

Black Lynching in the Promised Land: Mob Violence in Ohio, 1877 - 1916

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In 1928 the *Chicago Defender* reported that there were 4,951 lynchings in the United States from the years 1882 through 1927. Of the victims, 3,513 were black and 1,438 were white; 92 were women and 76 of those women were black.¹ Eighty-two percent of the recorded lynchings occurred in the eleven states of the former Confederacy, and perhaps this is why many Americans think of lynching as primarily a southern crime visited upon blacks by whites.² However, lynching as a means of terrorizing blacks and maintaining the racial caste system that occurred in every region of the country, including Ohio. Investigating lynchings and averted lynchings in Ohio is especially interesting given Ohio's role in the abolitionist movement. The state was said to have ". . . more than three hundred stations on the Underground Railroad, that network of roads, safe houses and churches through which runaway slaves escaped to their freedom. The Ohio River was the boundary between slavery and freedom; traversing the state was the shortest route to Canada³."

These virtually unknown lynchings and averted lynchings in a state described during different times in its history as both western and northern affords scholars the opportunity to look at two issues. First, is lynching better studied as a manifestation of collective violence as historian Roberta Senechal de la Roche posits or is it better studied as a manifestation of racism? Second, was the passage of an anti-lynching bill in 1896 responsible for the near elimination of lynchings in Ohio after 1916?⁴

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People defines lynching as a crime during which someone is killed illegally by three or more persons claiming to serve the cause of justice or tradition.⁵ With that definition in mind, I examined eleven lynchings which occurred from 1876 through 1916; ten of the victims were black men lynched by white mobs, and one was a black man lynched by a black mob. I also examined eight cases during this same time period in which the lynchings of black men by white mobs were averted, and one incident in which a white sheriff and the black prisoner he was protecting barely escaped being lynched.

Much has been written by scholars, social commentators, religious leaders and others about why blacks were lynched.⁶ During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the justification most often offered by whites was black men's unbridled sexual lust for white women, and the failure of the criminal justice system to swiftly seek out and punish blacks guilty of this heinous breach of racial etiquette. This is in direct contrast to what African Americans and anti-lynching activists Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Walter White found to be the explanation of lynching then: while conducting investigations of lynchings during the same period: race hatred and the determination of whites to maintain racial domination and economic hegemony over African Americans.⁷

A number of today's scholars, most of whom are historians and sociologists, agree with Wells-Barnett and White, but expand greatly upon their findings. Nowadays studies focus on how social issues such as breaches of racial etiquette, economic competition between whites and blacks, and political hegemony motivated lynching.⁸ Recent scholarship is also more likely to see lynching as a peculiarly American spectacle that could erupt any time; **any** black person could be lynched whether he or she committed any offense or not.⁹ Scholars in the fields of literature, music and film are lending a fresh perspective on lynching, analyzing everything from lyrics to plays to poetry in an effort to better explain and understand how and why whites lynched blacks with impunity.¹⁰

However, in the late 1990's, historian Roberta Senechal de la Roche advanced a new interpretation of why and how lynchings occur. She argues that researchers have ignored the concepts of crowd psychology and motivation, and that lynching is best studied through the lens of collective violence. While not based on empirical evidence, de la Roche has concluded that her approach renders a more accurate picture of lynching.¹¹

Sociologist Donald Black, on whose theory of collective violence de la Roche's paradigm is based, notes that every form of social control has a very distinctive social structure influenced by the social characteristics of all the parties involved in the conflict.¹² Collective violence is based on the pre-existing conditions of intimacy, cultural similarity, interdependence and inequality between the mob and the victim. De la Roche sees lynching as the use of collective violence as a means of social control through which the mob defines or responds to what it perceives as deviant behavior. Moreover, lynching can be distinguished from other crimes on two dimensions: the breadth of liability and degree of organization. De la

Roche defines the former as accountability, whether of a single person or a group, and the latter as some degree of planning, although not necessarily well thought out and sustained. For mob violence—that is, collective violence—to occur there must be some pre-existing condition besides racism or economic exploitation. Since lynching is generally a premeditated crime, using the conceptual framework of collective violence may allow us to predict whether a lynching will occur, who is most likely to be lynched, how violent that lynching will be, and whether a particular lynching might be averted.¹³ For de la Roche, the conditions of intimacy, cultural similarity, interdependence and inequality translate into the variables of relational distance, functional interdependence, vertical direction and cultural distance, respectively.¹⁴ These determine the likelihood of lynching.



