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# The War the South Won: Northwest Tennessee and the Birth of Jim Crow

Stephanie Sellers

When the Civil War came to Northwest Tennessee in 1861, it found an interesting political and social environment. Slavery had taken hold in the area and had been present since the opening of West Tennessee to settlement in 1818. There was a large Union following in this area, but the vast majority of Unionists did not support Emancipation.<sup>1</sup> After the war, Tennessee was “redeemed” by terror, violence, and Lost Cause ideology, leaving the local black population paralyzed socially and economically. Lynching had long been practiced in Tennessee but after 1865 Northwest Tennessee experienced sporadic explosions of racial violence. These erratic upsurges were not random but stemmed from deep-seated Lost Cause ideology and the culture of the area that allowed it to flourish. Ideas of white supremacy, paternalism, and racial unity permeated the white populations of Weakley, Gibson, Obion, and Dyer Counties. These same notions influenced religion, education, and future generations. The effects are still felt to this day.

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<sup>1</sup>Joe W. Stout, *The Life and Times of Greenfield, TN Revised* (n.p.: Mercer Press, n.d.), 252; Also see Bobby Lovett, “A Profile of African Americans in Tennessee History,” Introduction-Tennessee State University, <http://ww2.tnstate.edu/library/digital/document.htm>

## Slavery, Civil War, and Northwest Tennessee

Slavery had a long history in West Tennessee by the time Civil War erupted. In 1856, there were 13,536 slaveholders in West Tennessee with eighty-five families owning more than 100 slaves.<sup>2</sup> Counties of Northwest Tennessee were dotted by small farms growing tobacco and cotton. Local families such as the Mosleys, Bowdens, Gardners, Martins, Gleasons, and Bondurants owned thousands of acres of land and upwards of fifty to seventy slaves each.<sup>3</sup> However, slave ownership was not confined to these families named above. The area had a strong upper-middle and middle class comprised of doctors, lawyers, business owners, and small-scale farmers. The vast majority owned land, in addition to one to twenty slaves each.<sup>4</sup> Magistrates and other local officials, whom were responsible for night patrols and locating runaway slaves, often owned slaves as well.<sup>5</sup>

There were no “good” or “benevolent” slave holders, not even in Northwest Tennessee. Masters expected slaves to start their day at 3:30 a.m. in the summer and 4:00 a.m. in the winter, so work could begin at daylight and continue until dark with a two-hour break at noon.<sup>6</sup> Farm work was just one of the many tasks performed by slaves in this area. Projects, such as Shades Bridge and the Moseley mill canal, were built using slave labor in Weakley County, and many slaves died from overwork, disease, and exposure while building the Moseley

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<sup>2</sup> Caleb Perry Patterson, *The Negro in Tennessee, 1790-1865* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1922), 62.

<sup>3</sup> 1850 and 1860 U.S. Census, Dyer, Gibson, Obion, and Weakley County, Tennessee, population schedule, all districts; digital image, *Ancestry.com* (<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=8054>)

<sup>4</sup>Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Patterson, *Negro in TN*, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 70.

canal.<sup>7</sup> Lynching was a popular form of frontier justice in Northwest Tennessee. Before the Civil War, lynch mobs often preyed on horse thieves and other petty criminals. Most often their victims were white men, but plantation owners also handed down justice to rebellious slaves in West Tennessee. In 1855, a slave was lynched for killing an overseer in LaGrange, Tennessee.<sup>8</sup> Crimes against white citizens at the hands of slaves were dealt with harshly. In September of the same year, a runaway slave was lynched for killing a white woman in Sparta, Tennessee.<sup>9</sup> Many lynchings went undocumented, so there is no way to know how many slaves died by plantation justice and no record can be found of this happening in Northwest Tennessee. Yet, after the Civil War, these same patterns played out over and over again in rural communities all throughout the South, Northwest Tennessee included.

