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Research Paper

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Lynching of Jesse Washington and Birth of the Anti-Lynching Movement

The lynching of Jesse Washington, which took place in Waco, Texas, exposed violence and racism toward Blacks to the rest of the country. This incident, which occurred in 1916, was also known as the “Waco Horror”. That year, more than 50 Blacks were lynched all over the country, mostly in southern states. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People decided to investigate Jesse Washington’s case because Philip G. Peabody, a Boston philanthropist, offered the NAACP a gift of \$10,000 but only if the organization could convince Peabody that his money could be used effectively to reduce lynching. Although, he later changed his mind and lower the amount to only \$1000, the Idea inspired the NAACP to focus on the lynching problem even more intensely than before. In *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950*, Robert L. Zangrando states, “Reaction to Peabody’s decision indicated a great deal about the association’s stubborn determination to end lynching” (29). The lynching of Jesse Washington provoked strong response from all over the county; therefore the NAACP saw it as an ideal case to investigate, which later helped them to launch the Anti-Lynching Movement.

The people who were victims of lynching were usually accused by a group of people that had one point of view. Though lynching happened all over the USA, it mostly happened in the South. Lynchings or attempted lynchings of black people were common and some of the most hideous lynching took place in the Texas area. Jesse Washington was a resident of Waco City, located in Texas, "where the casual violence of the frontier met the mad-dog racism of the Deep

South" (Bernstein 16). The white southerners punished the African Americans by doing terrible things to them. For example, hanging them to die, burning humans while they were tied to a post (still alive), shooting them to death, cutting their body parts, burning their house down, and damaging their property or stores. Unfortunately, Washington was one of their victims.

Jesse Washington was described as a young farmhand. He was not educated and people called him retarded because of his hot temper. He worked for the Fryer family in Robinson. In May 1916, seventeen-year old Jesse Washington was captured by the sheriff of Waco. He was accused of the murder and rape of George Fryer's wife Lucy Fryer. They were described as "the most highly esteemed and respected residents of Waco" (Bernstein 89). The body of 53-year old Lucy Flyer was discovered by her daughter and son. Later their neighbor, Cris Cimon, told them that he saw Jesse Washington planting cotton near the Fryer house. Washington was immediately arrested by Sheriff Samuel S. Fleming and he didn't even try to escape or resist his capture. Sheriff Fleming didn't keep Washington in Waco for the trial. Instead he sent him to Dallas so people would not be able to lynch him before the trial. Eventually, He was brought back to Waco for his trial but the sheriff failed to protect Washington, and he was dragged out of the courtroom and lynched in front of more than 15,000 people. The mob sliced his body parts, chained him to a tree, and slowly burned him alive.

The news of Jesse Washington's lynching spread through the country like fire. The city of Waco was known as one of the fastest growing cities in America. The people of Waco were considered to be civilized and modern. Major newspapers criticized the residents of Waco For their wrong deed. In her book, *The First Waco Horror: the Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP*, Patricia Bernstein states, "The reaction to the Waco Horror across the state of Texas, across the country, even outside the country, was overwhelming. It was as if the

Associated Press accounts of the lynching carried with them a sizzling current of revulsion and disgust” (127). People might have forgotten about this lynching just like many other lynchings but the NAACP was determined that this time the nation’s reaction to a lynching would not disappear so easily. They decided to use this story to raise awareness and by doing that they would be able to receive the money Peabody promised to give them if only they could lower the number of lynchings.

The NAACP decided that they would hire an investigator, someone who would not be afraid of the white southerners. W. E. B. Dubois, one of the co-founders of the NAACP and editor of the NAACP's newspaper *The Crisis*, knew Elisabeth Freeman. Freeman was involved with the Women Suffrage Movement. She was working near Waco and heard the news of the lynching of Washington. She was appointed by the members of the NAACP to investigate Jesse Washington’s case. When she went to Waco, she told the people of Waco that she wanted to save their reputation. At first, they didn’t hesitate to talk to her, but as soon as they realized she might be lying, the local people stopped talking to her. By then, she discovered that before his trial, he confessed his crime. According to Washington's confession:

When I hit Mrs. Fryar on the side of the head with the hammer she fell over, and then I assaulted her [pulled up her clothes and crawled on her and screwed her. By screwing her I mean that I stuck my male organ into her female organ, and while I was going (doing?) this she was trying to push me off. When I got through screwing her I got off of her and] I then picked up the hammer from where I had laid it down, and hit her twice more with the hammer on top of her head. I saw the blood coming through her bonnet (Bernstein 94)

This is just one paragraph from his long confession, where he admitted that he raped and killed Mrs. Fryer. According to Bernstein, “the strange combination of the grossest vernacular with rather stilted speech...probably does not represent the way Jesse Washington really talked” (96). There are a couple of things that are wrong with his confession. First of all, he didn’t know how to read and write, so obviously he could not read the confession he was told to sign; second, he didn’t sign the paper; it was signed by the arresting party; and third, he was under a lot of pressure since they also arrested his family, which is why at the end of his confession, he included that he was the only one who was involved in the rape and murder of Mrs. Fryer.

It was the rape story more than the murder that provoked the public to lynch Jesse Washington. But, there’s a great doubt that Lucy Fryer was even raped. According to Bernstein:

There was no testimony about the rape at the trial. Even Dr. Maynard, who testified about the wounds to Lucy’s skull, was not asked about the rape, which makes one wonder if there was any solid evidence, other than Washington’s confession (which was probably coerced), that Lucy was raped at all. (96)

Bernstein used the word “coerced” because “Washington claimed that the officers of the law who questioned him promised that if he ‘confessed,’ they would protect him from being lynched” (Bernstein 96). They didn’t keep their promise because he was dragged right in front of them, and they didn’t make any attempt to stop the mob. Besides, they already knew that the lynching would take place the afternoon of May 15, because “Fred Gildersleeve, commercial photographer for over forty years, was notified well in advance that the lynching would take place, set up his equipment in the mayor’s office” (Bernstein 157).

Elizabeth Freeman collected all this important information and W.E.B. Dubois used those materials to put lynching into the public’s mind. He wrote a special eight-page addition to the

July 1916 issue of *The Crisis*, which he called “The Waco Horror.” In “the Waco Horror,” He describes the rape and murder of Lucy Fryer, the transfer of Jesse Washington to in Dallas, the search of the Waco jail by the mob, and Washington’s full confession. In her book, Bernstein states, “He concludes this section of the article by saying, ‘the confessions were obtained, of course, under duress, and were, perhaps, suspiciously clear, and not entirely in the boy’s own words’” (159). Just like Bernstein, Dubois also expressed his disbelief toward Washington’s confession. He may or may not have been innocent, but he never got a fair trial to find out.

Dubois also made sure to include how Sheriff Fleming and other authorities didn’t try to stop the mob. He used the pictures that were collected by Freeman. According to Bernstein, “No one who read ‘The Waco Horror’ and looked at the pictures was likely to forget it” (161). The picture showed Washington’s body, or what was left of his body, hanging in a tree and burned. In the conclusion of “The Waco Horror” Dubois listed 2,843 lynchings of Black people that occurred in the United States between January-1885 and June- 1916. Then, he officially announced their Anti- Lynching Campaign saying, “What are we going to do about this record? The civilization of America is at stake” (Bernstein 161).

W. E. B. Dubois wasn’t the only member of the NAACP who was trying to focus people’s attention on the crime of lynching. The NAACP treasurer Oswald Garrison Villard wrote a full-page appeal behalf of the Anti-Lynching Campaign, which appeared in *The Crisis*. In his appeal, he states “The crime at Waco is a challenge to our American civilization, yes, to every American” (Bernstein 179). Villard and Dubois highlighted the lynching of Jesse Washington to show people that America’s so-called modern civilization was in danger. People were being lynching in front of judges and police officers, individuals who are supposed be symbols of justice. Royal Freeman Nash circulated these articles to 700 newspapers to publicize

the Anti-Lynching Campaign. People sent them money from all over the country and at the end of the year the NAACP ended up raising nearly \$12,000. Although lynching didn't stop right away, the number decreased from 50 to 36. Peabody kept his words and gave the NAACP \$1000. This clearly means the NAACP was able to put lynching into people's mind.

