. There is no demand for reasons, or need of concealment for what no one is held responsible. The simple word of any white person against a Negro is sufficient to get a crowd of white men to lynch a Negro. Investigation as to the guilt or innocence of the accused is never made. Under these conditions, white men have only to blacken their faces, commit crimes against the peace of the community, accuse some Negro, or rest till he is killed by a mob. Will Lewis, an 18 year old Negro youth was lynched at Tullahoma, Tennessee, August, 1891, for being “drunk and saucy to white folks.”

In 1892 there were 241 persons lynched. The entire number is divided among [26 of 44] states.

Of this number 160 were of Negro descent. Four of them were lynched in New York, Ohio and Kansas; the remainder were murdered in the south...

[The next pages of the pamphlet detail the lynchings of thirteen black individuals, four of them women.]

No more appropriate close for this chapter can be given than an editorial quotation from that most consistent and outspoken journal the Inter-Ocean. Commenting on the many barbarous lynchings of these two months (June and July) in its issue of August 5th, 1893, it says:

“So long as it is known that there is one charge against a man which calls for no investigation before taking his life there will be mean men seeking revenge ready to make that charge. Such a condition would soon destroy all law. It would not be tolerated for a day by white men. But the Negroes have been so patient under all their trials that men who no longer feel that

they can safely shoot a Negro for attempting to exercise his right as a citizen at the polls are ready to trump up any other charge that will give them the excuse for their crime. It is a singular coincidence that as public sentiment has been hurled against political murders there has been a corresponding increase in lynchings on the charge of attacking white women. The lynchings are conducted in much the same way that they were by the Ku Klux Klan when Negroes were mobbed for attempting to vote. The one great difference is in the cause which the mob assigns for its action.

The real need is for a public sentiment in favor of enforcing the law and giving every man, white and black, a fair hearing before the lawful tribunals... No one wants to shield a fiend guilty of these brutal attacks upon unprotected women. But the Negro has as good a right to a fair trial as the white man, and the South will not be free from these horrible crimes of mob law so long as the better classes of citizens try to find excuse for recognizing Judge Lynch.”

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What conclusions can you draw regarding the numbers shown in the two tables?
2. Ida B. Wells states that the total number of lynchings in 1892 was 241. What trend do you notice regarding the number of lynchings year-to-year?
3. What are the main goals of this article?
4. What virtues and principles of constitutional government are relevant in considering the tragedy of lynching?
5. What are the most powerful or important passages in the article?