

The History of Lynching

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Many people have misconceptions of lynching and what it is. Many people think that lynching is just the hanging of people by a noose. By definition, it is extrajudicial punishment carried out by a mob in order to intimidate, control or otherwise manipulate a population of people, however large or small. Lynching was a major part in social control. The reason people did this in groups was because it made it harder for one person to get singled out or recognized. Even though this was the main type of social control, there were others including charivari, riding the rail, and tarring and feathering. It is usually more frequent in times of social and economic tension. Lynching grew increasingly worse after the depression in 1893. Many jobless whites took their anger out on blacks. Almost 5,000 African Americans were lynched between 1860 and 1890. In the 1890s alone, more than 1,000 African Americans in the South and elsewhere were victims of lynching.

There are many different sources of word's origin. The word is traditionally attributed to Charles Lynch (1736-1796), a Virginia Quaker, who punished Loyalist supporters of the British. Another source is said to be William Lynch (1742-1820) who used the word in a 1780 compact signed by him and his neighbors in Pittsylvania County. Other sources include James Lynch Fitzstephen of Galway, Ireland, who hanged his own son from the balcony of his house after

convicting him of murder in 1493 or Lingchi, a Chinese form of execution used from roughly AD 900 to 1905. It is also sourced to the Archaic verb lynch, which means to beat severely with a pliable instrument, to chastise or to maltreat. The term “Lynch’s Law” apparently originated during the American Revolution.

In the United States, lynching was used as a form of punishment for presumed criminal offenses. It was done without having a proper trial or having a judge decide guilty or not guilty. This occurred frequently before and after the American Civil War. Southern whites struggled to maintain social dominance. Several secret groups such as the Klu Klux Klan instigated assaults and killings to keep social dominance and to discourage freedmen from voting, getting jobs and getting an education.

During class we read many stories relating to segregation and anti-violence demonstrations by activists. In *The Testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer*, Fannie tells of how she tried to register herself and other colored-folk for voting rights so they could vote in elections. When she tried to do this, she was arrested and beaten. A couple weeks after her first registration, some houses were shot in and two little girls were shot and killed. This was no random crime, though. It was organized and set up by secret groups, such as the KKK.

Throughout this time, there were many protests against lynching. The frequent occurrence of murder against black people outraged a certain Ida B. Wells. She was an African American journalist for the newspaper, *Free Speech*. She used her position to urge African Americans to protest lynching, even after receiving many threats to her life. She wanted to make a boycott of segregated streetcars and white-owned stores.