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Reform and Regression: The Aftermath of the 1909 Cairo, Illinois Lynching

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REFORM AND REGRESSION: THE AFTERMATH OF THE 1909 CAIRO, ILLINOIS
LYNCHING

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And my glory but Sammy she did ! She did !
 And they stole you out of the jail.
 They wraped you around a cotton-wood tree.
 And they laughed when they heard you wail.
 Laughed.
 Laughed.
 They laughed when they heard you wail.¹

The “Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” by Gwendolyn Brooks, showed the utter pain of knowing another black body was hanged due to being black. Jacqueline Goldsby begins her book *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* with commentary on the “Ballad of Pearl May Lee.” This 1945 poem revealed much about how women, family, and communities live with the pain of such an event.² In 1909, my ancestors lived in the town of Cairo, Illinois. This place, in the southern tip, was ravaged by a two-man lynching on November 11th of that year. Asking myself the question, “How did they continue to live?” led my passion for researching this event and its aftermath. My great-grandmother entered the world just days before this. What did her mother’s heart ponder as a large mob lynched these men unjustly? How did the black community feel and seek peace from such a scar on the town?

Brent M.S. Campney highlights how the lynching in 1909 was not the origin of the racism and lynchings in Cairo; rather, this event should be placed in a larger regional context of racism.³ Historian Stacy McDermott writes of how this lynching as well as the work of Ida B. Wells, the governor, and anti-lynching advocates aided in stopping tolerance of mob lynchings in the state of Illinois.⁴ Historian Kerry Pimblott narrates some of the racism within the white

¹ Gwendolyn Brooks, “The Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” *Présence Africaine*, no. 1, (November-December 1947): 116.

² Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 2-3.

³ Brent M. S. Campney, “The Peculiar Climate of this Region” The 1854 Cairo Lynching and the Historiography of Racist Violence Against Blacks in Illinois,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 107, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 143-170.

⁴ Stacy Pratt McDermott, “An Outrageous Proceedng”: A Northern Lynching and the Enforcement of Anti-Lynching Legislation in Illinois, 1905-1910,” *The Journal of Negro History* 84, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 61-78.

community and the regression of Cairo's black population suffered in the aftermath.⁵ My thesis converges from these three historians. I combine the three conclusions as a point of comparison of state vs. local Black political and social progression, due to the larger context this event should be based in locally and nationally. Though the state of Illinois abolished mob lynching with the 1905 state law, local law and politics digressed in relation to racial equality in the aftermath of the 1909 lynching.⁶ This aftermath of the event succeeded in creating dissent on mob violence and applying the state's 1905 anti-lynching law. But it did not radically change local race relations within Cairo and reflected a larger race issue within the time and place.

Illinois was a free state when it entered the union in 1818 but had allowed slavery pre-statehood; there were some slavery supporters which led to debate that ended in a constitutional referendum not in favor of slavery in 1824.⁷ Illinois was not immune to the scour of racial lynchings. Ida B. Wells, a prominent black journalist and activist, said in 1910, "Since 1893 there have been sixteen lynchings within the State."⁸

An acute example of violent race relations gave background to mob lynching in the state and the southern Illinois region called Egypt.⁹ In 1854, Joseph Spencer, a black businessman in Cairo, was lynched after he was charged with trespassing and showed up to his hearing threatening those around him with a powder keg.¹⁰ This act led to an affair on his boat, where he was met by a mob. The white mob threatened him, and he fiercely countered those threats. In response, many men in arms set his boat aflame and waited for him to appear. But with a weight on him, he threw himself in the river. The accounts painted Spencer as offensive and lawless, but

⁵ Kerry Pimblott, *Faith in Black Power: Religion, Race, and Resistance in Cairo, Illinois* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 45-55.

⁶ McDermott, "An Outrageous Proceeding," 62.

⁷ Campney, "The Peculiar Climate of this Region," 147.

⁸ Ida B. Wells, "How Enfranchisement Stops Lynchings," *Original Rights Magazine*, June 1910, 46.

