

Lynching in America: A Case Study of Ed Johnson (Perspective 2)

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At the end of the Reconstruction Era in the 1890s, the federal government withdrew its protection and intervention on the behalf of black citizens' civil rights, leaving southern states free to create Jim Crow laws. These laws legalized racial segregation, inhibited blacks from voting and prohibited interracial marriages (Nash, 510). The Jim Crow era was a dangerous time for blacks in the South. If accused of breaking these laws, they faced criminal prosecution and the threat of lynching—a term defined as execution without legal authority. This definition does little to convey the violence and indignity imposed by lynching or the fear that it instilled in blacks. During this time many blacks were captured and publicly executed in terrible ways – including beating, torturing, mutilating, shooting, hanging or even burning alive. (Carson, 277)

Lynching was a tool used not only to punish the individual accused of crime, but also to send a message to other blacks to keep them from rising up against white male authority (Carson, 316). Over 1400 blacks were victims of lynching in the South in the 1890s (Nash, 512). The practice slowed following the anti-lynching campaign of journalist Ida B. Wells of Memphis, TN in 1893 (Carson, 316). However, the case of Ed Johnson proves that lynching remained a threat to blacks into the twentieth century.

The trial and lynching of Ed Johnson was well-documented by newspapers and court documents. Here are the facts of the case. Ed Johnson was a young black man accused of attacking and raping a young white woman in the St. Elmo neighborhood of Chattanooga, TN. The victim, Nevada Taylor, eighteen years old, was attacked from behind on her way home from work on the evening of January 23, 1906. It was dark, so she didn't get a clear look at her attacker. Her identification of the defendant was based on his general size, clothing and the sound of his voice. (Testimony of Nevada Taylor)

Johnson claimed he was innocent and provided credible alibis for the time in question (Testimony of Ed Johnson). The only physical evidence was a leather strap that had been used and left at the scene by the attacker (“Awful Crime at St. Elmo”). In February the case went to trial in Chattanooga. A jury convicted Ed Johnson of raping Nevada Taylor and sentenced him to death in March, 1906. The case was appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court which issued a stay of execution in order to have time to consider whether he had received a fair trial or not (Supreme Court Intervenes in the Ed Johnson Case). A large, angry mob reacted poorly to this court ruling, forcibly removed Johnson from police custody and lynched him on the night of March 19. They marched him to a bridge where they hanged him and then shot him multiple times (“God Bless You All – I Am Innocent”).

The facts and events surrounding Ed Johnson’s conviction and lynching provide insight into southern society during the Jim Crow Era. Exploring and analyzing the roles of race, gender, media coverage, and the justice system will show some of the injustices suffered by blacks during the Jim Crow era.

In this era, the idea of race mixing was contrary to white supremacist ideal of keeping the Anglo-Saxon race pure (Carson, 326). Thus in sex crimes like the Ed Johnson case, race and gender combined to play a role in outraging white supremacists and inciting violence. An upstanding young white woman from a nice family and respectable job is contrasted with a brutal, violent, scheming Negro (“Feeling at High Pitch”).

In “A Sermon on Lynching,” the white minister Dr. Howard E. Jones made bold statements denouncing the racism surrounding Ed Johnson’s lynching. He described the men responsible as “the most vicious, Godless, ignorant and depraved of the white men of this community.” He went on to say that their actions were teaching a new generation to hate and perpetuate violence. After delivering his sermon, the fact that his house was set on fire makes it clear that his opinion was not shared by everyone in the community.

The language of the documents also reveals subtle racism. The attacker is seldom described simply as male, but usually referenced as black or Negro. Miss Taylor’s testimony alone uses the word ‘Negro’ at least fifteen times (Testimony of Nevada Taylor). The language used in Johnson’s testimony is less formal. Overall his testimony gives the impression that he is poor and works odd jobs including one in a saloon (Testimony of Ed Johnson). Based on these impressions of the victim and defendant, the media, public, and jury, likely saw this as a case of an innocent young lady victimized by a harsh black thug.

The media definitely played a role in forming public opinion in this case. The press played up both sides of the story. An article in *The Chattanooga Times*, “Feeling at High Pitch” sensationalized the initial crime with colorful language and stirred public opinion with rumors of possible violence but without condemning such violence. One article described the local authorities as heroes for stemming an angry mob early in the case (“Law and Order Victorious over Overwhelming Odds”). Yet an article published after Johnson’s lynching seemed to condemn the violence that had been unleashed against him while making the police seem useless (“God Bless You All – I Am Innocent”). The sensational headlines shifted as the case developed and no doubt public opinion would have been affected.

Among other things, media coverage and public opinion became factors in the failure of the justice system to provide a fair trial to Ed Johnson. Instead of relocating the trial to an impartial area where publicity of the case had not been widespread, the court proceeded to try Johnson in Chattanooga with an all-white jury (“1906 Tennessee Conviction Overturned”). His court-appointed defense attorney admitted that he wasn’t sure of Johnson’s guilt but chose not to appeal his conviction in order to avoid another mob scene at the jail (“Funeral of Johnson”). Also local authorities seemed shockingly unprepared for the lynch mob that came for Johnson on the night of his death. Even though the controversial Supreme Court ruling had been announced early in the afternoon and rumors were circulating to the press prior to the mob action, local authorities only deemed it necessary to have one deputy on duty the night of Johnson’s lynching (“God Bless You All – I Am Innocent”). It seems that the local police could have foreseen the possible violence and taken steps to protect Johnson. The final failure of the justice system was to allow his murderers to go unpunished (“A Sermon on Lynching”). If the system had not failed in its role to protect Ed Johnson, the case might have had a completely different outcome.

Johnson’s guilt or innocence cannot be proven concretely, but it seems clear that his fate was not fairly decided. The circumstances surrounding his case definitely point out racial inequalities and injustices that thrived in the South during the Jim Crow era. Though lynching is no longer tolerated in the South, blacks and other minorities still face obstacles to equality and justice. The media still play a role in swaying public opinion, and corruption is still being uncovered in the justice system. Our nation has made improvements but still has work to do.

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