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The Lynching of Jesse Washington

Jesse Washington, a mentally disabled 17-year-old farmhand, was one of the many black people of Texas lynched in the early twentieth century.¹ The practice of lynching had become common in the South as racial tension from the Jim Crow Laws began to accelerate. Lynching reached an all time high in the 1920s, with Texas having the third most lynchings of any state with 468. These illegal acts were motivated by racism, resulting in the anger of a black *and* white nation, and ultimately signaled a transition in the practice of lynching.

Washington was charged for the rape and murder of Lucy Fryer, a 53-year-old white woman. There were no witnesses, however, and during the interrogation, the sheriff of Waco forced the boy to sign a confession and describe the location of the weapon used to murder. Wanting to avoid an attack on Washington while in custody in Waco, authorities sent him to a Dallas jail to await his trial. On May 15, 1916, Washington arrived back in Waco to a packed courtroom of angry townspeople.² Twelve white men formed his jury, and they found him guilty of murder after only four minutes of consideration.³ Directly after his sentence, a mob of white citizens that had been waiting wrapped a chain around Washington's neck and dragged him to the city hall, brutally stabbing and beating him as they went along. Over 10,000 spectators witnessed the mob castrate the boy, cut off his fingers, and hang him over a pile of burning boxes. He was repeatedly lowered and raised over the fire for about two hours until the body was

¹ Terry Kurt, "Jesse Washington Lynching." *Waco History*, accessed May 02, 2016.

² National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. *The Waco Horror. (Supplement to the Crisis, July, 1916.)*. New York, 1916, 8.

³ James M. SoRelle, "Jesse Washington Lynching," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed March 06, 2016,

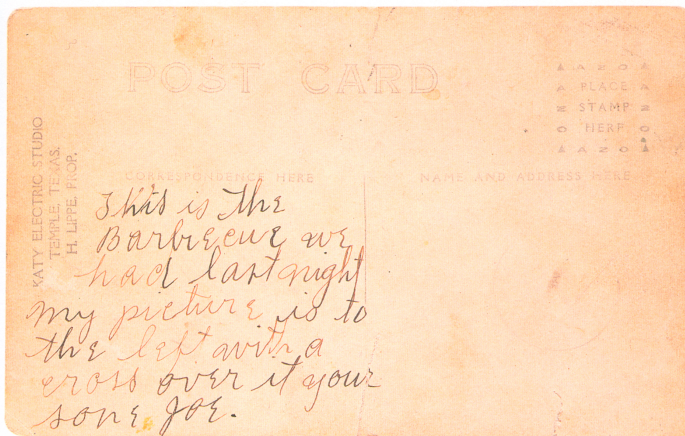
completely demolished. Once the fire was extinguished, his torso (the only part of his body left) was dragged through the predominantly black town and his body parts were sold as souvenirs to the crowd. A professional photographer attended the event and sold postcards of the charred body hanging from the pole.

It was not unusual for postcards of lynchings to be sold during this time. In fact, there is a book titled, “Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America,”

containing 4,742 photographs of lynchings in America from 1882 to 1968 that were probably turned into postcards and sold to crowds in attendance. Within this book is an image from a postcard taken during the lynching of Jesse Washington.

The front of the postcard is the charred corpse of the seventeen-year-old boy suspended from a utility pole. All around his body are the faces of smiling men, women, and children posing for the

picture. The back of the card reads, “The is the barbecue we had last night my picture is to the left with a cross over it your son Joe.”⁴



⁴ James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (New Mexico: Twin Palm Publishers, 2000)

This caption is particularly disturbing because the citizens of Waco found humor and justice in the murder of the Washington, turning his existence into a joke and publically celebrated the murder. It was almost as if the community felt like they were heroes, ridding themselves of an evil entity.

Another image taken from the lynching involves a group of men surrounding Washington while his dead body burned. They were dressed in suits, smiling, and posing proudly for the picture. Central Texas had become so exposed to racially motivated crimes that these men became indifferent to the violent and inhumane treatment of black people.⁵ Not only had the townspeople become indifferent to a black person's suffering, they were *pleased* to witness and take part of it. The culture of Waco ultimately glorified mob violence, which explains how the town could partake in such a brutal attack and also publicly celebrate it.



⁵ James Allen, *Without Sanctuary*.

Furthermore, Washington's lynching outraged the nation. Newspapers such as *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *New York Times* condemned the lynching severely, humiliating the town of Waco.⁶ However, the most important demonstration of an infuriated nation stemmed from the NAACP. The group launched an investigation into the case and also tried to push for a federal anti-lynching bill. This directly contrasted the reaction of the crowd and the people of Waco, Texas, who supported the lynching. Some newspapers in Waco expressed regret for the lynching but were bitter about the press of the North condemning the South and the people of Waco.

The reaction of black people in regards to the occurrence was similar to the white reaction. Although, instead of just showing anger about the event, the black community decided to retaliate and bring justice for Washington. For example, a black journalist named A. T. Smith, editor of the *Paul Quinn Weekly*, printed allegations against Lucy Fryer's husband, accusing him of committing the murder rather than Washington.⁷ This resulted in Smith's arrest and conviction of criminal libel. Likewise, in *The Waco Horror: Supplement to the Crisis, July 1916*, a member of the NAACP investigated the lynching in the nationally recognized magazine. The purpose of the magazine was to get information about the black community to other black people and sympathetic white people. Furthermore, the article exposed a scandal within Waco, arousing outrage within American people. The article uncovered how the lynching that took place was illegal and also how no one was prosecuted or held accountable for the act. The article also went into great depth of the crime and the gruesome execution of a man who may or may not have been guilty.

⁶ "15,000 WITNESS LYNCHING," *New York Times*.

⁷ SoRelle, "Jesse Washington Lynching."

The NAACP article was also very detailed and explicit, describing how the lynching began and ended and also the political reasoning behind it. For example, the exigencies of Waco politics are said to have “demanded a lynching.” The author also stated that the act of lynching was of political value to running officials.⁸ This enraged black people of America, essentially identifying how black people felt about the situation. Rather than being passive and quiet about the event, allowing lynching to become a static occurrence, they became assertive and demanded a change in society. For example, at the end of the article, the author asked for donations so \$11,000 could be raised for the beginning of an anti-lynching “crusade,” ultimately conveying how the black population was beginning to take a stance against black oppression.

A New York Times newspaper article also acknowledged the event, describing in detail the lynching of Jesse Washington. From the vivid and negative vocabulary used, it is safe to believe that the New York Times, and ultimately the majority of white people in America, seriously denounced the event.⁹ This article publicized the lynching, making it nationally aware and thus, humiliating Waco, Texas. This article also demonstrated the difference between northern and southern ideas of racism during the early 1900s. For example, southern newspapers, such as ones from Dallas, supported the event, making very few comments; however, newspapers, such as *Nation* and the *New Republic* found disgust in regards to the lynching.

The lynching of Jesse Washington was one of over 4,000 recorded lynchings that took place between 1882 and 1968; however, there were probably many more that occurred but went undocumented. It was gruesome, inhumane, and morally unsound.

⁸ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *The Waco Horror*, 8.

⁹ “15,000 WITNESS LYNCHING,” *New York Times*.

Although the lynching involved the burning and killing of a more-than-likely innocent young farmhand, the lynching brought about some progress in the oppression of black people. Because of the lynching, the NAACP brought publicity to the horrific occurrence and exposed the racist city to the nation, ultimately propelling an anti-lynching movement and fueling the prosperity of the black population.