⁹ Campney, "The Peculiar Climate," 145.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 143-144.

he could have been despised due to his economic achievement in business and gambling. Also, he asserted his want for respect, which he did not always return to white people, and he took pride in his skin color. Spencer's actions prior to his death could indicated that he knew "full well that it would precipitate mob violence."¹¹

Southern Illinois had a history of racial prejudice and stereotyping that led to racist and exclusionary laws in the 1800s. The Illinois Black Exclusion Law, which was to keep black people from staying in the state, was passed (though not incredibly enforced) in 1853.¹² In Cairo, a series of racist acts led to a race riot in 1857, which led to another riot in Mound City after black Cairoites had fled there. White citizens of Cairo seemed to mostly support the rioters.¹³ The Reconstruction period led to the repeal of the "Black Laws," but much of the promised equal citizenship was not realized. By the beginning of the 1900s, with the Compromise of 1877 and the introduction of Jim Crow, "blacks in Illinois found themselves in circumstances only marginally better than those they had endured in the antebellum years".¹⁴ In 1900, Blacks accounted for 40% of Cairo compared to Chicago with only 5% black representation.¹⁵ And the state's race-based violence was prevalent in the early 1900s and there were sundown towns throughout the state.¹⁶

Ida B. Wells, a prominent Chicagoan black journalist and activist, wrote an article stating there were 87 black people lynched in America in 1909.¹⁷ In the years 1880 and 1920, 25 people were lynched in Illinois.¹⁸ Jacqueline Goldsby's *A Spectacular Secret* has an image of a postcard

¹¹ Ibid, 144-146.

¹² Ibid, 147-148.

¹³ Ibid, 154-155.

¹⁴ Ibid, 155-156.

¹⁵ Pimblott, *Faith in Black Power*, 45.

¹⁶ Campney, "The Peculiar Climate," 159, 163.

¹⁷ Ida B. Wells, "Our Country's Lynching Record," in *Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Exploratory Study of an American Black Woman, 1893-1930*, (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990), 279.

¹⁸ Pimblott, *Faith in Black Power*, 45.

of Commercial Avenue in Cairo. Written in the top left corner is “x where they hung the coon” with an “x” over the arch the center of the card.¹⁹ The image below shows William James on a pole near the arch with a large crowd surrounding such a death.²⁰ On November 12, 1909, the *Cairo Bulletin*’s headline was “Cairo Reaps Fruit Of Many Murdered Unpunished Rope, Fire And Shot Means Of An Avenging Mob”.²¹ This mob was at one point at 10,000.²²



On November 8 of 1909 Mary (or Anna) Pelley, a young white woman of Cairo, was raped and killed.²³ William “Froggie” James, a black and new resident was accused of this crime.²⁴ There seemed to be some evidence to suspect James, but it was not completely solidified nor, had his trial happened.²⁵ Five people including James, all black, were arrested. Historian

¹⁹ Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret*, cover.

²⁰ Jim Crow and Progressivism, Bill of Rights Institute, accessed March 25, 2023, <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/jim-crow-and-progressivism>.

²¹ *Cairo Bulletin* (Cairo, Illinois), Nov. 12, 1909, 1, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn93055779/1909-11-12/ed-1/>.

²² Pimblott, *Faith in Black Power*, 47.

²³ Some sources have her name as Mary while others say Anna.

²⁴ Pimblott, *Faith in Black Power*, 46.

²⁵ Wells, “How Enfranchisement,” 47; “Suspected Murderer Spirited Away From City And Mob Foiled,” *Cairo Bulletin*, Nov. 11, 1910, 1 <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn93055779/1909-11-11/ed-1/>.

