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EDITORIAL TREATMENT OF LYNCHINGS

By JESSIE DANIEL AMES

Environment rather than personal inclination of editors determines the editorial treatment of lynchings, according to the results of a survey, begun in 1930, of editorials on lynchings in every one of thirteen Southern states, Mrs. Ames, who organized the Texas League of Women Voters, serving as its President for four years, has been Vice-Chairman of the Texas Commission on Interracial Cooperation and General Field Secretary of the Southern Commission on Interracial Cooperation. She is also Executive Director of the Central Council of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, with offices at Atlanta. The efforts of the Council are directed toward the development and promotion of educational programs against lynching and toward the repudiation of the claim that lynching is necessary to the protection of white women. During the last five years Mrs. Ames has personally visited the scenes of more than twenty lynchings, interviewing the people, including newspaper editors, and collecting editorials from local papers and from the dailies in the states in which the lynchings took place. Mrs. Ames has also found that in states where a relatively few large dailies have under no condition offered comfort to lynchers, the number of lynchings is steadily decreasing.

Editorial treatment of lynchings offers an interesting and revealing study of public attitudes toward this peculiarly American custom. Environment and not personal inclination of editors determines the tone of opinion in almost every instance. As individuals, they are unanimously opposed to mob violence but, as editors who are caught in the general atmosphere of a given trade territory, they do not reflect their own ideas but those of the people upon whose goodwill their papers depend for revenue. They find themselves in the difficult position of a rider who must sit two horses at the same time, one standing, facing backward, the other moving rapidly forward unencumbered by the harness of tradition. They must satisfy that part of the watchful public pressing in closest and upon whose approval they must rely for immediate revenue. But, also, they must offer assurances that the show is worth the investment of huge sums of money to that distant

public whose worldly possessions are highly essential to the progress and development of the South.

Editors, with few exceptions, condone lynchings by offering reasons for lynchers which are in effect sympathetic excuses defending the right of citizens under provocation to take the law into their own hands and constitute themselves judge, jury, and executioner all at the same time. The exceptions are so few, in fact, that they do not make up even a respectable minority.

Newspapers and Southern society accept lynching as justifiable homicide in defense of society. When defenders of society sometimes go too far in their enthusiasm, as in the Winona, Mississippi, torch lynchings of 1937, public opinion regrets their acts, deplors them, condemns, but recognizes that too much blame must not be attached to lynchers because their provocation is great and their ultimate motives are laudable. This attitude of society in the South—this sympathetic understanding of a barbarous act while regretting the fact—influences editorial opinion.

OUTSIDE AGENCIES BLAMED

Editors from time to time refer to the South's "peculiar situation" which must be handled entirely by native Southern people, without interference from "outside agencies." When such interference can be claimed, outside agencies become the spectacular scapegoat for local crime, bearing off into the wilderness all the sins and shortcomings of the community, leaving it . . . well, if not as white as snow, at least as white as it was before the lynching. Could there be any finer defense offered to lynchers than this editorial from a great, liberal, and influential daily paper:

Their bodies [the Negroes'] were riddled with bullets by hotheads who took the law in their own hands for fear that outside interference would block the course of justice. . . . But the maggoty beaks of the belled buzzards of the International Labor Defense League are stained with the blood of the three Negroes whose torn bodies this morning lie in newly turned graves.

The lynching community, to the last man, was quickly informed by its local paper that its citizens were cleared of crime

by the press. The local paper, supporting its constituency, took up the defense offered by the Capital City daily in an editorial captioned "The Carpet Baggers of 1933" and carried the idea of patriotism to an amazingly high point of eloquence:

They [the Negroes] died at the hands of an unidentified mob but they were LYNCHED by a communistic organization known as the International Labor Defense whose promoters may now enjoy to the fullest the havoc they have wrought.

There is almost visible a tear in the editorial eye for the hapless victims of the "communistic organization."