The NAACP's fight against lynching didn't end there. After 1916, they continued investigating most of the lynching cases. They used the information to write *Thirty Years of Lynching in United States*, which was published in April-1919. In the book, they gave brief descriptions of every lynching that occurred between 1894 and 1918. The book also contains information about lynching of Jesse Washington, stating "After death what was left of his body was dragged through the street and parts of it were sold as souvenirs" (24). Lynchers liked to display the body of the victim and the audience liked to keep the body parts of the victim as a memory of their "exciting event." For them, it wasn't wrong because they grew up thinking its okay to kill a black person.

The NAACP also wrote pamphlets to motivate people to take action against lynching. One of their pamphlets is called "A Federal Law to Curb Lynching." In the document, the NAACP was trying to get people to support a law called the Costigan-Wagner Bill. The law would punish people who lynched an innocent in the state that allowed lynching to occur. In the pamphlet, the NAACP states, "This federal bill is designed to assist states in assuring 'to person within the jurisdiction of every state the equal protection of the laws, and to punish the crime of lynching'" (2). At the end of the pamphlet, they stated how people could help the Anti- Lynching Campaign. They suggested that people write letter to their senators or congressmen requesting them to support the Costigan-Wagner Bill, and influence others to do the same. They failed to pass the law because of the southern Democrats stated that the law was "unconstitutional." A

law that would save hundreds of innocent blacks wasn't passed because saving a black person didn't seem constitutional to whites. Another attempt to bring the crime of lynching to light was the Negro Silent Protest Parade, which marched down Fifth Avenue in New York City on July 28, 1917. Pictures of Jesse Washington were notably featured on the signs carried by the marchers. The parade took place more than a year after Washington's death but the memories of his lynching were still on the minds of the organizers, even though forty blacks, possibly more, were killed just weeks before the parade in riots in East St. Louis. W. E. B. Dubois was one of the marchers at the head of the parade. In his book, Zangrando states, "It was through the anti-lynching struggles that the NAACP gained much of its stability and recognition, learned how to deal with the complex problems of race in America" (21). Lynching, of course, was one of the NAACP's major concerns from the beginning but the lynching of Jesse Washington gave birth to The Anti-Lynching Campaign.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an international document containing a series of articles that states the basic human rights to which all human beings are entitled. The lynching of Jesse Washington violates article 1 to 12; except article 4. The first article of UDRH states "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." If everyone was treated equally, Washington would have received a fair trial but he didn't. A very inexperienced and young lawyer was appointed to represent Washington, who made no defenses. Article three states, "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person" yet no one in the courtroom tried to save Washington's life when he was dragged out of the court. In fact some of the audience members were carrying guns. Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, was one of the creators of UDHR, which is ironic since her husband refused to speak against lynching. The NAACP really hoped that Roosevelt would bring an end to the lynching

but they turned out to be wrong. He didn't support the Costigan-Wagner Bill, which was designed to punish anyone who was associated with lynching. According to the NAACP, "He argued that the white voters in the South would never forgive him if he supported the bill and he would therefore lose the next election." He valued his power more than his morals because he refused to help innocent blacks who were being killed for no reason and chose the votes of the southern whites.

The lynching of Jesse Washington was a great case to investigate because it happened in one of the fastest growing cities in United States. It received an incredible amount of attention; it even appeared in a newspaper in London. The residents of Waco were not cavemen; they had electricity, cars, running water, and flush toilets. Then, why didn't they understand that lynching someone is not acceptable? Maybe because how people see themselves is the foundation for their values, their choices and relationships with each other. The white residents of Waco considered themselves superior to blacks because they grew up watching them get treated like animals. People who killed Washington didn't think they did anything wrong because in their eyes lynching a "nigger" wasn't wrong. For the NAACP, it was considered an unforgivable crime and they tried to use any legal evidence against the lynchers. Although they failed to bring the lynchers to justice, the effort to make his story known far and wide, and raise awareness was a huge success. It was also the beginning of the battle against lynching that would last for years. Stories like lynching of Jesse Washington set a horrid example of what our ancestors have done. Jesse Washington's story is a valuable lesson for all us. It inspires us to take action against any wrong deed and teaches us that we can't punish anyone unless we have strong evidence against that person. Even if that person is proven guilty, we should not take the law into our hands. We, humans, make the law so we should respect it.

Works Cited

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