Relational distance relates to how much blacks and whites participate in each other's lives. Regular contact increases intimacy. For example, blacks who provide whites with personal services such as household management, cooking and child rearing are commonly viewed in a paternalistic manner. This increased intimacy usually means that there is less likelihood of a lynching or it has a moderating influence on the degree of violence inflicted on the victim.

The extent to which blacks and whites rely on each other economically, politically, and in other ways is defined as **functional interdependence**. The more whites rely on blacks, the less likely there is to be a lynching, or again, the more likely there is to be a reduction in the amount of violence shown toward the victim. This may help explain why blacks were seldom lynched during slavery; they were too valuable to their masters and much of the white community. Furthermore, if there is an important white person who can vouch for the monetary value or virtue of a particular black person, then that person is often protected should he commit an offense against a white person or violate some community or legal code. The African American boxer Joe Louis's step-father allegedly escaped being lynched because he was known as a "good nigger."¹⁵

Vertical direction refers to the inequality of status as measured by wealth, education and other variables between the alleged victim of a precipitating offense and the person about to be lynched. Lynching takes place between those who are seen as unequal in status. An upward offense would most assuredly culminate in a lynching often preceded by severe torture; an upward offense absent relational or cultural distance would probably result in less violence. Finally, an offense between two social inferiors—for example, a poor white person and a poor black person—would not necessarily result in a lynching.

The difference between individuals and groups in terms of social characteristics such as language, dress, religion, music and other matters is defined as **cultural distance**. The greater the cultural distance, the more likely a lynching was to occur **and** the more severe the violence accompanying it was likely to be. De la Roche concluded, "Interracial conflicts involving blacks who lived outside the South or those from distinct subcultures . . . entailed a greater degree of cultural distance between the parties and a greater likelihood of lynching."¹⁶

According to de la Roche, lynchings are also more likely to occur when an offense crosses large expanses of social space and where there are temporal distinctions. That is, lynchings were more likely to occur in rural areas or small towns, and more frequently at some times during history than others. de la Roche suggests this explains why the number of lynching across the country is so unequal; why they occurred less during slavery and increased during the late nineteenth century and other periods of economic dislocation, tapered off after the 1930's, and re-emerged during the modern civil rights movement. Finally, de la Roche points out that a high degree of social polarization—that is, the combination of her four variables—increases the likelihood that a lynching will occur. Again, this explains the pattern discussed above.¹⁷

Let us now take a look at the lynchings and averted lynchings in Ohio from the period 1876, the end of Reconstruction, to 1916. The first recorded lynching of a black man by a white mob during the time period in question happened in Urbana, located in Champaign County, on or around January 12, 1876. A black tramp named Ulrey – no last name was available – allegedly persuaded a white girl of ten to walk with him outside of the city limits. There she was “ravished,” the common late nineteenth century euphemism for rape. She was said to be so devastated by the experience that her health rapidly declined, and she died within the year. Ulrey was captured outside Marysville, not far from Urbana. At his preliminary hearing, he admitted the offense and was jailed to await trial. On January 16, a mob of white men attacked the jail, but the sheriff held them off. The next night, a mob of about 50 men again attacked the jail and overpowered the sheriff. They took Ulrey to the courtyard and lynched him. Even though the faces of everyone in the crowd were visible, no one was ever arrested or charged.¹⁸

The Champaign County lynching set the pattern for the lynchings of black men in Ohio. A black man was accused of a serious crime such as rape, sexual assault, robbery, assault or murder. He might be given a preliminary hearing or even taken to trial. Angry over what they considered to be the slow pace of justice, a crowd would gather where the prisoner was being held or tried. After some rabble rousing, the mob would storm the building, capture the prisoner and drag him off to be lynched. Law enforcement officials might try with various levels of effort and success to protect lynching victims, but to no avail. This scenario occurred six times between 1876 and 1894. The pattern differed significantly from southern lynchings where law enforcement officials often took part or at least acquiesced in the killings.

The year 1894 marked a turning point with regard to Ohio lynchings. In a sudden wave of violence, two African American men were lynched, and three lynchings were averted. A riot followed one of the averted lynchings, and the state militia was called out to restore order. The extent of the violence engendered nation-wide condemnation and alarmed both politicians and black rights advocates. Ohio was beginning to develop a reputation for lawlessness that led to embarrassing comparisons to the South.

