

HONOR, SUPREMACY,
AND THE LYNCHING OF HENRY SMITH

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	2
ABSTRACT	3
NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR	4
CHAPTER ONE: SETTING THE STAGE	5
CHAPTER TWO: HORROR IN PARIS	9
CHAPTER THREE: RECONCILING WITH HISTORY	15
BIBLIOGRAPHY	19

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ABSTRACT

This study illustrates the past realities of extralegal violence through the unique story of Henry Smith, an African-American brutally lynched in Paris, Texas during the 1890s. Through an examination of primary documents – newspaper articles, photographs, eyewitness testimonies, etc. – *and* secondary literature, the author will reconstruct an event in Texas' history that has remained, for the most part, unexplored by the greater historical community. One's purpose in so doing is to shed light on the shadowed history of lynching in the *postbellum* South, keeping in mind the unique elements of East Texas' economic, political, and social climates before, during, and after Henry Smith's murder.

The goal is to situate the specific events surrounding Henry Smith's execution within the more general realm of U.S. history in the wake of Reconstruction, but at the same time, illustrate fully the localized nuances that fostered this violent spectacle. Hence, the author's aim is not to re-write the master narrative, *per se*. Rather, this is an attempt to enhance the reader's historical perspective, placing Henry Smith's story against the backdrop of lynching in American memory. The ultimate objective is to address – at least in part – these questions: *What conditions justified racialized public lynching in the postbellum South? And how, if at all, may we reconcile with this chapter of history?*

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

For decades, many historians have either actively or unwittingly woven extrajudicial violence – or *lynching* – into a single, interconnected chapter of the American master narrative. And, as with many historical phenomena, lynching is often examined through the anachronistic lens of the present. While the post-modern paradigm stems from society’s current set of norms, and is by definition inescapable, there is a degree to which historians can maintain objectivity with respect to their accounts of the past. *But how?* The answer to this question lies in historians’ approach to uncovering the microcosmic elements of the grand story: that is, the evidence of specific people, places, and events. Herein lies the value of this academic undertaking.

CHAPTER ONE

SETTING THE STAGE

In light of Emancipation, new economic, social, and political relationships had developed between blacks and whites in the *postbellum* South. During the late nineteenth century, the effects of Reconstruction led to a rapid increase in economic vitality throughout much of the South. East Texas' transition from a rural slave-holding region to an interspersed network of thriving cities with profitable markets provides an apropos illustration of this "New South."¹ Where the institution of slavery had once underscored the traditional roles assigned to blacks, newly found freedom and freshly formed infrastructure created economic opportunities, which – to some extent – led to better conditions for many shrewd and ambitious freedmen. However limited, this shift in the balance of power and wealth came with consequences.

Namely, the new economic opportunities necessitated competition. The war-ravaged South had been brought back to a state of economic vitality, but the men (and occasionally, women) who sought to benefit from this New South economy were no longer exclusively white. As if the struggle to rise from a crushing defeat was not enough for the once confederate states, the reality of "Old South" oligarchy and white

¹ Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940 (new Directions in Southern Studies)* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 6-7.

supremacy waned during Reconstruction, arguably precipitating a collective identity crisis among southern whites. Thus, in the absence of Unionist policies and radical social change, the post-Reconstruction epoch marks a phenomenal reversion to Old South values.²

What renders the new rise of Old South beliefs so phenomenal is that during this period – the late-nineteenth century – the typically racialized extralegal punishments doled out under the auspices of “vigilante justice” reached an apex throughout former slave-holding communities.³ In fact, approximately 91% of lynching between 1889 and 1918 took place in former Confederate States. In Texas, the number of extralegal executions numbered over 600 during this period.⁴

A pertinent question to assert is: *How did such violence rise decades after the paradigmatic shift in racial relations that accompanied the end of slavery in United States?* This question, while vast in scope, may be better addressed through the close examination of an event that has been rarely approached by the greater historical community – the brutal 1893 lynching of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas. Through the story of Henry Smith, an emphasis on the economic, political, and social climate of Paris, Texas will underscore and contextualize race-based vigilantism that once characterized the now sleepy Texas town.

Like many emerging cities in Northeast Texas, Paris – located in Lamar County – had relatively humble beginnings. With Reconstruction, Northeast Texas’ economy

² Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2004), 2-14.

³ Idem.

⁴ NAACP, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States: 1889-1918* (New York: NAACP, 1919), 39.

diversified: a plethora of railroad lines connected cities such as Paris with the great economic hubs of Houston, Dallas, Kansas City, St. Louis, New Orleans, and others. Originally a ranching and cotton-growing region, Paris and surrounding areas continued to capitalize on these traditional economic staples. In addition, lumber manufacturers, bankers, and wholesale distributors added to the structural complexity of this modernizing area.

