



A Red Record Ida B. Wells (1895)

Ida B. Wells was born into slavery in Mississippi during the Civil War. She grew up to become a journalist and activist. She was most famous for her efforts to rally public opposition to extralegal violence against African Americans—that is, lynching. Wells herself was threatened with such violence in 1892 while she ran a newspaper in Tennessee, leading her to resettle in Chicago.

A Red Record is a 100-page pamphlet in which Wells documented lynchings perpetrated in the United States during 1892-94. For each of those years, she recorded between 150 and 250 lynchings, mostly in southern states and mostly targeting African Americans. Two selections from the pamphlet are presented here. In the first, Wells recounts the horrific public killing of an African American man in Texas who was accused of raping and murdering a white child. In the second selection, Wells calls on Christian organizations to protest such “barbarism,” charging that American Christianity and “the white man’s civilization” are on trial. She likens campaigns against lynching to international protests against the persecution of ethno-religious minorities in the Russian and Ottoman empires; also to the abolition of sati in British-ruled India and to other campaigns by Western powers, including the United States, to suppress violence by “savage” indigenous peoples.

Never in the history of civilization has any Christian people stooped to such shocking brutality and indescribable barbarism as that which characterized the people of Paris, Texas, and adjacent communities on February 1, 1893. The cause of this awful outbreak of human passion was the murder of a four-year-old child, daughter of a man named Vance. This man, Vance, had been a police officer in Paris for years and was known to be a man of bad temper, overbearing manner, and given to harshly treating the prisoners under his care. He had arrested Smith and, it is said, cruelly mistreated him. Whether or not the murder of his child was an act of fiendish revenge, it has not been shown, but many persons who know of the incident have suggested that the secret of the attack on the child lay in a desire for revenge against its father.

In the same town, there lived a Negro named Henry Smith, a well-known character, a kind of roustabout, who was generally considered a harmless, weak-minded fellow, not capable of doing any important work but sufficiently able to do chores and odd jobs around the houses of the white people who cared to employ him. A few days before the final tragedy, this man, Smith, was accused of murdering Myrtle Vance. The crime of murder was of itself bad enough, and to prove that against Smith would have been amply sufficient in Texas to have committed him to the gallows; but the finding of the child so exasperated the father and his friends, that they at once shamefully exaggerated the facts and declared that the babe had been ruthlessly assaulted and then killed. The truth was bad enough, but the white people of the community made it a point to exaggerate every detail of the awful affair and to inflame the public mind so that nothing less than immediate and violent death would satisfy the populace. As a matter of fact, the child was not brutally assaulted as the world has been told in excuse for the awful barbarism of that day. [...]

That the murderer was known as an imbecile had no effect whatever upon the people who thirsted for his blood. They determined to make an example of him and proceeded to carry out their purpose with unspeakably greater ferocity than that which characterized the half-crazy

object of their revenge. [...] Lest it might be charged that any description of the deeds of that day are exaggerated, a white man's description which was published in the white journals of this country is used. The *New York Sun* of February 2, 1893, contains an account, from which we make the following excerpt:

PARIS, Tex., Feb. 1, 1893 — Henry Smith, the negro ravisher of 4-year-old Myrtle Vance, has expiated in part his awful crime by death at the stake. Ever since the perpetration of his awful crime, this city and the entire surrounding country has been in a wild frenzy of excitement. When the news came last night that he had been captured at Hope, Ark., [...] the city was wild with joy over the apprehension of the brute. Hundreds of people poured into the city from the adjoining country [...] Curious and sympathizing alike, they came on train and wagons, on horse, and on foot to see if the frail mind of a man could think of a way to sufficiently punish the perpetrator of so terrible a crime. Whisky shops were closed, unruly mobs were dispersed, schools were dismissed by a proclamation from the mayor, and everything was done in a business-like manner. [...]

Arriving here at 12 o'clock, the train was met by a surging mass of humanity 10,000 strong. The negro was placed upon a carnival float in mockery of a king upon his throne and, followed by an immense crowd, was escorted through the city [...] to the open prairies [...] Here Smith was placed upon a scaffold, six feet square and ten feet high, securely bound, within the view of all beholders. Here the victim was tortured for fifty minutes by red-hot iron brands thrust against his quivering body. Commencing at the feet, the brands were placed against him inch by inch until they were thrust against the face. Then, being apparently dead, kerosene was poured upon him, cottonseed hulls placed beneath him, and set on fire. In less time than it takes to relate it, the tortured man was wafted beyond the grave to another fire, hotter and more terrible than the one just experienced.

Curiosity seekers have carried away already all that was left of the memorable event, even to pieces of charcoal. [...]

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Public sentiment, by its representatives, has encouraged lynch law, and upon the revolution of this sentiment we must depend for its abolition.

Therefore, we demand a fair trial by law for those accused of crime, and punishment by law after honest conviction. No maudlin sympathy for criminals is solicited, but we do ask that the law shall punish all alike. [...] Surely the humanitarian spirit of this country—which reaches out to denounce the treatment of the Russian Jews, the Armenian Christians, the laboring poor of Europe, the Siberian exiles, and the native women of India—will not longer refuse to lift its voice on this subject. If it were known that the cannibals or the savage Indians had burned three human beings alive in the past two years, the whole of Christendom would be roused to devise ways and means to put a stop to it. Can you remain silent and inactive when such things are done in our own community and country? Is your duty to humanity in the United States less binding?

What can you do, reader, to prevent lynching—to thwart anarchy and promote law and order

throughout our land? [...] You can be instrumental in having churches, missionary societies, YMCAs, WCTUs, and all Christian and moral forces in connection with your religious and social life pass resolutions of condemnation and protest every time a lynching takes place; and see that they are sent to the place where these outrages occur. [...]

Think and act on independent lines in this behalf, remembering that, after all, it is the white man's civilization and the white man's government which are on trial. This crusade will determine whether that civilization can maintain itself by itself, or whether anarchy shall prevail; whether this nation shall write itself down a success at self-government, or in deepest humiliation admit its failure complete; whether the precepts and theories of Christianity are professed and practiced by American white people as golden rules of thought and action, or adopted as a system of morals to be preached to heathen until they attain to the intelligence which needs the system of lynch law.

Source: Ida B. Wells, *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894* (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, [1895]), 25-28, 97-98, <https://id.lib.harvard.edu/curiosity/slavery-abolition-emancipation-and-freedom/74-990012311540203941>. From the collection "Slavery, Abolition, Emancipation, and Freedom," CURIOSity Digital Collections, Harvard Library, Harvard University. Harvard Library asserts no copyright over digital reproductions of works in its collections which are in the public domain, where those digital reproductions are made openly available on Harvard Library websites. Wells's pamphlet is public domain in the United States because published in the United States before 1923.

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These edited excerpts from Wells's pamphlet are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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