Prominent citizens, including black Republican state representative Harry C. Smith, owner of the *Cleveland Gazette*, and Albion Tourgee, the white civil rights leader and former Radical Republican, had been working with Ohio legislators, black rights groups, and the newly formed Northern Ohio Anti-Lynching League to pass anti-lynching legislation for several years. Their proposal would punish those found guilty of mob violence and provide some monetary compensation for the families of people who had been lynched. The spate of incidents in 1894 gave their work new impetus.

In 1894 only two states, Georgia and North Carolina, had anti-lynching laws; both laws had been passed after a rash of lynchings in those states in 1893. The Georgia statute penalized sheriffs found negligent in protecting prisoners threatened by mob violence and allowed them to deputize local citizens in order to obtain their assistance. The North Carolina law made counties in which lynchings occurred financially responsible for the costs of investigating and prosecuting people involved in mob violence.¹⁹ However, both laws imposed weak penalties, and the law had little to no affect on lynching and mob violence perpetrated against black citizens in the those states. Indeed, both states continued to record lynchings of black men and women well into the twentieth century.

By contrast, the law written by Tourgee and Smith gave legal representatives of the victims of lynching the power to sue the county in which the crime occurred for a maximum of \$10,000. If the victim was not killed or seriously injured, he or his representatives might sue for a minimum of \$200 to a maximum \$1,000. The money would be raised by a general tax levy in the effected county. To ensure that legal representatives of the victim would not intimidated seeking damages, the claim could be filed in an adjoining county. County officials who entered into an agreement with the plaintiffs to settle for less than the minimum would be charged with a misdemeanor. Lastly, participants in mob violence could still be prosecuted criminally.²⁰

The so-called Smith law was radical and timely, but it was also a bit of wishful thinking. Smith and Tourgee naively assumed that participants in a lynch mob, steeped in the deeply held belief of white superiority and black inferiority and angered beyond all reason at some transgression against the social order and, would stop to think about the financial liability of participating in a lynching. Second, they assumed that every mob is alike. The nature of the alleged crime, the size of the community, the relative status of the victim and the accused perpetrator, and the attitude and actions of local law enforcement officials could all be different. Third, Tourgee and Smith assumed that low status "riffraff" perpetrated lynchings and that such people could be influenced by community leaders, and that those leaders would take action to halt a lynching. But this was a false assumption; some of the communities' leading citizens encouraged or participated in at least two of the lynchings.

After two years of political maneuvering, the legislation passed in 1896. Within the next four years, legislators in South Carolina, Kentucky, New Jersey, West Virginia and Wisconsin wrote anti-lynching laws based on Ohio's law. The NAACP used the Ohio bill as a model in its efforts to secure federal anti-lynching legislation.²¹

Yet lynchings did not cease upon passage of the Smith law. In 1897, Charles "Click" Mitchell was lynched in Urbana, Ohio in broad daylight for the alleged rape of a wealthy white woman. In the summer of 1900 Louis Peck barely escaped being lynched in Akron, Ohio; he had been accused of sodomizing a young white girl. The mob in Akron grew so large and unruly that a riot ensued. Several people were injured and one person was killed. Eventually the Ohio National Guard was called out to restore order.²² In 1903 two black men, Charles Hall and Robert Pleasant, barely escaped lynching after a fight with a white man who was stabbed.²³ In 1904 two other black men, Ben Jackson and William Anderson, also narrowly escaped being lynched.²⁴

The best known lynching in Ohio occurred in Springfield in 1904 when Richard Dixon, a black man, shot and killed a popular and well-respected white police officer.²⁵ There was a difference, however, with regard to Dixon's lynching. At the behest of Governor Myron T. Herrick, it was thoroughly investigated. Several men were arrested and indicted, but their trials ended in hung juries. No one was ever punished for Dixon's murder.²⁶

Two more lynchings occurred after Dixon's death. John Jordon was lynched in 1911 for the theft of some cherries from a white man's orchard.²⁷

In Lima, Ohio, Charles Daniels, accused of raping a white woman, was nearly lynched before the white sheriff, Sherman K. Eley, could spirit him out of town. Upon his return, Eley himself was nearly lynched for protecting Daniels.²⁸ The last two incidents occurred in 1916.