That stated, cotton was still king.⁵ Whether through increased access to markets (via railroads), or widespread demand due to population increase, King Cotton remained in full swing through the 1930s in northeast Texas.⁶ From 1870 to 1930, the population in northeast Texas soared from 93,389 to 316,489.⁷ Perhaps in response to the economic diversity that accompanied this increase in population, cities – Paris, for instance – became more urban, and hosted a substantial middle class. Still, urban populations in northeast Texas comprised less than twenty percent of the total population.⁸

Though historians have argued that middle-class movements were increasingly popular and widespread, it is crucial to view the class dynamics of Paris, Texas in a relative manner.⁹ For, it is within the racially volatile context of northeast Texas' history that the lynching of Henry Smith may be appropriately explored. This rise in population birthed a business and middle-class constituency, shifting power in the region away from

⁵ Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: an Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 137.

⁶ Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, —Texas: TOTAL POPULATION, 1870-1930, University of Virginia Library, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/php/newlong3.php> (accessed August 10, 2013).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁸ *Idem.*

⁹ William Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 209-210.

the once oligarchical white plantation owners. Within this context, a marked shift in the balance of power away from Southern aristocrats and toward the emerging working class arguably sparked the sociopolitical tensions that fostered and precipitated the environment necessary for the lynching of countless individuals, predominately blacks.¹⁰

Also during the end of the nineteenth century, the rise of *populism* – a political ideology that endorsed working-class people – brought with it a seriously polarizing reality. Namely, free whites were now in competition with free blacks for jobs and even market share.¹¹ Indeed, there were blacks that fared well in the wake of the Civil War, though this was relatively rare. However uncommon, the perceived risk of black infringement upon white labor opportunities was one of many facets upon which Southern whites banded together in defense of white supremacy.¹²

Asserting supremacy was a multi-tiered operation for whites in Paris, and subsequently, there exists a long and bloody trail of racialized violence, one that both precedes and follows the era in discussion. Keep this in mind when digesting the brutal spectacle that was Henry Smith's public lynching. As Richard E. Nisbett discusses in his book, *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South*, the increased tendency of white Southerners to commit certain kinds of violence was not solely due to socioeconomic class, population density, or the legacy of slavery in the South; it was the result of a culture of honor in which a man's reputation was central to his economic

¹⁰ Robert L. Zangrando, *NAACP Papers*.

¹¹ Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 132-135.

¹² Cynthia Skove Nevels, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness through Racial Violence* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 2.

survival.¹³ That stated, many still argue that the remnants of slavery, along with socioeconomic factors played a substantial role in Southern lynchings. Although from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, the term “lynching” did not contain particularly racial undertones, the 1880s ushered in mob violence across the South, which was increasingly carried out by whites to the detriment of blacks. Between the years 1882 and 1964, for instance, nearly five thousand people died from lynching, the overwhelming majority being African-American.¹⁴

¹³ Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen, *Culture of Honor: the Psychology of Violence in the South* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), 2-124.

¹⁴ The Tuskegee Institute. *See bibliography*.

CHAPTER TWO

HORROR IN PARIS

The 1890s hosted the worst period of lynching in U.S. history, based on the sheer numbers of extralegal killings and the contemporaneous emergence of widespread media coverage in the U.S. Though many occurrences of lynching were not recorded outside their immediate locality, some extralegal executions made their way to the forefront of mainstream media. In February 1893, a white reporter from the *New York Sun* offered a grisly account of the burning at the stake in Paris, Texas, the victim of which – Henry Smith – was a black man accused of molesting then murdering a four-year-old white girl. The following is an account of events leading up to *and* following Henry Smith’s death.

Henry Smith, the “negro ravisher” of 4-year-old Myrtle Vance, died at the stake on February 1, 1893.¹⁵ Following the *supposed* perpetration of his awful crimes, Paris, Texas and surrounding territories were caught up in a “wild frenzy of excitement.”¹⁶ As the story goes, suspicion of Henry Smith came after witnesses allegedly observed Smith carrying a white girl in town. On day later, in January 1893, Myrtle Vance was found in

¹⁵ *New York Sun*, 1893.

