

About Lynching

Robert L. Zangrando

“...African-Americans suffered grievously under lynch law. With the close of Reconstruction in the late 1870s, southern whites were determined to end northern and black participation in the region's affairs, and northerners exhibited a growing indifference toward the civil rights of black Americans. Taking its cue from this intersectional white harmony, the federal government abandoned its oversight of constitutional protections. Southern and border states responded with the Jim Crow laws of the 1890s, and white mobs flourished. With blacks barred from voting, public office, and jury service, officials felt no obligation to respect minority interests or safeguard minority lives. In addition to lynchings of individuals, dozens of race riots--with blacks as victims--scarred the national landscape from Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898 to Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921.

Between 1882 (when reliable statistics were first collected) and 1968 (when the classic forms of lynching had disappeared), 4,743 persons died of lynching, 3,446 of them black men and women. Mississippi (539 black victims, 42 white) led this grim parade of death, followed by Georgia (492, 39), Texas (352, 141), Louisiana (335, 56), and Alabama (299, 48). From 1882 to 1901, the annual number nationally usually exceeded 100; 1892 had a record 230 deaths (161 black, 69 white). Although lynchings declined somewhat in the twentieth century, there were still 97 in 1908 (89 black, 8 white), 83 in the racially troubled postwar year of 1919 (76, 7, plus some 25 race riots), 30 in 1926 (23, 7), and 28 in 1933 (24, 4).

Statistics do not tell the entire story, however. These were recorded lynchings; others were never reported beyond the community involved. Furthermore, mobs used especially sadistic tactics when blacks were the prime targets. By the 1890s lynchers increasingly employed burning, torture, and dismemberment to prolong suffering and excite a "festive atmosphere" among the killers and onlookers. White families brought small children to watch, newspapers sometimes carried advance notices, railroad agents sold excursion tickets to announced lynching sites, and mobs cut off black victims' fingers, toes, ears, or genitalia as souvenirs. Nor was it necessarily the handiwork of a local rabble; not infrequently, the mob was encouraged or led by people prominent in the area's political and business circles. Lynching had become a ritual of interracial social control and recreation rather than simply a punishment for crime.”

See also: Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (1929); Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (1980).

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