Nothing could be more delightfully restrained than this editorial rebuke on the same occasion from another state paper. Even a casual reader may detect the editor's dislike for unnecessary violence even in a good cause:

There can be no justification in flaunting the jurisdiction of the courts and committing murder even to show such a despicable outfit as the International Labor Defense, whose concern is not for the Negroes, that it is not wanted in Alabama.

Sorrowful regret, a few penitential tears, but for the most part an indignant and righteous wrath that a fine community had been forced to such extreme measures to protect society—those were the characteristics of editorial opinion in Alabama on the occasion of this double lynching. Editorial screams of justification were accepted as noble harmonies by the public. In an editorial three days after the lynching, the editor who described the outside agency as "belled buzzards" sighed gratefully in his paper:

Let us forget the embarrassment we have suffered at the hands of outsiders now that the outside world has agreed that the International Labor Defense shares our blame. A state that does not or cannot offer protection to the most lowly of its residents does not deserve the right to call itself a sovereign state.

All was peaceful again in Alabama. The country and the Alabama editors had accepted the lynchings as painful, regrettable, but excusable under the circumstances, something in the nature of

a terrible cauterization of a poisonous snakebite, necessary to the preservation of community life. This accomplished, the editors called on the citizens of Tuscaloosa to clean house. The answer Tuscaloosa made to this appeal was another lynching within six weeks.

Thus were the editors of Alabama and the South again embarrassed. Their amazement and pain were genuine. They cried aloud in their anguish. But Tuscaloosa lynchings were quite logical. Their first sin had been forgiven and their second, like unto the first, also must be forgiven. In a front-page editorial spread over four columns, they found expression in part—even the “law-abiding citizens”:

No lynching can be condoned but Tuscaloosa refused to take full responsibility for the Pippen-Hardin case and it had a right to refuse this responsibility. An outside agency inflamed the people to such a point that the community was tense with fear of racial disorders in which many lives would be lost, so when a handful of men took the matter in their own hands and put those Negroes to death a certain relief was undeniably felt by even the most thoughtful and law-abiding of our citizens.

THE DILEMMA OF EDITORS

Editors are good citizens. As individuals they condemn lynching. Lynching gives the South the wrong kind of publicity. It makes it a bit more difficult to attract outside capital and to increase immigration of the right people. The South wants all possible “outside” agencies with money to invest to invade its section, but this invasion must come on local terms, chief of which is that the native population must be allowed to handle their “peculiar situation” in the traditional way. Thus must editors sit on the stationary horse while desiring to ride rapidly into the sunrise of progress and prosperity.

Other states, not so spectacularly heckled by Communists as Alabama, find other dangers to the South’s “peculiar situation” equally hateful. Undisturbed by revolutionary ideas, Negroes and

white people would continue in a state of harmonious living in which all persons of each race find contentment. This harmony is clearly set forth by a Georgia editor:

But he [the Negro] is still extant in the majority of cases with the inherent negroid characteristics of the common laborer. . . . He is still something of an economic necessity. . . . The problem of dealing with him evolves into making him a fit citizen. . . . It is only appropriate that they [Negroes] live in their present capacity as neighbor citizens in continual peace and friendship.

This peace and friendship, based on a recognition of and respect for a caste system, is the basis of good race relations. Negroes, undisturbed in the philosophical acceptance of their "present capacity" in a white society, go along unharmed and unlynched. Sometimes Negroes forget their status, even to the point where they think they can defend their property against greedy white neighbors. Then they are liable to sudden death. After a lynching in Mississippi, when an old Negro man had questioned the right of certain acts of white people against him, the local county paper delivered editorially a funeral oration addressed to the remaining Negroes, closing with a benediction:

Negroes must learn—and most of them do know—that they occupy a peculiar place in this land and must keep it. It is hoped that white people will eventually learn better how to handle the minor difficulties for their own salvation and better interest—and thereby save themselves and their loved ones much unnecessary trouble and worry.

Outsiders must see in this editor's mind that lynchings are regrettable, and, what is not so generally recognized, a lot of trouble.

