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Don't Act So Innocent, Midwest: *A Midwestern Lynching Narrative*

As the Civil War ended in 1865, it marked a turning point in history for the United States. Slaves were finally set free, but white oppressors used lynchings, an act of violence, to control racial threats to their economic, political, and social hegemony.¹ Typically, this hate crime took place at night, and the number of victims varied in each one. The torture and hanging of Black Americans in front of a large crowd posed as a warning and a statement from white oppressors that just because laws say all Americans are free, Black Americans have no place and meaning in this country. To maintain racial segregation and white power here in the United States, was a motive for the continuation of these lynchings. They originally started down South.² Historian Edward Ayers, who studied the Southern prevalence of before and after the Civil War writes that the characteristics that defined the South were racism, moralism, sexual tension, honor, rurality and localistic republicanism.³ When the Civil War ended and Black Americans were free, white Americans had experienced a decline in faith in the legal system and decided to take action into their own hands to push towards racial order.⁴ The result of this now was a spree of lynchings in the South. Since this now, historically the South has held the reputation of being the racist region, where blacks have been oppressed. The South has been the place where Emit Till was

¹ Robert Defina and Lance Hannon, "The Legacy of Black Lynchings and Contemporary Segregation in the South," in *The Review of Black Political Economy*, vol. 38 (June 2011); pg. 165-181.

² Ibid.

³ Kathleen Belew, "Lynching and Power in the United States: Southern, Western, and National Vigilante Violence," *History Compass* 12, no. 1 (2014): pg 84-99.

⁴ Ibid 85.

murdered, where Jim Crow segregation took place, where Martin Luther King Jr. fought during the Civil Rights Movement, and where the Klu Klux Klan thrived in the terrorizing of Blacks. Pointing fingers at the South has allowed regions like the Midwest to hide the fact that there were and are racial tensions and that this region is not blameless. It is incredibly important to discuss the history of lynchings in the Midwest because it challenges the narrative of the Midwest as innocent of mistreating people of color. Exploring lynchings stories like the one that happened in Duluth, Minnesota in 1920, and comparing that to a lynching that took place in South Carolina in 1898, will show how the Midwest has the same motives and characteristics as the South.

Throughout time, while there was a rise in lynchings and hate crimes in the South, there was a black migration towards the North hoping for a better, safe lifestyle.⁵ This hope for a better life streamed from the myth that the North was a land of liberty, the home of the Union Army during the Civil War, fighting for freedom for the Slaves. To many American people even today, the Northern Region is not supposed to have any sins. It represents the good in the United States, and that is why in school systems still teach about slavery and segregation as a sin of the South.⁶ The frequency of lynching in the South, and the focus on the events that only have taken place there allowed historians to avoid the North's own bloody racial violence. The Midwest Region, which consists of states North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio, does contain these racial

⁵ Jason Sokol, "The North isn't better than the South: The real history of modern racism and segregation above the Mason-Dixon line," *Salon*, last modified December 14, 2014, https://www.salon.com/2014/12/14/the_north_isnt_better_than_the_south_the_real_history_of_modern_racism_and_segregation_above_the_mason_dixon_line/.

⁶ Ibid.

traits just like the South. The perfect myth of the Midwest covers its racial and social problems it hides by being the innocent region.

Despite being viewed as boring and innocent according to historian and professor at Ball State University, Nicole Etchenson, who wrote “Barbecued Kentuckians and Six-Foot Texas Rangers: The Construction of the Midwestern Identity,” the Midwest did not have “. . . secession or slavery, which define the South. Not even the frontier whose stereotypical figures of cowboy, Indian, gunfighter, and saloon girl have been co-opted by the West.”⁷ What big event in American history has shaped the Midwest’s identity? But instead of focusing on historical events have shaped this region, this region’s identity is focused on the social and racial inequalities that are not talked about. Some define the Midwest as a region of opportunity for economic self-making, and because of that it is believed that Midwesterners are more hard working than any other Americans.⁸ With the idea of “economic opportunity” there has been a division in social class, that results in racial problems. There is a belief that certain races are not believed to be above the working class in the Midwest. In Etchenson’s piece, she writes about how a Mexican-American boy was told a waitress that it was hard to believe that he could be a middle-class businessman.⁹ With this example you can see that Midwesterners put different races in different social classes, which can result in people of color living in segregated neighborhoods, plagued with problems ranging from poor schools to low quality housing, to a lack of jobs.¹⁰ Something that has allowed these problems to occur is that the Midwest does not address them and they are

⁷ Nicole Etchenson, “Barbecued Kentuckians And Six-Foot Texas Rangers: The Construction Of Midwestern Identity” In *The Identity Of The American Midwest: Essays on Regional History*, ed. Andrew R. L. Clayton and Susan E. Gray (Indiana University Press), 78-90.

⁸ Ibid 82.

⁹ Ibid 85.