Does de la Roche's paradigm help to explain these lynchings and attempted lynchings. Accordingly, what are we to make of the theory advanced by historian Roberta Senechal de la Roche? In each of the lynchings and averted lynchings, vertical direction and cultural distance were the two strongest of variables. In none of the incidents was the accused of the same social status as the victims of the crimes. (However, it cannot be said that the economic distance between victims of the mob and those who were lynched or who escaped lynching was extreme. There were only two instances in which the alleged victims of precipitating crimes were much more wealthy than the accused.) We should also not be surprised that cultural distance was so strong a variable, because Ohio was home to Jim Crow school systems, crippling housing segregation, and a general lack of opportunity for blacks.²⁹

With regard to relational distance, in none of the lynchings were blacks and whites close enough, either physically or socially, as to participate to any meaningful degree in each other's lives. Nor was functional distance, the degree to which whites were heavily dependent upon black labor much of a factor. There were no instances in which whites relied so heavily upon black labor that it affected their decision to carry out a lynching. Third, there was no incident in which there was the slightest hint of social equality between the victims of the precipitating event and the men who were lynched for committing it. Finally, although some whites visited the bars and brothels in the black neighborhoods of Springfield, Ohio, segregation, both de jure and de facto, was the rule. The races did not share cultural traditions, nor was there great cultural space or temporal distinctions involved in any of the incidents.

In order to say that de la Roche's research paradigm **proves** why lynchings occur, we would have to have empirical evidence, and she admits that ". . . no systematic empirical inquiry into the differential handling of conflict in the postbellum South has yet been attempted."³⁰ Furthermore, the number of lynchings versus the race of those lynched would also have to be ascertained. However, de la Roche's paradigm, coupled with the common paradigms of race hatred and economic hegemony, does provide scholars with additional insight into why lynchings occur.

With regard to my second research question, it is difficult to measure the impact the 1896 anti-lynching law had on lynchings in Ohio, especially since there were several lynchings after the law was passed. However, several things are clear.

The Smith law had tremendous symbolic value in the struggle to outlaw lynching in America. By 1896, Reconstruction had been over for twenty years. De jure segregation in the South was so deeply entrenched that most blacks lived lives little removed from slavery; de facto segregation in the North was so pernicious that opportunities for good jobs, education, and housing were all but closed to a significant portion of the black population. The drafting, public debate, passage and implementation of the Smith Law was proof that there were still white public officials willing to fight for black rights.

The actions of Ohio lawmakers sympathetic to the anti-lynching movement were also very helpful. For example, Representative Aquila Wiley, a white Democrat, moved to overturn the Smith law during the 1898 legislative term. The re-election of William Stewart, a Republican from northeastern Ohio and an ardent supporter of the anti-lynching law, was crucial in blocking Wiley's efforts. Additionally, Representative Chase Stewart sponsored a bill that subjected anyone who broke into jails and attacked law enforcement officers for the purpose of lynching to a punishment of one through ten years in the state penitentiary.³¹

Rulings emanating from legal action against counties may have also influenced local officials to work to stop lynching. When the family of Click Mitchell filed suit against Champaign County for the maximum damages permitted by the Smith law, a Champaign County common pleas court judge ruled the anti-lynching law unconstitutional. He was overruled by the circuit court in May 1899. In *The Ohio Supreme Court* sustained the constitutionality of the Smith law in case of *Mitchell Admr. v. Champaign Count (Comrs.)* 1899. The court also defined the term mob, noted the elements constituting a mob, and ruled that the members of the mob need not have formally agreed to violate the law for an unlawful assemblage to have occurred. The court observed that "the lynching of Mitchell raises the presumption that the persons who did it intended to do him damage or injury," thus making Champaign County citizens liable for Mitchell's death.³² Click Mitchell's lynching cost Champaign County taxpayers \$10,000; of that, \$5,000 went to his heirs.

These little known lynchings and averted lynchings in Ohio show us that race hatred and mob violence against blacks was not solely a southern phenomenon. They also provide a rich source of material for further investigation using traditional paradigms such as spatial effects and economic competition to more recent research theories such as that advanced by de la Roche.

