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The majority of lynchings that occurred in the United States between 1882 and 1981 were located in the South.¹ Alabama specifically had over 300 during the years when violent mobs murdered victims without cause or official conviction, in an attempt to control and terrorize the black community. The black press, anti-lynching groups and activists such as Ida B. Wells organized extraordinary anti-lynching efforts that ended this version of terror² – but it was too late for Elizabeth Lawrence.

On one of the last days in June of 1933, Lawrence was walking along a country road, about five miles from home near Birmingham, Alabama (Jefferson County).³ Suddenly, a group of young white children began taunting and throwing rocks and dirt at her as she was walking by. Being a school teacher⁴ and mother herself, she reacted in a way many of us would have; Lawrence reprimanded the children without ever touching them.⁵ However, in the years post-slavery, all that was needed to justify violence against a black person was the word of a white

¹ “History of Lynchings.” *NAACP*, 2018, <https://www.naacp.org/history-of-lynchings/>.

² Jamiles Lartey and Sam Morris. “Pain and Terror: America’s history of racism.” *The Guardian*. April 26, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/26/lynchings-memorial-us-south-montgomery-alabama>.

³ “Negro Woman Lynched in B’ham: Son Narrowly Escapes Same Fate.” *Daily ___* (name unreadable on the film), July 5, 1933, via Tuskegee Reel #228. This is the first newspaper account of the lynching. In subsequent reports by the *Savannah Tribune*, (July 13, 1933), and the *Baltimore Afro-American Newspaper*, (July 22, 1933), the article states having heard the story approximately three weeks prior; making her date of death around the end of June 1933. Elizabeth Lawrence’s birth date is unknown.

⁴ Katie Couric. “The Blood of Lynching Victims is in this Soil.” *National Geographic: The Race Issue*, 2018. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/04/race-lynching-museum-katie-couric-alabama/>. Bryan Stevenson is interviewed as saying Elizabeth Lawrence was a school teacher – this has not been confirmed by a source.

⁵ “Ala. Boy Tells of Mother’s Lynching.” *Baltimore Afro-American Newspaper*, July 22, 1933.

person. Like so many other African-Americans who were lynched based on these social norms, Lawrence was now at risk for violent retaliation because she committed a “social transgression.”⁶

While it is impossible to know if Lawrence feared a mob attack after the encounter, it is extremely likely. During this same time, the high-profile Scottsboro case dominated newspaper headings around the country. One of the main concerns was the growing impatience of the mob wanting to take justice into their own hands. The intimidation that lynchings brought to the community were a cornerstone after the end of Reconstruction, and opened up a “widespread campaign of racial terror and oppression against newly freed black Americans.”⁷ This targeted extremism was no stranger to the black population regardless of their origin and background.

Lawrence was alone in her home when the parents of the children she had scolded earlier in the day circled her house.⁸ It is unknown if Lawrence exited the house in protest or if the mob stormed inside during the attack. But on that evening Lawrence was shot, and her house burned to the ground, likely with her still inside.⁹ Local papers, such as the *Birmingham News*, never mention the murder or fire in the editions that followed her death, and no obituary was written.

⁶Equal Justice Initiative, “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror” (3d Ed., 2017). EJI listed these as primary reasons to justify lynchings: (1) a wildly distorted fear of interracial sex; (2) in response to casual social transgressions; (3) allegations of serious violent crime; (4) public spectacle lynchings; (5) escalations into large-scale violence targeting the entire African American community; and (6) lynchings of sharecroppers, ministers, and community leaders who resisted mistreatment, which were most common between 1915 and 1940.

⁷Jamiles Lartey and Sam Morris. “Pain and Terror: America’s history of racism.” *The Guardian*. April 26, 2018.

⁸The exact location of Elizabeth’s home is unknown, it is also not confirmed that her son, Alexander, lived in the same residence.

⁹“Ala. Boy Tells of Mother’s Lynching.” *Baltimore Afro-American Newspaper*, July 22, 1933.

Of the three newspapers reporting on the murder of Elizabeth Lawrence, this first (and likely most accurate account) comes from the International Labor Defense (ILD), who learned of the story via the son, Alexander, and were to open an investigation. They report that Elizabeth was shot, and her home burned to the ground, and also state the “report is not confirmed.”