¹⁰ Aaron M. Renn, “To Rebuild, The Midwest Must Face Its Real And Severe Problems” *Newgeography*. Last modified October 1, 2019.

not talked about. Etchson is arguing that “The class differences of the Midwest, although not so clearly visible as those on the border, are nonetheless real.”¹¹ In other words, what she is trying to argue is that the real problem in the Midwest is that there are racial and class inequalities but they are not talked about and are hidden.

Duluth, Minnesota, a harbor city that is located along the shores of Lake Superior, that historically developed due to its valuable timber and iron abundance in the area. This made it a very vital city for shipping and manufacturing. In the 1920s this city was the home of a small black community, with most black people working as waiters, janitors, and factory workers. All of the prominent positions in this city were held by white men. Blacks were treated here just like they were in the South. Some restaurants would not serve people of color, or blacks would get paid less for their salary than whites, and people of color also lived in poor neighborhoods separated from the rest of the community. The poor treatment of blacks in this community was not brought to light until June 15, 1920, when three black men were lynched in the innocent city of Duluth Minnesota.¹²

A circus was taking place in this town of Duluth on June 14th. Irene Tusken and James Sullivan, two white 18 to 19 year old girls attended the circus. Apparently, during or after the show six black guys held them both at gunpoint and then raped Irene shortly after. These accusations did not occur until the next morning when James Sullivan’s dad contacted the police. That morning, when the police received a phone call from Jame’s dad that six black men had held the two girls at gunpoint and raped Irene did the police arrested the accused. That morning was Irene went to a physician to get an examination. There were no signs of rape or assault, but

¹¹ Nicole Etcheson, “Barbecued Kentuckians And Six-Foot Texas Rangers: The Construction Of Midwestern Identity,” 83.

¹² Minnesota Historical Society, “Background,” *Duluth Lynchings: Background and historical documents relating to the tragic events on June 25, 1920, 1849.*

the police still arrested the black men. News of these accusations spread fast throughout the town. The men were taken to the local county jail, which was soon reported in the local newspaper. The angry reaction of the town would soon result in tragedy for three of these black men.

After the allegations of 6 black men raping Irene circulated throughout the town, it was estimated that the same evening the six black men were put into the county jail 1,000-10,000 white men and women gathered outside the police station to form a mob. The mob was motivated by the fact that these men had supposedly harmed a white young girl. It was very easy for them to force themselves into the police station because the police were not using any resistance at this point. They did not use any type of force to get the mob to leave or calm down. The law did not do their job in protecting these black men. The mob successfully broke into the jail by breaking windows, using bricks, and tearing down doors. They took three of the six black men that were accused. The three men that were striped from their jail cells were lynched, beaten: Isaac McGhie, Elmer Jackson, and then Elias Clayton.¹³ The three men were beaten, and then strung to a light pole one by one, which resulted in their deaths. These were also the men that, after the trial, were declared guilty. After this tragedy took place, Minnesota National Guard arrived in Duluth the next morning to protect the three surviving prisoners.

After the lynching, there were two serperate reactions to the event. Some people did not experience regret for this hate crime. The *Ely Minor* claimed in, "The consensus of opinion throughout the county is that, while the thing was wrong in principle, it was most effective and those who were put out of their criminal existence by the mob, will not assault any more young girls."¹⁴ In other words, there was a belief that the lynching that took place was the only way to

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ely Miner, 18 June 1920, p. 4.

handle this crime, so to warn other black man would harm a young white women. These racial attitudes did in fact take place in Minnesota too. Even though most believe you will only find that in the South. Even though these people recognized the act of lynching as wrong, they still did not categorize these three black men as human beings. In the *Mankato Daily Free Press*, they wrote, “And it must be understood that white men—men of blood—will not sit idly by when black rascals pounce like fiends on white woman.”¹⁵ They believed that black men's motive is to hurt these white women, and then this article continues to refer to black men as beasts. After stating that white people need to take black crimes into their own hands, they write, “Mad dogs are shot dead without ceremony. Beasts in human shape are entitled to but scant consideration. The law gives them by far too much of an advantage.”¹⁶ In other words, these black men are beast, and should have been killed without the protection of the law. These reporters did not see the wrong in how they reported on these black men.

Minnesota did not just have a racist attitude towards the tragic event that took place on June 15, 1920. In a *Minneapolis Journal* a reporter writes, “The sudden flaming up of racial passion, which is the reproach of the South, may also occur, as we now learn in the bitterness of humiliation in Minnesota.”¹⁷ In other words, this event was seen as a disgrace and that their are racist people in Minnesota like their are in the South and that was a disgrace to many people. A woman writes, in regard to the lynching that took place, “Duluth has suffered a horrible disgrace a blot on its name that can never outlive.”¹⁸ This woman writes in her article that Duluth will never outlive this hate crime. What these people did was immoral.

¹⁵ Mankato Daily Free Press, June 17, 1920, page 6

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “The Duluth Disgrace,” *Minneapolis Journal*, 17 June 1920, p. 18.