NOTES

1. Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 2002), 227. There is no way to ascertain exactly how many people have been lynched in the United States. For a variety of reasons, there is tremendous discrepancy in figures used by different sources. The *Chicago Defender*, a black-owned newspaper, began keeping track of lynchings in 1882. Several years later, Tuskegee Institute began a similar exercise. Prior to 1912, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) used data provided by the *Chicago Defender*; after that time, however, it began keeping track of lynchings on its own. See also William Katy, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (New York: Negro University Press, 1969); James Elbert Cutler, *Lynch Law: An Investigation Into The History of Lynching In The United States* (New York: Negro University Press, 1969); and Ralph Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynching*. (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1988).
2. Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynching 1882 - 1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995) 269-70.
3. Keith David Churchman, "The Social and Economic Status of the Negro in Ohio in 1860" (MA thesis, Miami University 1939), 91.
4. Since writing this paper in 2005 I have discovered what may be several more lynchings and averted lynchings into the 1930s.
5. Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynching*.
6. See Sherrilyn A. Ifill, *On the Courthouse Lawn: Confronting the Legacy of Lynching in the Twenty-first Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007); Christopher Waldrep, *Lynching in America: A History in Documents* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society 1874-1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2003); James Allen, Hilton Als, John Lewis, Leon F. Latwick, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palm Publishers, 2000); Mark Curriden and Leroy Phillips, Jr., *Contempt of Court: The Turn-of-the-Century Lynching That Launched a Hundred Years of Federalism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999); Gunnar Myrdal and Sissela S. Bok, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, Vol. 1 (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995); A. J. Williams Myers, *Destructive Impulses: An Examination of America's Secret in Race Relations: White Violence* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994); Mark Twain, *Collected Stories, Sketches, Speeches and Essays, 1890 - 1920* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 485; W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Knopf, 1941), 116-20; Arthur F. Raper, *The Tragedy of Lynching* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933).
7. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *On Lynchings* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002); and

White, *Rope and Faggot*.

8. See Larry J. Griffin, Paula Clark, and Joanne C. Sandberg "Narrative and Event: Lynching and Historical Sociology," in *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, ed., W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

9. Stewart Tolnay, Glen Deane, and E. M. Beck, "Vicarious Violence: Spatial Effects on Southern Lynchings, 1890-1919," *American Journal of Sociology*, 102 (November 1996): 788.

10. Doral Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Cynthia Scoves Nevels, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness Through Racial Violence* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 2002); Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Anne P. Rice, ed., *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

11. Roberta Senechal de la Roche, "The Sociogenesis of Lynching," in Brundage, *Under Sentence of Death*, 64.

12. *Ibid.*, 52.

13. *Ibid.*, 48.

14. *Ibid.*, 52.

15. "To Be Somebody," *The Great Depression*, videorecording, directed by Stephen Stept (Blackside Inc., 1993).

16. Senechal de la Roche, "The Sociogenesis of Lynching," 49.

17. *Ibid.*, 60.

18. Evan P. Middleton, *History of Champaign County, Ohio* (Indianapolis, IN: B. F. Bowen, 1917), 1146.

19. David A. Gerber, "Lynching and Law and Order: Origin and Passage of the Ohio Anti-Lynching Law of 1896," in *Lynching, Racial Violence and Law*, ed. Paul Finkelman, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 200.

20. *Ibid.*, 201.

21. *Ibid.*, 204.

22. *Ohio State Journal*, June 4 and June 5, 1897.

23. *Lorain Times Herald*, July 30, 1903.

24. *Ohio State Journal*, March 13 and March 15, 1904.

25. See Kathleen Ann Galvin, *The Springfield Riots of 1904 and 1906* (MA thesis, The Ohio State University, 1971).

26. *Springfield Daily News*, January 3, 1905.

27. *Cleveland Leader*, June 28, 1911; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, June 28, 1911.

28. *Lima Times Democrat*, August 31, 1916.

29. See Steven Middleton, *The Black Laws: Race and the Legal Process in Early Ohio* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006).

30. Senechal de la Roche, "The Sociogenesis of Lynching", 48.

31. *Cleveland Leader*, March 12, 1897; *Cleveland Gazette*, February 2, April 23, October 22, 1898; *Cleveland Gazette*, March 25, May 6, May 13, 1899; *Cleveland Gazette*, April 21, 1900.

32. *Mitchell's Admr. v. Champaign Co.* (Comrs.) 9 Ohio Dec 821 (1899).

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