The Civil War came to Northwest Tennessee in 1861. The vast majority of men joined the Confederate ranks, but a few men remained loyal to the Union. Union Forces occupied much of Tennessee early on, so the state was spared vast physical destruction. In the northwestern portion of the state, the frontier-like environment present before the war remained intact. Lawlessness and violence plagued the area. Nathan Bedford Forrest mounted raids in Gibson, Obion, and Carroll counties and Forrest was accompanied by many local soldiers, most notably Eli

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<sup>7</sup> Stout, *Life and Times*, 250; Also see 1860 U.S. Census, Dyer, Gibson, Obion, and Weakley County, Tennessee, slave schedules, all districts, digital image, *Ancestry.com*, (<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=7668> : for evidence of sexual exploitation of female slaves. High numbers of mulatto children reported in the area.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Waldrep, *Lynching in America: A History in Documents* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 74.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Stone, who later became the mayor of Milan.<sup>10</sup> Ruthless bushwhackers, such as the Claiborne gang, terrorized Weakley County and the Skullbone area of Gibson County.<sup>11</sup> The Claibornes, pro-Confederate guerrillas, like so many other “home guard” bandits, prevalent in the area, took advantage of the situation, and preyed on their own communities and fellow citizens.

### **Redemption, Ku Klux Klan, and the Lost Cause**

Emancipation came to the area on February 25, 1865 by popular vote, but in the counties of Hickman, Dyer, Weakley, and Haywood, landowners refused to free their slaves until the end of summer to ensure the harvest of their crops.<sup>12</sup> This disregard of the law would continue into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, soldiers returned home and assumed a place of honor in their communities. Many of them attained influential and powerful positions. In 1866, the state of Tennessee moved to rejoin the Union and end Federal military occupation.

A “radical” Republican state legislature adjusted Tennessee’s Black Codes and gave the new Freedmen the right to testify against whites. This was a lukewarm attempt to pacify a Republican U.S. Congress and rid the state of the Freedman’s Bureau.<sup>13</sup> To secure readmission, the state granted black Tennesseans the right to make

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<sup>10</sup>“Biographical Appendix,” in *The Goodspeed History of Tennessee: Dyer, Gibson, Lake, Obion, and Weakley Counties* (South Carolina: The Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1978), 900-1073.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Carroll, “Bushwackers, Gangs, and Nightrider Stories,” [http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~tnweakle/cw\\_gangs\\_bushwhacker\\_s.htm](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~tnweakle/cw_gangs_bushwhacker_s.htm)

<sup>12</sup>“Say My Name: An African American Family History,” <http://www.freewebs.com/jencessa/tosecedeornottosecede.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Joseph H. Cartwright, *The Triumph of Jim Crow: Tennessee Race Relations in the 1880s* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 8.

contracts, to sue and be sued, to inherit property, to be protected in person and property, and to equal punishments under the law, all of which gained permanence with the ratification of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. In 1867, the vote was extended to Freedmen, but they remained unable to sit on juries or hold office until these final rights were granted the following year. Through these efforts made by the state government, Tennessee avoided military Reconstruction. Ironically, this allowed for Tennessee to return to conservative rule and pass “Jim Crow” legislation much earlier than any other state in the Confederacy.

When William G. Brownlow was elected governor of Tennessee in 1865, Unionist ranks split into three factions: Radical, Moderate, and Conservative.<sup>14</sup> Northwest Tennessee Unionists tended to be of the Conservative to Moderate nature. Both groups opposed the extension of rights to Freedman and ex-Confederate disenfranchisement, but Conservatives sought to overthrow the Brownlow coalition completely.<sup>15</sup> In 1867, Brownlow pushed successfully for black suffrage to secure his second term as governor. His Unionist opponent was a native son of Weakley County. Emerson Etheridge, a Conservative Unionist from Dresden, and also a former slave holder, strongly objected to emancipation and Brownlow’s power to declare martial law in counties where extreme violence and voter intimidation prevailed. Often in rural areas, such as Northwest Tennessee, some former Confederates won local offices, such as sheriff, city official, judge, and voter registration posts. Yet, the majority of local ex-Confederates remained disenfranchised by the new state government. The state also incurred a huge war debt of \$43

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

million, so taxes were high for residents.<sup>16</sup> All of these factors and a multitude of others created the perfect environment for racial violence in Northwest Tennessee.

