

"AT THE HANDS OF PERSONS UNKNOWN" LYNCHING IN AMERICA

*The ghastly body swaying in the sun
The women thronged to look, but never a one
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.*
—from "The Lynching" by Claude McKay

The Lynching of Claude Neal

On October 19, 1934, the battered body of a 19-year-old white woman, Lola Cannidy, was discovered in a wooded area of Jackson County, Florida. She had been raped and beaten to death with a hammer.

Suspicion immediately focused on a 23-year-old married black man, Claude Neal, who lived in the area and sometimes worked as a hired hand on the Cannidy farm. Several people said they saw Neal near the crime scene the day Lola Cannidy was murdered. They said that Neal's hands looked "skinned up." A piece of bloody cloth, found near the girl's body, seemed to match a shirt belonging to Neal. Neal was soon arrested

The sheriff knew that lynching was a real threat. Between 1900 and 1934, six people had been lynched in the county. Moreover, racial tensions had recently increased. It was during the depression and many poor whites had lost their farms, and were forced to compete with blacks for a dwindling number of jobs, as well as for government relief.

The change of jails, however, did not protect Neal. With about 100 Jackson County men in pursuit, Neal was moved three more times before authorities finally took him across the state line to the jail in Brewton, Alabama. While in Brewton, Neal confessed that he had raped and killed Cannidy. But how officers obtained this confession is not known.

Meanwhile, word of Neal's location in Alabama leaked out. Fifteen men decoyed the sheriff, grabbed Neal, and drove him back to Florida.

But by now all of northern Florida and southern Alabama knew about a planned [lynching](#). A local newspaper even advertised the event with this headline: "Florida to Burn Negro at Stake: Sex Criminal Seized from Brewton Jail, Will be Mutilated, Set Afire in Extra-Legal Vengeance for Deed."

A radio station also broadcast the news. Soon, the entire nation was aware of what was happening in Jackson County. [Walter White](#), executive secretary of the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People \(NAACP\)](#), even sent a telegram to Florida's Governor [David Sholtz](#) asking him to intervene. Sholtz replied that he could do nothing until local authorities called for help.

By the night of October 26, several hundred cars carrying about 3,000 people had descended on the Cannidy farmhouse. The mob grew restless and started screaming for Neal. The kidnapers became fearful that a riot would break out if the lynching were to take place at the Cannidy farm. So they decided to lynch him themselves.

Before killing Neal, they tortured and mutilated him for two hours. At 1 a.m., they tied Neal's lifeless body to a car and dragged it down a road to the Cannidy farmhouse. By this time, most of those waiting for the lynching had gone home, but members of the Cannidy family continued to mutilate the body. The mutilated body was then hanged from a tree on the courthouse lawn in Marianna.

By mid-morning, a large crowd had gathered in front of the courthouse. Neal's body had been removed, and the onlookers grew frustrated and angry. When they learned that another black man was locked up, several hundred people attacked the courthouse. The mob numbering about 2,000 retreated only after law officers inside threatened to shoot.

After finally receiving a call for help from Jackson County officials, the governor ordered the National Guard into Marianna to restore order. By Sunday morning, guardsmen had quelled the riot and dispersed the mob. About 200 innocent black men, women, and children had suffered beatings during the riot.

The prevailing opinion among the white people of Jackson County was that, although the rioting was regrettable, the lynching of Claude Neal was justified. One local newspaper editorialized, "What America needs today is men who are willing to defend virtue and womanhood not only against the brute Negro, but the social temptations of today that are placed around our girls."

A few months after the lynching, the Jackson County Grand Jury found that Claude Neal died "at the hands of a small group of persons unknown to us." Attempts to get the federal government to enter the case failed when President [Roosevelt](#)'s attorney general ruled that the newly enacted [Lindbergh Kidnapping](#) Law did not apply to the abduction of lynching victims. No one involved in the lynching was ever prosecuted.

Lynching in America

Before the [Civil War](#), most lynching victims were white. But, after federal troops withdrew from the South at the end of [Reconstruction](#), lynchings of African-Americans began to rise. This reached a peak in 1892 when 71 whites and 155 blacks were lynched in the United States. Between 1882 and 1968, there were 4,743 persons lynched in the United States; over 70 percent of the victims were African-Americans.

Although lynchings decreased in most parts of the country after 1892, the proportion of those taking place in the South rose. By the late 1920s, 95 percent of all lynchings in the nation took place in the South. The victims were almost always African-Americans, and few lynch mob participants ever went to jail. Police and other eye-witnesses refused to identify lynch mob members, and Southern all-white juries rarely convicted them.

