Ida B. Wells Campaigns Against Lynching

Ida Bell Wells was born into slavery in 1862. Her parents understood the value of education and hard work. She attended Rust College in Mississippi and was able to find work as a teacher in Memphis, Tennessee.

Wells was angered by Jim Crow laws that required her to sit in a different train car from that of white passengers. Trains in the South in the late 1800s had “ladies’ cars” where smoking and swearing were not permitted, but African American women were not permitted to sit in these cars. One weekend, Wells purchased a first-class ticket entitling her to sit in the ladies’ car on the train home from Memphis. The conductor told her to move. Wells refused, and later sued the railroad. She had mixed success in the courts, but she found a way to express her outrage by writing articles about her experience for a local newspaper. Thus began her career as a journalist, challenging the wrongs of Jim Crow.

Wells is remembered most for her active campaign against lynching—the lawless killing of a person by a mob, often by hanging. Wells was spurred to action when competition in
the grocery business led to the lynching of three Black men in Memphis in 1892.

One night, a white mob attacked the People’s Grocery, owned and operated by three African American men—Calvin McDowell, Will Stewart, and Thomas Moss. The three were put in jail after some members of the white mob were injured. A few nights later, a mob of some 75 masked men arrived at the jail. Ida B. Wells (in a speech she gave in 1893) described what happened next:

The mob, in obedience to a plan known to every prominent white man in the city, went to the jail between two and three o’clock in the morning, dragged out these young men, hatless and shoeless, put them on the yard engine of the railroad which was in waiting just behind the jail, carried them a mile north of city limits and horribly shot them to death while the locomotive at a given signal let off steam and blew the whistle to deaden the sound of the firing.

One of the murdered men, Thomas Moss, was a friend of Wells. About Moss and the lynching, she later wrote:

A finer, cleaner man than he never walked the streets of Memphis. . . . This is what opened my eyes to what lynching really was. An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and keep them down.

Wells wrote many newspaper editorials condemning lynching and revealing the lies behind the reasons offered by white people to justify their actions. Her writing prompted violence against the newspaper and threats against her life.
Lynching continued throughout the country for many years, most notably in the South. In the 1890s, hundreds of African American men and women were killed. Wells wrote many articles and traveled widely to make people aware of the horrors of lynching. She published a book called *A Red Record* that cataloged lynchings in the United States. In it, she wrote: “We demand a fair trial by law for those accused of crime, and punishment by law after honest conviction... Surely the humanitarian spirit of this country... will no longer refuse to lift its voice on this subject.”

*Lynn Law in America* by Ida B. Wells (1900)

Our country’s national crime is lynching. It is not the creature of an hour, the sudden outburst of uncontrolled fury, or the unspeakable brutality of an insane mob. It represents the cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who openly avow that there is an “unwritten law” that justifies them in

---

**humanitarian:** caring about the well-being of all people

**deliberation:** careful thought and discussion before deciding or acting

**avow:** to assert; to state a belief or opinion openly
A white mob lynching black men—Ida B. Wells bravely campaigned against what she called “our country’s national crime.”
putting human beings to death . . . without trial by jury, without opportunity to make defense, and without right of appeal. The “unwritten law” first found excuse with the rough, rugged, and determined man who left the civilized centers of eastern states to seek for quick returns in the goldfields of the far West. . . . The thief who stole a horse, the bully who “jumped” a claim, was a common enemy. If caught he was promptly tried, and if found guilty was hanged to the tree under which the court convened. . . .

. . . It next appeared in the South. . . . There it has flourished ever since. . . . So potent is the force of example that the lynching mania has spread throughout the North and Middle West. It is now no uncommon thing to read of lynchings north of Mason and Dixon’s line. . . .

. . . Under the authority of a national law that gave every citizen the right to vote, the newly-made citizens chose to exercise their suffrage. But the reign of the national law was short-lived and illusionary. Hardly had the sentences dried upon the statute-books before one Southern state after another raised the cry against “Negro domination” and proclaimed there was an “unwritten law” that justified any means to resist it. . . .

---

**appeal**: In the American legal system, if you lose your case in court, then you can appeal your case—which means, asking a higher court to review and reverse the lower court’s decision.

**convened**: came together for some purpose

**flourished**: thrived

**potent**: powerful

**mania**: wild enthusiasm for something

**Mason and Dixon’s line**: the Mason-Dixon line, surveyed from 1763 to 1767 by two Englishmen, Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon, to resolve a border dispute between states, and later informally known as the dividing line between the free Northern states and the slaveholding Southern states

**national law**: the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (see page 53.)

**reign**: the period of time during which someone or something holds power

**illusionary**: misleading; deceptive; based on something unreal

**statute**: written law created by a government
These advocates of the “unwritten law” boldly avowed their purpose to 
**intimidate**, suppress, and nullify the Negro’s right to vote. . . . 
The Ku Klux Klans . . . and similar organizations proceeded to beat, exile, and kill Negroes until the purpose of their organization was accomplished and the supremacy of the “unwritten law” was effected. Thus lynchings began in the South, rapidly spreading into the various states until the national law was nullified and the reign of the “unwritten law” was supreme. . . .

. . . It is considered a sufficient excuse and reasonable justification to put a prisoner to death under this “unwritten law” for the frequently repeated charge that these lynching horrors are necessary to prevent crimes against women. . . . No matter that our laws presume every man innocent until he is proved guilty. . . .—if a white woman declares herself insulted or assaulted, some life must pay the penalty. . . . The world looks on and says it is well.

Not only are two hundred men and women put to death annually, on the average, in this country by mobs, but these lives are taken with the greatest publicity. In many instances the leading citizens aid and abet by their presence when they do not participate, and the leading journals inflame the public mind to the lynching point with scare-head articles and offers of rewards. Whenever a burning is advertised to take place,

---

**intimidate**: to fill someone with fear  
**suppress**: to stop by force  
**nullify**: to cause something to have no value or effect  
**The Ku Klux Klans**: secret societies dedicated to achieving white supremacy, often by violent means, especially against Black people  
**sufficient**: enough for the purpose  
**abet**: support; help  
**scare-head**: a headline intended to scare and alarm readers
the railroads run **excursions**, photographs are taken, and the same **jubilee** is **indulged** in that characterized the public hangings of one hundred years ago. . . .

. . . This question affects the entire American nation. . . . Our **watchword** has been “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” Brave men do not gather by thousands to torture and murder a single individual, so gagged and bound he cannot make even feeble resistance or defense. Neither do brave men or women stand by and see such things done without **compunction** of conscience, nor read of them without protest. . . .

. . . No excuse can be offered for exchanging the orderly **administration** of justice for barbarous lynchings and “unwritten laws.” Our country should be placed speedily above the plane of confessing herself a failure at self-government. This cannot be until Americans of every section, of broadest patriotism and best and wisest citizenship, not only see the defect in our country’s armor but take the necessary steps to remedy it. . . .

---

**excursions**: outings; short trips  
**jubilee**: celebration; rejoicing  
**indulged in**: given way to; enjoyed unhealthily  
**watchword**: a word or phrase that expresses a principle you follow  
**compunction**: feelings of guilt  
**administration**: putting into effect