The vast majority of Civil War veterans in Northwest Tennessee were former Confederates. Not only did they find themselves unable to vote, some families lost their modest wealth and a large portion of their labor force. Poor whites lost their “white privilege”. Now poor white ex-Confederates had to compete with freedmen for jobs, as well as social, and political power. The counties of Gibson, Dyer, and Obion had a sizeable number of cavalry veterans who had served under Forrest, the recently anointed Grand Wizard of the newly formed Ku Klux Klan.<sup>17</sup> These three counties also had a higher black population than Weakley County. While Weakley County still suffered from Klan violence and incidents of lynching, it boasted six chapters of the Union League.<sup>18</sup>

Klan violence erupted in Northwest Tennessee as early as 1867, when radical Republican State Senator and Obion County native Almon Case was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan near his home in Troy.<sup>19</sup> His son suffered the same fate nine months later. In 1869, Tennessee recorded three incidents of black citizens being lynched; Obion County was home to two of them.<sup>20</sup> T.J. Gaskins, a sworn

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<sup>16</sup> *Tennessee Blue Book* (Nashville: State of Tennessee, 2008), 418.

<sup>17</sup> “Biographical Appendix,” in *Goodspeed*, 900-1073.

<sup>18</sup> Ben H. Severance, *Tennessee's Radical Army: The State Guard and Its Role in Reconstruction, 1867-1869* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 37, 76.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Allen R. Coggins, *Tennessee Tragedies: Natural, Technological, and Societal Disasters in the Volunteer State* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012), 266.

constable of Obion County, testified before the Congress House of Representatives.

“The Ku Klux Klan are going through the country, whipping some, killing others, and taking all the arms of the colored people, and also their certificate to vote...they say they are determined to vote, law or no law.”<sup>21</sup>

Beatings and the disarming of area Republicans were not just confined to men. Women were reportedly taken from the home, stripped of their clothes, and beaten.<sup>22</sup> Weakley County nightriders fired into homes of Republican officials, and Gibson County experienced extreme violence.<sup>23</sup> A Brownlow radical home-guard major reported in May 1869 that a freedman in Gibson County had been assaulted seven times in the previous three weeks.<sup>24</sup> Aside from such terrorism, Milan, Tennessee’s black population also lost its school to fire at the hands of the Klan.<sup>25</sup> That year, violence escalated to the point that Governor Brownlow declared martial law in Gibson County.

At the state level, Radical Reconstruction was about to come to an abrupt end. After declaring martial law in nine counties in 1869, Governor Brownlow became a U.S. State Senator. Brownlow’s ascent cleared the way for Dewitt Senter to become the new governor. Senter disbanded Brownlow’s State Guard and opened the registration books to disenfranchised ex-Confederates in 1869. By 1870, “Redeemers” pushed a complete revision of the state constitution, but before the convention met they began to dismantle Brownlow’s state government.

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<sup>21</sup> *Sheafe vs. Tillman*, 41st Cong., 2d sess., 1870, H. Doc., 293.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>23</sup> Severance, *Tennessee’s Radical Army*, 37.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>25</sup> *Sheafe vs. Tillman*, 300.

The Tennessee legislature repealed the state's Ku Klux Klan law (also known as the Act to Preserve Peace in Tennessee), abolished the state schools system, and removed a law that prohibited racial discrimination by railroads, repealed protective legislation, and enacted a crop-lien law.<sup>26</sup> Klan violence had succeeded in intimidating black and white Republican voters alike.

Tennessee's people of color formed a minority in a culture that saw them as unequal to any white man. In 1870, Tennessee's black population stood at 25.6%. Even in counties where black people enjoyed a majority, the white vote still dominated.<sup>27</sup> The increasing pressure of the Klan, as well as the radical state militia that enforced Brownlow's policies, served as catalysts for white cohesiveness. As radical white Republicans "changed" their minds about their political leanings or tried to hide them to protect themselves and their families, they no longer suffered from violence at the hands of the Klan. Black citizens, on the other hand, did not enjoy such a concession, due to the strong white supremacy sentiment of the area. Even after the state was "redeemed," Northwest Tennessee's black citizens still felt the wrath of Klan Violence.