Stacy McDermott writes, “Authorities based his arrest primarily on the color of his skin” as things like his build made him suspected.²⁶ The *Cairo Bulletin* for November 11th recounted the police taking James on a train to avoid the mob that was trying to capture him. Pelley’s brother was among the mob. They came and searched the police headquarters, and he was not found. The *Bulletin* continued, “Violent denunciations were hurled at the chief and jailer, and threats were made to lynch them if the prisoner was not produced.”²⁷ Later, part of the crowd took over a streetcar when it was heard that James was going to Mound City nearby. They went to Mound City jail and searched, coming up empty. However, some were going by train to find him while the sheriff escorted him.²⁸

Sheriff Frank E. Davis and James were eventually found for all their fleeing, and both were taken back to Cairo.²⁹ On November 12th, the *Cairo Bulletin* wrote James “was lynched at 9:15 o’clock last night, being shot to death after futile efforts to hang him under the street arch...”³⁰ He was captured and ordered to testify. He eventually admitted guilt and claimed a man named Alexander “took the lead.”³¹ Then, they fit the rope around his neck, but the rope broke, and he descended to the crowd. He was shot hundreds of times, dragged, and eventually, he, now a corpse, was set ablaze. *Cairo Bulletin* wrote, “The flames revealed thousands of people on fences, on roofs of houses...and sidewalk a solid mass of humanity.”³² Afterwards, all that remained was his severed head found on a stick. His heart was cut before being burned and given as souvenirs, and one stranger brought a piece to the office of the *Bulletin*.³³

²⁶ McDermott, “An Outrageous Proceeding,” 63-64.

²⁷ *Cairo Bulletin*, Nov. 11, 1909, 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ McDermott, “An Outrageous Proceeding,” 64; Pimblott, *Faith in Black Power*, 47.

³⁰ “James Caught By Crowd Near Belknap, Ill.,” *Cairo Bulletin*, Nov. 12 1909, 1.

³¹ *Cairo Bulletin*, Nov. 12, 1909, 1.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ “Alexander Taken Out of City Under Guard of Force of Militia,” *Cairo Bulletin*, Nov. 13, 1909, 1, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn93055779/1909-11-12/ed-1/>.

Going against the officer and jailer, some leaders dragged Henry Salzner, a white man who supposedly murdered his wife some time before. He was hanged on a telegraph pole after being interrogated (during which he protested his innocence) and forced to pray. He was shot with bullets and his body fell on the ground. His blood became souvenirs.³⁴ The *Bulletin* mentioned that the governor of Illinois said the mob wanted Alexander and came up short, so they took Salzner. Alexander seemed to have been protected by “a special train,” as a mob had formed in the city of Centralia.³⁵ The state’s National Guard was ordered to go to Cairo.³⁶

Responses to this event spoke to the larger issue of racism and lynchings within the time and area. Also, it showed the negative feelings toward mob violence. The use of the Illinois “anti-mob law” 1905 law, which was headed by the recently elected and only Black state congressman, Edward D. Green, showed the issue.³⁷ Sheriff Davis was dismissed due to 1905 law by Illinois’s governor. Ida B. Wells and other activists aided in the triumphant response by the government.³⁸

Wells wrote much on lynchings and its data as were other journalists and newspapers in the midst of resistance.³⁹ In 1910, Wells wrote “How Enfranchisement Stops Lynchings” in the *Original Rights* magazine, in which she discussed the lack of security the police fought for in the Cairo lynching. She said that while James was arrested, “Sheriff had neither sworn in deputies to aid him in defending the prisoners, nor called on the Governor for troops,” and no “additional guards” near jail and work to help Salzner after being “taken from his cell.”⁴⁰ Also, she

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *Cairo Bulletin*, Nov 12, 1909, p. 1; *Cairo Bulletin*, Nov 13, 1909, 1.

³⁶ *Cairo Bulletin*, Nov. 13, 1909, p. 1; McDermott, “An Outrageous Proceeding,” 67. Note: it says in the newspaper that Sheriff Davis called in for the militia, but this might not be completely true.

³⁷ McDermott, “An Outrageous Proceeding,” 62.

³⁸ Ibid, 75.

³⁹ Ibid, 69.

