

Lynching in America: A Case Study of Ed Johnson (Perspective 1)

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Lynching can be defined as the execution of a person without following due legal process. This act, typically a mob's action, involves hanging, burning, or shooting of the victim. According to the historian, Clayborne Carson, lynching in the United States intensified in the years following the Civil War when "white mobs used lynching specially to enforce racial inequality." (316).

Lynching was more frequent in the South where violence against African Americans rose by the end of the 19th century after state legislations established segregation laws, the Jim Crow laws, in the 1880s. African Americans were deprived of the rights they once enjoyed under the Civil Rights Act of 1875, as the court ruled in 1883 that while it could control the states from discriminating, it could not control or prevent individuals from doing so (Carson 295). Sadly, over 1,400 black men were lynched during the 1890s, about a third charged with sex crimes (Nash 512). The case of Ed Johnson, murdered by a lynch mob in the state of Tennessee in 1906, provides a vivid example of the cruelty of lynching.

The lynching of Ed Johnson was the end result of a series of tragic events that took place in the city of Chattanooga, Tennessee. On the night of January 23, 1906, Nevada Taylor, a white woman, was attacked on her way home from work near the Forrest Hill Cemetery where she lived with her father who was the cemetery's superintendent (Awful Crime at St. Elmo). According to Miss Taylor in her testimony, an individual had walked behind her, took her pocketbook, placed a strap around her neck, and strangled her. Although it was a dark night, Taylor reported that she was able to see the face of her attacker, and from what she saw, he was a "Negro man" wearing a dark coat. Once she recovered from the assault, she walked to her house and told her family what had happened (Testimony of Nevada Taylor).

The crime was soon reported to the county jail where Captain Ship took charge of the search for the rapist (Awful Crime at St. Elmo). No one else saw the criminal who could have provided a hint as to his identity. Yet a desperate search was set in motion, and a reward totaling \$300.00 was even offered to any individual “who would furnish information that would lead to the detection, arrest and conviction of the black rapist.” (Feeling at High Pitch) A couple of days after the assault, Ed Johnson was arrested as a suspect and was taken to a Nashville jail where he was later identified by Taylor as her attacker. However, during trial, Johnson denied ever assaulting Miss Taylor (Testimony of Ed Johnson). Johnson claimed that several reputable individuals in the city could testify that he was at the *Last Chance Saloon*, working during the time Taylor was assaulted (Says He Is Not Guilty).

The rape of Miss Taylor deeply angered the white population of St. Elmo. After Johnson’s arrest, a large mob, between 500 and 1,500 men, stormed the local county jail determined to seize him and avenge the alleged crime. The attempt to lynch him was unsuccessful, thanks to the fact that he had been sent to a different jail (Law and Order Victorious over Overwhelming Odds).

Meanwhile, an all-white jury found Johnson guilty of the crime and sentenced him to die. However, on an appeal to the Supreme Court of the United States, Johnson was issued a stay of execution. But this further infuriated some whites who decided to take justice into their own hands. On March 19, a crowd of angry whites once again broke into the jail where Johnson was being held, captured him, and took him to the county bridge where he was hanged and shot over 50 times. His last words were: “I am ready to die, but I never done it” and, “God bless you all! I am innocent” (God Bless You All- “I Am Innocent”).

The lynching of Ed Johnson is a clear depiction of racial violence against African Americans during the early 20th century. Carson expressed this vividly:

Particularly in the south, African Americans who had successful business, stood up to white people’s insults, ran for office, or voted risked incurring white people’s wrath. Mere friendliness or eye contact with white women could get a young black man killed. (Carson 316).

For many whites, lynching was a way to express resentment at the idea of racial equality and a guarantee of civil rights for African Americans. There were thousands of innocent African American lives unjustly

taken through lynching. Johnson's lynching was intended to punish any black man that whites could lay their hands on to serve as a warning to others of his kind (Feeling at High Pitch).

Race was not the only important element in lynch episodes, gender had a role to play as well. Many of the lynch cases recorded involved an alleged assault on white women by black men. Most often, white people accused black men who were in consensual relationship with white women of rape. In the case of Ed Johnson, the crime he allegedly committed was not just against Taylor, but against the whole white community. Indeed, the *Chattanooga Times* confirmed that "There was no lacking proof that the manhood of the entire community was stirred to its outmost depths." (Awful Crime at St. Elmo)

The media played a key role in encouraging racial hatred, and in fuelling the lynching. Newspapers graphically narrated the rape episode, thus inciting mob action. Published articles instigated readers to participate in mob actions, and encouraged greater feelings of anger and resentment among white citizens. In addition, the media also, often, provided inaccurate and false information. For example, the *Chattanooga Times* stated Taylor's age as 18, when she was actually 21 years old, according to her own testimony in court (Awful Crime at St. Elmo). Also, the same paper reported that "Johnson had confessed his guilt," whereas, even in his last words he declared his innocence.

Lynching was also a direct result of the failure of the court system. It is important to note that while black men who could be innocent were lynched extra-judicially, the white perpetrators were often never tried for any crimes. The legal system during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was never a just one. This was true especially when, more often than not, blacks could neither testify in courts nor serve in juries. Thus, as in the case of Ed Johnson, trials were often not fair and verdicts were rendered on the basis of feelings, not on facts. The fact that the Johnson's court conviction was overturned by a criminal judge ninety four years later is a clear indication of mistrial and a broken legal system during that era (1906 Tennessee Conviction Overturned).

In conclusion, although, the late 19th Century in American history was a time of great technological and industrial advancements, at the same time it was a retrogressive period in terms of race relations. Racial discrimination and hatred towards blacks by whites did not abate. Lynching took the lives of thousands of innocent black men accused of various crimes, whether guilty or not. The lynching of Ed Johnson showed not only violence against blacks, but also ignorance by the white

of St. Elmo. Moreover, the lynching represented a broken government system which denied blacks the right to fair trial.

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