In 1871, the *Memphis Avalanche* reported the Weakley County lynching of two African American brothers, Bill and Ed Johnson, at the hands of the Klan.<sup>28</sup> Bill Johnson worked for an ex-Sheriff of Weakley County by the name of David Shaeffers. He was

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<sup>26</sup> Cartwright, *The Triumph of Jim Crow*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> "Two Negroes, Charged with Theft and Arson, Hanged by a Mob Near Dresden, Tennessee," *Daily Memphis Avalanche*, April 25, 1871, under "4,"

[http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~tnweakle/Ralston\\_lynching1871.html](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~tnweakle/Ralston_lynching1871.html)

reported to have broken into the sheriff's desk, stolen his private papers, which included a list of local area Klansman, and burned the desk while Shaeffers was out of town. Shaeffers, along with the current County sheriff John Vincent, began to search for Johnson, who fled to Kentucky. Bill Johnson was found and detained, the party boarded a train headed for Weakley County. In Ralston, when the train came to stop, about forty disguised men boarded the train and seized the prisoner. The unknown assailants then visited the jail at Dresden and retrieved Ed Johnson. The next morning, both men were found lynched outside Dresden.

Lynching continued in Northwest Tennessee until 1874, when five or more black men were lynched in Gibson County.<sup>29</sup> What became known as the Trenton Massacre began with one of the most vital Lost Cause arguments (i.e. freedmen worked with Union forces to suppress and harass whites during Reconstruction), a legitimate fear for rural white southerners, and the threat of an armed black uprising and retaliation against the Klan and “innocent” citizens. On the night of Saturday, August 22, two young white men reported being fired upon by a band of armed black men six miles from Humboldt, Tennessee.<sup>30</sup> After questioning a local black man by the name of Ben Ballard, authorities arrested sixteen black men on Monday, August 24<sup>th</sup> for shooting with intent to kill and inciting a riot. In the early morning

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<sup>29</sup> Margaret Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment: Lynchings and Legal Executions in the South* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 35.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-38; Also see *New York Times*, August 27, 1874, 5; August 30, 1874, 5; September 2, 1874, 2; September 10, 1874, 7; September 12, 1874, 1; September 18, 1874, 1; October 12, 1874, 7. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.utm.edu/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/93403980/DC73471662A246F5PQ/1?accountid=29025>

hours of Wednesday, more than 100 (some estimates run as high as 400) masked men abducted the prisoners from the Trenton jail. What happened next is still debated, but not all sixteen men taken from the jail that night were lynched.<sup>31</sup> Five (perhaps six) men died that night, but the rest escaped. The U.S. Justice Department attempted to prosecute as many as fourteen Klansmen, but found survivors unwilling to testify in open court. For black citizens in the area, testifying in open court against a white man became a virtual death sentence. No subsequent charges were filed and the defendants were cleared of any wrong doing.

As Tennessee's General Assembly attempted to restore the old ways of the South, and as the Klan continued to terrorize anyone who posed a threat to that restoration, a larger project got underway. By 1870, all former Confederate states had been restored to the Union and Ulysses S. Grant was serving his first term as President of the United States. Grant's presidency saw the passage of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment (which Tennessee did not ratify till 1997), the Amnesty Act, and the Enforcement Acts, but was also marred by corruption. In Virginia, the South lost another one of its beloved sons. In October of 1870, Robert E. Lee died quietly at his home. Lee's death kicked off a southern redemption campaign on a national scale. Former Confederate General Jubal Early and the Southern Historical Society declared a second war on the Union, only this time the South would write a victory narrative. The Lost Cause narrative became "the replacement of the armed conflict of the Civil War."<sup>32</sup> Lost Cause ideology and related writings

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Jesse Goldberg, "Burned in Effigy: How the Lost Cause Allowed for Reconciliation through Cultural Performances of Surrogation," *Neoamericanist* 5, no. 2 (Winter, 2011-2012), 8.

proved hard to challenge due to the built-in escape mechanisms and a powerful two-pronged argument: Southerners had fought to protect state's rights and simple virtuous farmers never stood a chance against a corrupt industrial society.<sup>33</sup>

### **Culture, the Birth of Jim Crow, and the Return of Mass Lynching**

During the 1870s, Lost Cause ideology found a home in the minds of most white Southerners, along with antebellum ideas of paternalism, white supremacy, masculinity, honor, and racial unity. In Northwest Tennessee, these ideas were evident in daily life. Local whites had long feared racial violence and riots. Race riots occurred in Memphis, Franklin, and Pulaski during the latter 1860s and further solidified the idea that lynching could stamp out race riots. There was also the growth of black patriarchy within black families in Northwest Tennessee. While black men worked as domestic servants and farm laborers, some allowed their wives to stay home. This, coupled with popular Victorian ideals concerning the role of women, exacerbated fears of the masculine black man and sexual violence toward white women.<sup>34</sup>

The celebration of masculinity became popular among white men as well. Fraternal orders flourished in Northwest Tennessee. Local histories cite fraternal organizations and churches as foundations of area towns, but some did not spring up until the latter 1860s.<sup>35</sup>

Fraternal orders, such as the Masons, Independent Order of Odd

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<sup>33</sup>Thomas L. Connelly, *The Marble Man: Robert E. Lee and His Image in American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 102.