¹⁶ *Idem*.

the woods just outside of Paris' town center – supposedly having been raped, and then bludgeoned to death. Before local law enforcement could apprehend possible suspects, Henry Smith had already skipped town.¹⁷

This raised and affirmed suspicions in the minds of Paris locals, and a search party was quickly assembled. Days later, Paris locals B. B. Sturgeon and James T. Hicks, who were members of this search party, attested (along with many others) to having identified a bedraggled Henry Smith in Hope, Arkansas.¹⁸ As a city, Paris was reportedly “wild with joy over the apprehension of the brute.”¹⁹ Almost instantly, hundreds of people poured into the city from the adjoining areas, and the word quickly spread that “the punishment of the fiend should fit the crime.”²⁰ Astoundingly, a consensus had been reached outside of the judicial system – that death by fire was the penalty Smith should pay for “the most atrocious murder and terrible outrage in Texas history.”²¹

Persuaded with incensed media coverage and word-of-mouth, both the curious and the sympathetic came to Paris, Texas on trains and wagons, on horses, and even on foot to witness the sufficient punishment of the alleged perpetrator of so terrible a crime as the rape and murder of an innocent (white) girl. As one man reports, “[w]hisky shops were closed, unruly mobs were dispersed, schools were dismissed by a proclamation from the mayor, and everything was done in a business-like manner.”²² Advertisements for the lynching reached as far as New York City. And, with newly developed

¹⁷ “A Most Horrible Crime: The Demoniac Deed Done by a Negro Fiend,” *Galveston Daily News*, January 28, 1893.

¹⁸ *New York Sun*, 1893.

¹⁹ *Idem*.

²⁰ *New York Times*, 1897.

²¹ *New York Sun*, 1893.

²² *Idem*.

technologies such as the telegraph, word had spread swiftly.

Upon being questioned, Henry Smith denied his involvement in Myrtle Vance's untimely death, but upon being stripped naked for examination, his undergarments appeared to be spattered with blood and a part of his shirt had been ripped off. Still in custody at Hope, Arkansas, Smith was kept under heavy guard for the night. He confessed to the crime late that evening. At least, this is what the newspapers reported.

The following morning, Smith was brought through Texarkana, where five thousand people awaited the train. For fear of a premature lynching, prominent Paris citizens delivered impassioned speeches, demanding that the prisoner "be not molested by Texarkana people, but that the guard be allowed to deliver him up to the outraged and indignant citizens of Paris."²³ Along the journey back to Paris, the train gathered in size and fervor, having gleaned individuals from various towns and corners of the region. Anxious spectators crowded upon the platforms and tops of coaches in order to be observe the lynching. Henry Smith, deemed the "guilty negro," would soon be delivered to an infuriated mob led by the victim's family – the Myrtles.²⁴

Arriving in Paris, Texas at noon on February 1, 1893, the train was met by a surging mass of around ten thousand onlookers. Immediately after arriving in Paris, Henry Smith was placed upon a carnival float "in mockery of a king upon his throne," and, stalked by the immense crowd, was escorted through the city so that all might catch a glimpse of "the most inhuman monster known in [recent] history." The march of death began on Main Street, continuing to the town square, around the square, and finally to the

²³ *New York Sun*, 1893.

²⁴ *Idem*.

open prairies several hundred yards from the center of Paris proper. The prairieland was selected because it was the closet available venue for a crowd of such magnitude.

There, Smith was placed upon a scaffold, “six feet square and ten feet high,” securely bound, within the view of all beholders. The perpetrator was now the victim in the eyes of the community. Smith was tortured for nearly an hour by red-hot iron brands thrust against his trembling body, which began at his feet and proceeded up to his face and head. One reporter noted the “delight” Myrtle Vance’s twelve-year-old brother took in gauging out Smith’s eyes with the iron rod.²⁵ Then, still apparently alive, kerosene was poured on Smith’s convulsing body, and cottonseed hulls were placed beneath him and set aflame. The *New York Sun* reported that: “in less time than it takes to relate it, the tortured man was wafted beyond the grave to another fire, hotter and more terrible than the one just experienced.”²⁶ Perhaps most disturbing is the fact that following Smith’s incineration, curiosity seekers – not yet satiated – galloped away with trophies from the brutal spectacle, including bone fragments and other relics that had survived the fire. Even pieces of charcoal were snagged.²⁷

The supposed cause of the crime against four-year-old Myrtle was that Henry Vance, Myrtle’s father, had served as a deputy policeman in Paris. In the course of his duty, Deputy Vance was called to arrest Henry Smith for being drunk in public. When Smith became unruly, Vance was forced to use his club, beating Smith badly. While in jail, Smith swore vengeance, and reportedly assaulted Vance several times. In the eyes of the public, Smith’s lust for revenge was not yet assuaged – that is, not until “he grabbed

²⁵ *Galveston Daily News*, January 28, 1893.

²⁶ *New York Sun*, 1893.