Sometimes even Southern white people forget their caste in this bi-racial society. When they do, though they are admonished, the outcome may be death to a Negro. A Negro was lynched in North Carolina within these late years. Now, a lynching in North Carolina, because of its rarity, is news. But when one does occur—doubtless through necessity—the same racial attitudes that control

in the Deep South are exposed editorially by some papers of that state. Such an exposure is made in this editorial:

If some white people were not prone to be familiar with negroes and socialize with them, allowing them reasons to suppose their presence among white people is acceptable, there would still live in the heart and soul of the negro the fear and dread of swift and sure punishment in case of wrong doing.

Their presence, except as an economic necessity, is not desired. They must be endured and handled as capably as long experience in dealing with an inferior race—made so by God himself—has taught the white people. Notions which might inflate the ego of a Negro and delude him into thinking that he is a man even as other men must be dealt with heroically. When a Negro is lynched he is not lynched by the persons who fire the guns, pull the rope, or light the bonfire, but by white people who betray their own race and also the Negro whom they pretend to love:

The white and negro races of the South [editorializes one paper] get along very well and would get along better if the negro-loving yankee who loves the negro at long distance and the visionary and fanatical interracialist who coddles the negro, would take themselves out of the picture.

EDUCATION CHANGES DEFENSES

Many leading Southern dailies no longer condone lynchings by holding them as necessary to protect Southern womanhood. Editors to some extent have absorbed a few statistics on the alleged crimes which arouse sensitive citizens. However, they have not come to the point in their education, either in their minds on facts or in their emotions on chivalry, to do more than drop the knight-errant explanation of lynching. Since big dailies have a circulation outside the South and their editors and publishers attend national conferences and conventions, they must represent the South in the light that will be most productive of goodwill and large investments. So they dare not lay themselves open to ridicule by defending lynching on the grounds of gallantry. They cannot defend lynching as a necessary form of violence to insure white supremacy.

All the country holds the philosophy of white supremacy—North, East, West, as well as South—but nationally it is not good sales talk to advertise that white supremacy can be maintained in the South—the last stronghold of pure Anglo-Saxon heritage—only by force, coercion, and lynching.

The Scottsboro Case, made famous by outside interference, has become a trifle boring, not only to Alabama but to the larger part of the South. It has done the South no good in many ways but it has proved an asset in one notable way. It has furnished Southern editors a dignified and self-righteous basis for excusing lynchers with a line of argument that the whole country appreciates—delays in court procedure, the uncertainty of punishment, the loopholes in the law—conditions prevalent everywhere and universally condemned.

So, the Scottsboro Case contributes to the editorial policy of Southern dailies in solving their problem of sitting still while riding rapidly to a place in the sun. One editorial—and their number is legion—is representative of all editorials in defense of lynching on these grounds:

Lynching is chiefly attributable to laxity of court procedure and the abuse of the pardon power in the United States. No such outrages against law and order occur in Great Britain and her dominions because British justice is quick and certain. . . . In that difference is to be found the reason why mob violence is an unknown thing in one of the great English-speaking nations of the world but is lamentably frequent in the other.

Dignified in style, elegant in language, balanced in construction, and international in illustration, it holds arguments advanced by J. Edgar Hoover as causes of crime, and applies them deftly and convincingly to lynching. It is a national condition with a special application to the South's "peculiar situation." It satisfies the lynchers with a good alibi for their acts, even if those acts include burning at the stake, or, as happened twice in Georgia in these last two years, the ghastly exhibition of the mutilated dead bodies before lighting the funeral pyre.

Daily papers of the South are beginning to show editorially a growing sympathy toward Federal interference, a sympathy not shared to any noticeable extent by the county weeklies whose local constituencies grapple with the problem of maintaining white supremacy. If the Federal government intervenes in the activities of lynchers, then the burden of stopping lynchings will no longer rest on the South. If two men or officers of the law kill a Negro, that will not be a lynching; but if three or more men and women kill a Negro, that will be a job for the Federal government. The Negro in either case will be very dead. The South can forget the murder but the nation will share the lynching. The pot and the kettle can't call names—a situation greatly desired by Southern editors and their readers.