<sup>34</sup>Waldrep, *Lynching in America*, 21.

<sup>35</sup>“History of Tennessee: Dyer, Gibson, Lake, Obion, and Weakley Counties” in *Goodspeed*, 797-857.

Fellows, and the Knights of Pythias, were found in every town of Weakley, Obion, Dyer, and Gibson Counties. Lodges became symbols of class identity, with membership being exclusive to the most prominent citizens (often Klansman) and embodied a stick-together ideology.<sup>36</sup>

Religion played a vital role in local communities and Lost Cause rhetoric. Churches and their ministers often reflected local values. In the Black Patch culture, religion was fused with violence.<sup>37</sup> The heart of Southern religion centered on atonement for sin, which often meant death or brutal punishment. This brutality was appropriate for the training of wives and the rearing of children. Local churches staunchly supported temperance movements as a way to control lower-class populations. Strong religious beliefs served as proof, positive to

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew McCain, "The Parameters of Brotherhood: Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in Fraternal Orders," *The Incorporation of Fraternalism: Fraternal Orders at the End of the Victorian Era*,

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA04/mccain/fraternalorders/page4a.htm>

<sup>37</sup> Donald G. Matthews, "The Southern Rite of Sacrifice: Lynching in the American South," *Mississippi Quarterly* (Vol. 62, no. 1: Spring 2009), 27-70; Also see Rick Gregory, *Tennessee Encyclopedia of*

*History and Culture* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2009), s.v. "Black Patch War," accessed March 12, 2014,

<http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=95>; "Beliefs of Their Fathers: Violence, Religion, and the Black Patch War 1904-1914,"

*Border States: Journal of the Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association* 9 (1993): 1, 4,

<http://spider.georgetowncollege.edu/htallant/border/bs9/gregory.htm>;

Also see Night Riders Leave Notice, *Grand Forks Herald*, December 17, 1908, accessed March 15, 2014,

[http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~tnweakle/Historical\\_Newspapers\\_Weakley\\_Co\\_TN.html](http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~tnweakle/Historical_Newspapers_Weakley_Co_TN.html).

Lost Causers, that Southerners were of a higher moral standard than any Yankee, further solidifying white unity and self-segregation.

Some Northwest Tennesseans leaned more on the paternalistic side of Lost Cause ideology. They often evoked romanticized images of the Old South and concepts of Christian duty. Paternalistic whites feared black violence and pushed for segregation as the solution to the race problem. They offered black people progress, but at a pace and direction controlled by whites.<sup>38</sup> Black citizens might be given rights, but only if they “deserved” them. This often meant having “manners and personal condition” (modest wealth).<sup>39</sup> Yet, no Northwest Tennessee black people produced much, if any, wealth, but they were expected to observe white etiquette and any breach often merited violence.<sup>40</sup>

In 1875, the Enforcement Act (also known as the Civil Rights Act of 1875) was enacted by the U.S. Congress. This bill guaranteed African Americans equal treatment in public spaces, public transportation, and the right to sit on juries. This bill provoked outrage across the South, and Tennessee’s redeemed state government did something about it. Tennessee House Bill 527, or Chapter 130, went into effect less than one month after Congress passed the Civil Right Act of 1875. The bill was proposed by Robert Pollack “R.P.” Cole, the representative of Carroll, Gibson, Henry, and Weakley Counties.<sup>41</sup> Cole, a lawyer from Paris, Tennessee, served as a Confederate captain

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<sup>38</sup> Cartwright, *The Triumph of Jim Crow*, 162.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>41</sup> Kathy Lauder, “Chapter 130 and the Black Vote in Tennessee,” *Middle Tennessee Journal of Genealogy and History* (Vol. 24, No. 2), 1-6.

