

## "Mob Violence Has No Place"

### Supporting Antilynching Laws

Ida B. Wells

African Americans faced discrimination and terror at the turn of the century. The Supreme Court upheld Jim Crow laws mandating segregation, and violent mobs lynched black citizens without a trial. Ida Wells, a black journalist, launched a national antilynching campaign. She found that almost 10,000 Americans were lynched from 1878 to 1898. Refuting the charge that lynching "is the only successful method of dealing with a certain class of crimes," namely assaults on women, Wells demonstrated that most lynchings were for misdemeanors. Violence against African Americans led to the founding in 1909 of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization.

The record of the past ten years shows a surprising increase in lynchings and riot even in the North. No northern state has more frequently offended in this crime than Illinois, the state of Lincoln. . . . Since 1893 there have been sixteen lynchings within the state, including the Springfield riot. With each repetition there has been increased violence, rioting, and barbarism. The last lynching, which took place November 11 of last year in Cairo, was one of the most inhuman spectacles ever witnessed in this country.

The Negroes of Illinois have taken counsel together for a number of years over Illinois's increased lynching record. They elected one of their number to the state legislature in 1904, who secured the passage of a bill which provided for the suppression of mob violence, not only by punishment of those who incited lynchings, but provided for damages against the city and county permitting lynchings. The bill goes further and provides that if any person shall be taken from the custody of the sheriff or his deputy and lynched, it shall be prima facie evidence of failure on the part of the sheriff to do his duty. And upon that fact being made to appear to the governor, he shall publish a proclamation declaring the office of sheriff vacant, and such sheriff shall not thereafter be eligible

to either election or reappointment to the office. . . . This bill passed both houses, was signed by Governor Deneen, and became a law in 1905. . . .

On the morning of November 11 last year, a double lynching was reported from Cairo, Illinois—a white man and a Negro. A white girl had been found murdered two days before. The bloodhounds which were brought led to a Negro's house three blocks away. A Negro who had stayed in that house the night before was arrested and sweated for twenty-four hours. Although the only clue found was that the gag in the girl's mouth was of the same kind of cloth as the handkerchief of the prisoner, threats of lynching him became so frequent that the sheriff took him away from the city, back in the woods twenty-five miles away.

When the mob had increased its numbers, they chartered a train, went after the sheriff, [and] brought him and his prisoner back to Cairo. A rope was thrown over [the prisoner] Will James's neck; he was dragged off the train to the main business corner of the town. The rope was thrown over a steel arch, which had a double row of electric lights. The lights were turned on and the body hauled up in view of the assembled thousands of men, women, and children. The rope broke before James was strangled to death and

before hundreds of waiting bullets could be fired into his body. However, as many as could crowd around emptied their revolvers into the quivering mass of flesh as it lay on the ground. Then seizing the rope the mob dragged the corpse a mile up Washington Street, the principal thoroughfare, to where the girl's body had been found. They were followed by a jeering, hooting, laughing throng of all ages and of both sexes of white people. There they built a fire and placed this body on the flames. It was then dragged out of the fire, the head cut off and stuck on a nearby fence post. The trunk was cut open, the heart and other organs cut out, sliced up and passed around as souvenirs of the ghastly orgy and our American civilization.

Having tasted blood, a voice in the crowd said, "Let's get Salzner." Away went the mob to the county jail. Salzner, a white man, had been indicted for wife murder and was in jail awaiting trial. The suggestion is said to have come from the brother of Salzner's murdered wife. The mob demanded that the sheriff, who had repaired to his office in the jail when Will James had been taken from him an hour before, get Salzner for them. He begged them to go away, but when they began battering in the doors he telephoned the governor for troops. The lynchers got Salzner, hanged him in the courtyard in front of the jail, emptied their remaining bullets in his body, and went away. When troops reached the scene six hours later, they found, as the leading morning paper said next day, that "the fireworks were all over."

In mass meeting assembled, the Negro citizens of Chicago called on Governor Deneen to do his duty and suspend the sheriff. Two days later the sheriff's office was vacated. Ten days more and Sheriff Davis had filed his petition for reinstatement, and on December 1, argument was had before Governor Deneen both for and against the sheriff.

The sheriff's counsel, an ex-state senator and one of the leading lawyers of southern Illinois, presented the sheriff's petition for reinstatement, which declared

he had done all in his power to protect the prisoners in his charge. He read letters and telegrams from judges, editors, lawyers, bankers, merchants, clergymen, the mayor of the city, captain of Company K of the state militia, his political opponents, and even the temporary incumbent of the sheriff's office himself—all wrote to urge Sheriff Davis's reinstatement. The petitions were signed by hundreds of citizens in all walks of life and the Catholic priest of Sheriff Davis's parish was present all day and sat at the sheriff's side.

As representing the people who had sent me to Cairo to get the facts, I told of the lynching, of visiting the scenes thereof, of the three days interview with the colored people of Cairo, and of reading the files of every newspaper in the city published during the lynching to find some account of the steps that had been taken to protect the prisoner. I told of the mass meeting of the Negroes of Cairo in which a resolution was passed declaring that from Tuesday morning when Will James was arrested until Thursday night when he was lynched, the sheriff had neither sworn in deputies to aid him in defending the prisoners nor called on the governor for troops. We said that a reinstatement of the sheriff would be an encouragement to mobs to hang, shoot, burn, and pillage whenever they felt inclined in the future, as they had done in the past.

Governor Deneen rendered his decision a week later, removing the sheriff. After reviewing the case he said:

... Only one conclusion can be reached, and that is that the sheriff failed to take the necessary precaution for the protection of his prisoners. Mob violence has no place in Illinois. It is denounced in every line of the Constitution and in every statute. Instead of breeding respect for the law it breeds contempt.

It is believed that this decision with its slogan "Mob law can have no place in Illinois" has given lynching its death blow in this state.