This was not uncommon as a primary goal was to keep anonymity of lynching participants, and “because of the tacit approval of law enforcement.”¹⁰

Lawrence’s son, Alexander¹¹, was the one who sought justice for this violent crime. Alexander was away (location not known), when the mob came to murder his mother, but he returned and attempted to file a report with the [Jefferson] county police. The mob quickly re-gathered and threatened Alexander with the same fate. He fled to Boston, Massachusetts for safety. Alexander was one of 6-million African Americans to leave the rural South and seek a new life in the North, Midwest, and West between 1916 and 1970.¹² In addition to the threat to their lives, the harsh economic opportunities and segregationist laws were enough to convince blacks to seek other horizons. While they were unable to escape racism and prejudice, a new era began for African Americans. The Great Migration gave birth to the Harlem Renaissance, and an increase in political activism changed the American demographic forever.¹³

If Alexander had never left the South, his mother’s murder and life would not have been remembered. Although newspapers covered lynchings during this time, most of the information was reduced to numbers and minimal facts released by the International Labor Defense (ILD) and organizations such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).¹⁴ While anti-lynching organizations outwardly appealed for legislation and change,

¹⁰ Jamiles Lartey and Sam Morris. “Pain and Terror: America’s history of racism.” *The Guardian*. April 26, 2018.

¹¹ Alexander’s last name is not known therefore referred to as “Alexander.”

¹² “Great Migration.” *History*. March 4, 2010. Web, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/great-migration>. (accessed November 10, 2018).

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ The ILD was an advocacy organization which operated from 1925–1947. They were known for their defense and legal appeals regarding the infamous Scottsboro case, but were also active in anti-lynching.

newspapers essentially catered to public opinion, and often ignored the underlying motivation for lynchings; distrust of the law and racism. For instance, the *Montgomery Advertiser* ran an editorial about “Alabama’s shame...standing disgraced in the eyes of the civilized world.”¹⁵ This article prompted a large public response in Tuscaloosa, Alabama as it called out citizens for their prejudice and violence and shed some light on the responsibility of the state and its community.

Lynchings did continue until 1981,¹⁶ and many of the incidents are known only due to the research collected by the Tuskegee University which is credited to have the “most comprehensive collection of research data...of lynchings in each...state.”¹⁷ Although the evidence is extensive, there is still a strong possibility that a much larger number of lynchings occurred that were never recorded or reported.

Congress failed 240 times to pass anti-lynching laws on a federal level.¹⁸ In 1918 the Dyer Bill would be filibustered by Southern Democrats who insisted the legislation was not needed.¹⁹ In 2018, Senator Mary Landrieu (D-La.) acknowledged, “There may be no other injustice in American history for which the Senate so uniquely bears responsibility.”²⁰ Lynching began to decline the nearer history got to the Civil Rights Movement in 1954, but racial violence is hardly a thing of Alabama or the country’s past. Equal Justice Initiative Director Bryan

¹⁵ “Blood on the Great Seal of Alabama,” *The Montgomery Advertiser*, Monday August 14, 1933, 4.

¹⁶ “Mobile police say racial motive unlikely in slaying,” *The Montgomery Advertiser*, March 27, 1981, 13.

¹⁷ “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror.” *Equal Justice Initiative*. Report Summary 2015, 2nd ed. <https://eji.org/sites/default/files/lynching-in-america-second-edition-summary.pdf>.

¹⁸ Logan, Erin B. “Why Congress failed nearly 200 times to make lynching a federal crime.” *The Washington Post*, 5 July 2018. This was a quote by Senator Mary Landrieu (D-La.) Held office 1997-2015.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Stevenson said, “It is never too late for our nation to express our sorrow for the decades of racial terror that traumatized millions in this country.”²¹

Note: Research on Elizabeth Lawrence’s death is still on-going. The report/investigation led by the International Labor Defense is likely to contain additional information such as age, location of home/fire, and cause of death. Once this information is obtained, more details surrounding Lawrence’s death, and her surviving family will hopefully be found.

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²¹ “Booker, Harris, Scott Introduce Bill to Make Lynching a Federal Crime.” *U.S. Senate Home Page*. Press Release. (June 29, 2018). Web, https://www.booker.senate.gov/?p=press_release&id=821, (accessed December 12, 2018).

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