⁴⁰ Wells, “How Enfranchisement,” 48, 51.

connected disenfranchisement to mobs and lynchings. She boldly stated, “the more complete the disenfranchisement, the more frequent and horrible has been the hangings, shootings, and burnings”.⁴¹ McDermott writes, “Yet despite the odds, black newspapers contributed to the anti-lynching campaign's goal to publicize as many lynchings as possible and educate as many people as possible in regard to the lynching problem in the United States”.⁴² Some of the decrease in lynchings in early 1900s can be attributed to this work in pen.⁴³

A look at the Black newspapers of the time displayed the disdain and defense against these mob lynchings. In the Editorial section on November 27th, 1909, of The Springfield *Forum*, a Black newspaper based in Springfield, Illinois, there was discussion of the lynching.⁴⁴ A contributor wrote James should have stayed in the jails at Cairo with protection like the police and state guard and there was a need for a deep investigation. The paper said, “The American white people are on trial again, testing whether or not this nation can long endure.”⁴⁵ In the Editorial section on November 20th, a writer argued for a “broader view” as mob violence ruins “organized government” and the Cairo mob “had no respect for color.”⁴⁶ They argued that the rape and murder was just as “dastardly” as the lynching.⁴⁷ Stacy McDermott writes that Black advocates “argued that lynching corrupted all who participated, eroded respect for the law, and threatened the safety of all members of every community that allowed it to happen” since

⁴¹ Ibid, 45.

⁴² McDermott, “An Outrageous Proceeding,” 70.

⁴³ Ibid, 70.

⁴⁴ “About The forum,” Chronicling America, Library of Congress, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86086415>; “Editorial,” *Forum*, Nov. 27, 1909, 2 <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86086415/1909-11-27/ed-1/>.

⁴⁵ *Forum*, Nov. 27, 1909, 2.

⁴⁶ “Editorial,” *Forum*, Nov. 20, 1909, 2, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86086415/1909-11-20/ed-1/>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

positions with a racial focus were not received in the white community.⁴⁸ This newspaper could be an example of such an argument.

After his dismissal, Davis “applied for reinstatement,” and the state’s newspapers’ editorial pages contributed to the conversation.⁴⁹ A “group of influential black Chicagoans” formed, (including Wells and her husband) which led to a resolution made and presented by Wells to the governor at Davis’s hearing.⁵⁰ Wells went to Cairo and acquired a “resolution drafted and signed in Cairo which demonstrated black opposition to the sheriff’s reinstatement.”⁵¹ But it was not without friction. Some in the black community supported Davis due to having black deputies and his political party and thinking he defended James, who some saw as guilty.⁵² In the end, she persuaded “leading black citizens” to not defend Davis and obtained her resolution.⁵³ To the governor at the reinstatement hearing, she presented the resolution, “her own investigation,” and a “legal statement” her lawyer husband crafted.⁵⁴ Davis was not reinstated by the governor, and the 1905 law held up and sealed a victory. McDermott writes, “Illinois thus put lynching legally in its past.”⁵⁵

John Murray Lansden, a previous mayor, wrote *A History of the City of Cairo* in 1910.⁵⁶ He conveyed the “vituperative animosity for blacks so vividly exhibited in the lynching of William James the year before.”⁵⁷ He did not support mob violence and commented that Salzner

⁴⁸ McDermott, “An Outrageous Proceeding,” 72.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 73.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 73-74.

⁵¹ Ibid, 74.

⁵² Ibid, 73.

⁵³ Pimblott, *Faith in Black Power*, 50.

⁵⁴ McDermott, “An Outrageous Proceeding,” 74.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 75.

⁵⁶ John M. Lansden, *A History of the City of Cairo, Illinois* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1910), 179.