The Anti-Lynching Crusade

From its founding in 1909 to the late 1940s, the NAACP led the fight to pass a federal anti-lynching law. It argued that a federal law was needed since local and state governments in the South failed to prosecute lynching. In 1922, the [House of Representatives](#) passed an anti-lynching bill. But Southern senators argued that it unconstitutionally interfered with local and state authority. The bill died when the Southerners resorted to a [filibuster](#).

As the [Great Depression](#) gripped the country in the 1930s, lynchings of African-Americans again began to increase in the South. The NAACP, under the leadership of Walter White, pressed for a new effort to pass a federal law against lynching.

In 1937, White and the NAACP used the Claude Neal lynching to spark a national crusade in support of an [anti-lynching bill](#) introduced by Rep. Joseph Gavagan (D-N.Y.). The bill defined a lynch mob as "an assemblage composed of three or more persons acting [together] without authority of law, to kill or injure any person in the custody of any peace officer. . . ."

The Gavagan bill stated that any local or state officer who refused to protect an individual in custody or to prosecute lynch mob members would be guilty of a felony punishable by a fine up to \$5,000 and imprisonment up to five years. Any officer actually aiding a lynch mob would face a prison term of from five to 25 years. Finally, the bill made the county where a lynching took place liable for damages of \$2,000 to \$10,000 payable to an injured victim or, if killed, to his survivors. Missing from this bill, however, were any federal penalties for the lynchers themselves.

The Gavagan bill passed the House in 1937 and again in 1940, but both times it died in the Senate because of Southern filibusters. The last major attempt to enact a federal anti-lynching law took place in 1949 when Senator [Hubert Humphrey](#) (D-Minn.) introduced a bill with the strong backing of President [Harry Truman](#). But, like the others before it, this measure never made it to the president's desk.

Although the NAACP had failed to get a [federal law](#) passed, lynchings had almost disappeared by 1950. The NAACP's 30-year struggle to publicize the barbarity of lynch mobs had penetrated even the most backward and racist regions of the country.

For Discussion and Writing

1. The lynching of African-Americans in the South was rare before the Civil War, reached a peak in 1892, increased again somewhat during the 1930s, and finally gradually disappeared after 1950. Using your knowledge of U.S. history, try to explain these patterns.
2. In one of the first studies of the lynching problem in the United States, Arthur F. Raper wrote in *The Tragedy of Lynching* (1930), "Mobs do not come out of the

- nowhere; they are the logical outgrowths of dominant assumptions and prevalent thinking." Explain in your own words what you think he meant.
3. What is a lynching? Could a lynching ever be justified? Explain.

For Further Reading

"Black's White." *Time*. 24 Jan. 1938: 8-10. [This is a *Time* cover story on Walter White and the NAACP's effort to get the Gavagan bill passed.]

Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. *Lynching in the New South, Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930*. Urbana, Ill.: U. of Illinois Press, 1993.

A C T I V I T Y

Opinion Page, 1934

Form the class into groups of five or six students. Each group will be an editorial team for a 1934 newspaper. It is your assignment to create, layout and publish an opinion/editorial page for your newspaper.

Step 1. Gathering Samples

Collect examples of modern opinion/editorial pages from local newspapers. These can be used as models for your group work.

Step 2. Team Writing

Each member is responsible for writing at least one of the following opinion/editorial features.

1. **Letter to the Editor:** This letter from Claude Neal's family will describe the horror of Claude Neal's lynching and explain how it has affected his family.
2. **Guest Editorial:** This newspaper editorial will explain the causes of lynching, and what should be done about it from the perspective of Walter White of the NAACP.
3. **Editorial:** A piece laying out the facts of America's lynching problem and asking why nothing was done to prevent Claude Neal's lynching and why no one was prosecuted.
4. **Pro:** An editorial taking the position that a federal anti-lynching statue like the Gavagan bill is needed and should be passed.
5. **Con:** An editorial taking the position that federal anti-lynching legislation like the Gavagan bill is unconstitutional and not really needed.

Step 3. Team Editing

After each person has written a letter or editorial, exchange pieces for editing and comments, and make needed revisions.

Step 4. Layout/Production

Type or neatly print each of the articles. Then, using butcher paper cut to the size of an actual paper, layout the articles to create your own opinion page. You can also create an editorial box, cartoons, or other graphic elements.

Step 5. Presentation and Discussion

When the opinion/editorial pages are completed, students should reassemble as a class and share their pages. Decide which opinion/editorial page had the best individual piece, and which had the best overall presentation.