during the Civil War. The 1870 Census showed he owned property valued at \$3500, and his personal estate was worth \$1200.<sup>42</sup> The handwritten bill permitted racial discrimination in transportation, lodging, and public places of entertainment. This bill offered a bold testament to the prevailing racial attitudes of Northwest Tennessee and the rest of the South. Now that white supremacy had legal standing, lynching ceased for almost a decade in Northwest Tennessee.<sup>43</sup> The years immediately following 1875, saw a dramatic increase in Tennessee's black prison population.<sup>44</sup> The state also ramped up its convict-leasing program. In 1881, Tennessee state legislators expanded upon Chapter 130, now *requiring* railroad cars to be segregated but equal in accommodations. This law made Tennessee the first state to pass "Jim Crow" legislation.

In 1882, lynching returned to Northwest Tennessee. During the 1880s, thirteen black men and one white man were lynched in Obion and Dyer Counties.<sup>45</sup> By the 1890s, Weakley and Gibson

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<sup>42</sup> 1870 U.S. Census, Henry County, Tennessee, population schedule, Paris., p. 15 (stamped), line 21, digital image, *Ancestry.com* ([http://interactive.ancestry.com/7163/4276881\\_00065/4657662?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestry.com%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3frank%3d1%26new%3d1%26MSAV%3d0%26msT%3d1%26gss%3dangsc%26gsfn%3dRobert%2bPollack%2b\(R.P.\)%26gsln%3dCole%26msrpn\\_\\_ftp%3dHenry%2bCounty%252c%2bTennessee%252c%2bUSA%26msrpn%3d1355%26msrpn\\_PInfo%3d-%2527c0%2527c1652393%2527c0%2527c2%2527c3246%2527c45%2527c0%2527c1355%2527c0%2527c%26msydy%3d1870%26uidh%3dzl2%26pcat%3d35%26h%3d4657662%26db%3d1870usfedcen%26indiv%3d1%26ml\\_rpos%3d3&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnRecord](http://interactive.ancestry.com/7163/4276881_00065/4657662?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestry.com%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3frank%3d1%26new%3d1%26MSAV%3d0%26msT%3d1%26gss%3dangsc%26gsfn%3dRobert%2bPollack%2b(R.P.)%26gsln%3dCole%26msrpn__ftp%3dHenry%2bCounty%252c%2bTennessee%252c%2bUSA%26msrpn%3d1355%26msrpn_PInfo%3d-%2527c0%2527c1652393%2527c0%2527c2%2527c3246%2527c45%2527c0%2527c1355%2527c0%2527c%26msydy%3d1870%26uidh%3dzl2%26pcat%3d35%26h%3d4657662%26db%3d1870usfedcen%26indiv%3d1%26ml_rpos%3d3&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnRecord))

<sup>43</sup> Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, chart, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Randall G. Shelden, "Slavery in the Third Millennium Part II," *The Black Commentator* (June 16, 2005) 1.

<sup>45</sup> Vandiver, *Lethal Punishment*, 196.

Counties rejoined the fray. There are many theories as to why lynching returned during this period. The Federal Government had lost interest in enforcing equality in the Southern half of the United States, and immigration and growing white nationalist movements are noteworthy factors that influenced this lynching boom. Lost Cause writings distributed by the Southern Historical Society also capitalized on the growing nationalist movement. The organization succeeded in making Robert E. Lee a national hero by 1885. Social organizations, such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy, continued to wave the bloody flag of war, by erecting numerous monuments honoring the Confederate past and its ideals. Jim Crow legislation alone could not ensure the subordination of the black population, so white citizens returned to what worked in the past. Minor infractions of the rigid racial caste system, such as entering a white woman's bedroom, were capital offenses in Northwest Tennessee.

Regardless of the reasons why lynching returned, what is evident is that lynching changed after the 1870s. No longer confined to a handful of masked men, lynching became a community event, a spectator sport. Not only did lynching convey the unmistakable message of racial hierarchy to local black communities, but it further cemented and perpetuated the same message to the white populations as well.<sup>46</sup> Local newspapers provided instrumental support for lynching, in some cases even announcing when and where the lynching was to take place. Northwest Tennessee's scattered farms, sparse population, weak law enforcement, and continued frontier mentality

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<sup>46</sup> Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 2.