²⁷ *Galveston Daily News*, January 28, 1893.

up the little girl and committed the crime.”²⁸ Citizens responded to the crime against an innocent white girl with an unparalleled craving for vengeance – or “JUSTICE,” as most called it. Many endorsed this view of vigilante justice, and it is almost unconscionable to imagine that such attitudes were commonplace in the south as recently as eighty years ago.



²⁹ See footnote.

²⁸ *Galveston Daily News*, January 28, 1893.

²⁹ *The Avengers of Little Myrtle Vance, and the Villian [sic] Brought to Justice*, 1893, Library of Congress, accessed August 18, 2013, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004671621/>.

CHAPTER THREE

MAKING SENSE OF THE PAST: A CONCLUSION

Given the brutal legacy of public lynching, it is easy for those of the present-day paradigm to feel shame and disgust with respect to the incident. It seems natural, and it is. However, such a disposition often works against humanity's desire to prevent the recurrence of such incidents. The very act of sweeping shameful aspects of history under the proverbial rug can be deleterious. For, it is through exposure to and reconciliation with the past – whether good, bad, or ugly – that society is able to avoid repeating the deplorable aspects of its past. Sometimes, embracing the ugly baby is the best way to progress. And though lynching is neither a fun nor exciting topic for most, it is undoubtedly crucial in the quest for understanding many ills of the present. Remembering the dark spots of history effectively illuminates them. History's truth lies in the totality of its telling.

With respect to the South, author C. Vann Woodward – who is considered by many to be one of most influential historians of the post-World War II era – speaks to this notion in his book, *The Burden of Southern History*. In a chapter entitled “The Search for Southern Identity,” Woodward asserts: “The Southerner may not have been very happy about those old monuments of regional distinctiveness,” but that such relics (e.g., lynching, Jim Crow, etc.) “serve as indisputable truth that the South was

different.”³⁰ Here, the author touches on something fundamental: that, in defining the nuances of epochs past, one’s present search for identity lies in *all* that came before.

As a historian, it is a difficult task to contextualize the present without depicting the past in a regionalized and specific way. That is why recently, the topic of lynching has been approached by historians in such a manner. For example, in his 1993 publication, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930*, William Fitzhugh Brundage tackles the topical leviathan of extralegal punishment by devoting an entire book to lynching in *only* two states over a fifty-year period. In an effort to encapsulate the South’s “obsession” with lynching, Brundage chooses Virginia and Georgia as representations of the “upper” and “lower” South, respectively.³¹ From the micro to the macro, historians such as Brundage shed light on the legacy of Southern lynching through the conveyance of regional histories, and in hopes of threading these histories into the greater social fabric of history and American memory.

In essence, this is the same approach taken with regard to the story of Henry Smith. But, as historian Cynthia Skove Nevels notes in her book, *Lynching to Belong: Claiming Whiteness through Racial Violence*, lynching occurred at different times, in different places, and for different reasons.³² Hence, the details and specificity of each account play a role in illustrating the pixels that comprise the big picture, not only with respect to the genre of lynching, but with respect to American memory thereof. This is why seemingly insignificant stories – the lynching of Henry Smith, for instance – may

³⁰ C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, 3rd ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 4-6.

³¹ Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 1-17.

³² Nevels, *Lynching to Belong*, 1-8.

enhance an audience's understanding of something very grand in the architecture of the past.

It has been argued that exacting justice outside of the realm of legality is arguably unjust by its very nature. But, when the intentionality behind such an act is considered – namely, the idea that the threat of lynching was a powerfully effective method of keeping black Southerners subjugated – one sees that vicious punishment both deterred vicious crime, and also struck fear into those associated with crime itself. Whether this justifies such acts, however, lies beyond the scope of this study.

In the south, blacks historically served as scapegoats for tense, white populations. This seems to be the case for Henry Smith and the citizens of Paris, Texas in 1893. As press accounts made clear, to witness a lynching – or simply to catch a glimpse of its aftermath – could be a searing experience for those who implicitly targeted: most notably, young African-American males. Regardless of justification, the threat of lynching was a powerful mechanism for keeping black Southerners submissive.

The primary lesson one may take away from the lynching of Henry Smith is this: despite society's current value system – one that, in general, condemns and rejects extrajudicial violence and racism – the legacy of this shameful past still lingers. If time heals all wounds, then American society needs more of it. Even amidst the most progressive era in American society to date, there are *still* remnants of racism and violence. A better understanding of the origins of such prejudice is one important step in the process of reconciliation. That is precisely where the importance of history – the good, the bad, and the ugly – lies. May the brutal lynching of Henry Smith serve as a

reminder of how far American society has come, as well as a reminder of the long road that lies ahead.

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