⁵⁷ Campney, “The Peculiar Climate,” 163.

and another attempted lynching in 1910 would not have happened if James had not been killed.⁵⁸ He seemed to blame the officer's ignorance because "they should have known the impossibility of their protecting James" once he was the probable guilty party.⁵⁹ He also seemed to share his biases and his sympathy to hysteria for "the victim was a young white woman and the assailant and murderer a black brute..."⁶⁰

The larger context of racism and lynching offered compelling view of this act. Lansden conveyed that racist undertones were present in the Northern state. McDermott cites, "Between 1889 and 1918, 3,209 persons were lynched in this country" and 375 of that number were not in Southern states.⁶¹ As a nation, America has had a history of lynchings for ill-gotten justice since colonial times.⁶² Even the NAACP was founded February of 1909 in the aftermath of lynchings and a race riot in Springfield, Illinois.⁶³ Lynching continued in the state in 1924; a black man was lynched in Chicago.⁶⁴ If considered with a wider lens, this lynching is not just oddity or "an aberration of the northern situation. Nor was it a stereotypical southern lynching. Rather, it was more of an amalgam of racial prejudice and a historical pattern of lawlessness."⁶⁵

Pertaining to Illinois, Pemplott writes, "Nowhere was the threat of mob rule more palpable than in Alexander County, where five lynching and innumerable failed attempts kept black residents on constant guard."⁶⁶ Some "white civic elites" used Salzner to show it was not a

⁵⁸ Lansden, *A History*, 279.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 279.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 278.

⁶¹ McDermott, "An Outrageous Proceeding," 65; Note: This is not just black people.

⁶² *Ibid*, 66.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 68.

⁶⁴ Campney, "The Peculiar Climate," 162.

⁶⁵ McDermott, "An Outrageous Proceeding," 68; Pemplott, *Faith in Black Power*, 46.

⁶⁶ Pemplott, *Faith in Black Power*, 45.

race problem and instead a legality problem; others “drew direct linkages between expanded black citizenship rights, political power and acts of white racial terror.”⁶⁷

After the success at the hearing, early in 1910, Cairo was subject to mob violence yet again. This time two black men in jail for suspected thievery were saved by the response of “eight black deputies,” which led to the arrestment of 12 and death of the leader.⁶⁸ This led to the need for the new sheriff to be “taken into the national Guard’s protective custody” due to threats by white Cairoites to “kill his family,” “bomb the courthouse,” and lynching blacks.⁶⁹ The twelve arrested were not prosecuted. Wells wrote of sheriff’s defense of the two arrested men and the twelve men’s supposed indictment. She seemed to cite as an example of a good response to mobs.⁷⁰ But, Pemplott writes, “The tragic events of 1909-1910 represented a watershed in Cairo’s history.”⁷¹

These “watershed” events were followed by black voter suppression in Cairo. In regard to voting, “After 1913...no blacks were elected to city office for almost 70 years.”⁷² A decrease in the black population but an uptake in the white population followed in the 1910s. The Black community, especially churches, did continue and were still places of agency.⁷³ But the 1909 lynching was “the culmination of a broader pattern of unchecked racial terrorism aimed at nullifying Cairo’s reconstructed interracial polity.”⁷⁴ Then, there is a case that this event and the city’s past correlates to the 60s race riots and downturn in the latter half of the 20th century.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ Ibid, 48-49.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 50.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 51.

⁷⁰ Wells, “How Enfranchisement,” 52.

⁷¹ Pemplott, *Faith in Black Power*, 51.

⁷² Ibid, 52.

⁷³ Ibid, 53-56; Note: There was an increase in the black population in 1930-1940.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 46.

⁷⁵ Campney, “The Peculiar Climate,” 158.

A young mother, my great-great grandmother, brought a young girl into this world in the town of Cairo, Illinois. The unspeakable lynching must have been on her mind. My family left during my great grandmother's childhood, and I cannot help but wonder if the aftermath of such a terror made them leave. This event left a mark on the city and the state it sits in. The tireless work of reform and civil rights led to victory legislatively with a decline in the health of Cairo's prosperity, especially among the Black community. Lynchings will always be horrific, but how people react to them tells more of the story. The 1909 lynching was a testament to the activism and fight against mob lynching, the harboring racism in Cairo, and the broader climate in America and Illinois surrounding race-based deaths and mob violence.