made it the ideal place for lynching to become “law.”<sup>47</sup> White citizens of Northwest Tennessee sought to protect lynching by imposing “boundaries.” In 1896, the *Milan Exchange* wrote, “A vigilant committee is a good thing for a town if they do not become too officious and overstep the bounds of the law.”<sup>48</sup> Prominent citizens of “good moral fiber” usually carried out “respectable” lynchings, with no “excessive” violence. Mob members were not drunk and derived pleasure from the task at hand.<sup>49</sup>

Northwest Tennesseans also protected the ritual of lynching with the performance of mock trials. In the case of Fred King, who was lynched in 1901 on the courthouse lawn in Dyersburg, local white citizens actually used the courthouse for the trial and called a former sheriff to testify as a witness.<sup>50</sup> If local law enforcement officers put up a fight or protested, the mob would turn on them, as was the case during the lynching of Mallie Wilson in 1915.<sup>51</sup> Wilson reportedly entered the bedroom of a prominent white woman in Greenfield. When the mob came to abduct Wilson, vigilantes locked Weakley County sheriff Whit LaFon in the cell. Mr. White (husband of the victim) refused to pull the rope and hang Mallie Wilson. The prisoner was returned to the jail, but the mob returned the next day and carried out the lynching. None of the participants ever feared retribution or legal punishment for their actions.

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<sup>47</sup>Waldrep, *Lynching in America*, 19.

<sup>48</sup> Vandiver, *Lethal punishment*, 104.

<sup>49</sup>Susan Jean, “Warranted Lynchings: Narratives of Mob Violence in White Southern Newspapers, 1880-1940,” *American Nineteenth Century History* (Vol. 6, No. 3: September, 2005), 351-72.

<sup>50</sup>Vandiver, *Lethal punishment*, 94.

<sup>51</sup>“Orderly Mob Wrecks Vengeance at Greenfield.” *Dresden Enterprise and Sharon Tribune*, 10 September 1915, p. 1.

In 1915, Lost Cause ideology made it to the big screen with D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. While the movie showed the abduction of "Gus" by the KKK and his lifeless body being left on Silas Lynch's doorstep, it does not show the lynching taking place, therefore, cleansing the act itself.<sup>52</sup> In actuality, lynchings had taken an increasingly violent turn, predominately in the South. Northwest Tennessee was no exception. In 1917, local white citizens of Dyersburg brutally tortured Lation Scott before his lynching. Scott was stripped of his clothing and skin simultaneously. Red hot pokers were used to put out his eyes, and rammed down his throat as he screamed for mercy.<sup>53</sup> The victim was robbed of his genitals, and hot irons were applied to his body.<sup>54</sup> In 1931, during the middle of the day in Union City, George Smith was dragged by a car to his lynching on the courthouse lawn.<sup>55</sup> This was the last lynching in Northwest Tennessee. Even in cases in which lynching was not the outcome, brutality was still practiced, even on children. In Gleason, Tennessee, a ten-year-old black child was arrested for stealing a mule. As locals were about to hang him, the boy's older brother arrived and the men turned on him instead. After a brutal beating, the older brother was ordered to whip his little brother with a buggy strap. This episode of racial hatred played out on Main Street and was witnessed by two hundred people.<sup>56</sup> Even after racial violence subsided, racist attitudes remained.

Even today, the effects of Jim Crow are felt in Northwest Tennessee. Many prominent early family's descendants remain in this

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<sup>52</sup>Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 152.

<sup>53</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Crisis, Volumes 15-18* (Cambridge: Harvard College Library, n.d.), 181.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Vandiver, *Lethal punishment*, 42.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 143.

area and many are still active in local governments. Elected officials, on a county and municipal level, remain predominately white. Not one town in Weakley County has ever had a black mayor or school board member. Until recently, Gleason School remained all-white.

Neighborhoods remain partially segregated. Every town in Northwest Tennessee has a few particular communities commonly referred to by local whites as “n\*\*\*\*\*town”. Churches were segregated in Northwest Tennessee during Reconstruction; this practice has largely remained unchanged. Most disturbing of all, local histories have been scrubbed clean of all the ugly parts, and the Civil War (pro-Confederate, of course) is practically a religion itself. The basic landscape has changed little. Vast tracts of farm land still separate small towns, and agriculture remains king. Racial violence seems to have dissipated in this corner of Northwest Tennessee many years ago, but for some customs, time stands still. One could call it, the spoils of a war.