¹⁸ “Judy, M.W., Duluth’s Sad Experiment,” *National Advocate*, July 3, 1920, page 1

The *Chicago Tribune* was one of the many newspapers that covered the lynching in Duluth. In one of their articles, “The Duluth Lynchings,” on June 17, 1920, just two days after the lynching occurred, a reporter wrote, “The problem is deeper. At its base, of course, is a very strong trait in American history character, which creates, in spite of inconsistencies and exceptions towards women. In the Duluth the men charged with the offense were negroes, and undoubtedly this was an important factor in the psychology of the outbreak.”¹⁹ In other words, this reporter has already established that America as a whole continues to have racial hate crimes, especially when it is a black man accused by a white woman. But to this reporter this has become the norm in America. It is not just something that has happened in the Southern region of the United States. What did this now mean for Duluth or the state of Minnesota, or if we want to regionalize, the Midwest? Throughout history we have categorized the South, as being the only region that has a racist history. The South is where these lynchings are supposed to take place. But the lynching in Duluth, Minnesota proved that to be wrong. The Midwest has experienced racist attitudes and events.

In spite of where the Midwest is located geographically, it has the same racial hate, practiced in the South. But this also angered many people and people then believed that that this has left a stain on Minnesota. One reporter wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*; “This is a crime of a northern state, as black and ugly as any that has brought the south into disrepute.”²⁰ The lynching that took place in Duluth was just as racist as the ones that take place in the South. Now we therefore have to take into consideration that the Midwest is not any different than the South. The effect that the lynchings had on the Midwest, definitely expressed the attitudes many

¹⁹ “THE DULUTH LYNCHING.” 1920. *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), Jun 17, 8.
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/174642207?accountid=8432>.

²⁰ Chicago Evening Post quoted in “Minnesota’s Disgrace,” *The Appeal* (St. Paul, Minn), 19 June 1920, p2.

of the citizens had. A citizen that lived in Minnesota when this took place wrote a journal piece after the tragic event. They wrote, "It was the color of the three prisoners that made them victims of the mob. Had they been white, they might have been the objects of reprobation for the crime with which they were charged—but they would no doubt have been left to the calm processes of the law."²¹ In other words this writer believes that the motive for this lynching and even for them being accused was the fact that these three men were black, and if it was three white men it would not have gotten that far, to the point where men died. The affect that the lynching had on this specific writer is disappointment in Minnesota, they wrote, "The sudden flaming up of racial passion, which is the reproach of the South, may also occur, as we now learn in the bitterness of humiliation in Minnesota."²² This person believes that the Midwest does have in fact Southern approaches and problems when it comes to race.

The Duluth lynching was not the only lynching that took place in the Midwest. Multiple lynchings that have taken place across in the Midwest. Another one that sticks out is a lynching that took place in Omaha, Nebraska of a man named William Brown. Brown was accused of attacking a white woman, he was dragged from the county jail's 5th floor, and he was hung from a light pole where he was shot and shot at several times.²³ Another theory of what also caused this lynching was the various attacks of black men towards white women and the current riot that was taking place between police officers and white men and women mobsters.²⁴ This lynching is similar to the lynching in Duluth, Minnesota because the alleged crime involved

²¹ "The Duluth Disgrace," *Minneapolis Journal*, June 17, 1920, page 18, http://www.mnhs.org/duluthlynchings/documents/The_Duluth_Disgrace-89.001.php.

²² Ibid.

²³ "HANG NEGRO: MOB MAYOR: OMAHA COURT HOUSE IS BURNED; TROOPS IN CITY 9 HOUR BATTLE ENDS IN LYNCHING; 2 DEAD; 2 SHOT. BULLETIN." 1919. *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922), Sep 29, 1. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/174529260?accountid=8432>.

²⁴ Ibid.

a white women being attacked by a black man. Hate of the man's skin color resulted in a tragic event. The difference between the Duluth lynching and the one that took place in Omaha is that the police were more involved in the Nebraska lynching. Four white men were shot by the police when the mob attempted to hang the Mayor of the city because he would not just hand over William Brown.²⁵ The police attempted to keep Brown under protection a lot more than the police involved in the Duluth lynchings. During the Duluth lynchings the police were actually created after using their guns to stop the mob from entering the building. A reporter from the Duluth lynchings wrote, "The order not to fire on the mob, if given as the press accounts say, may have prevented the loss of human life."²⁶ What I believe this reporter was hinting at was the judgement call used by law enforcement. By not doing whatever they could to protect the black men that were in the jail that day. What this really showed was whose lives matter more in that circumstance. It was either hurt the white mob who they knew were trying to harm the black men, or let the black men be harmed. Clearly they picked the white mob to survive that day, because to them their lives mattered more. In the Midwest and even America as a whole, bad treatment of police is also a characteristic people might find only to happen in the South since that region is the "racist" one. But under that circumstance the Midwest was no better than the South, with protecting the black gentlemen they had locked up, which would make the Midwest, just as guilty as the South.

It was not one or two lynchings that has defined the Midwest as having racist characteristics like the rest of America. Chicago is home to the Red Summer of 1919. The summer of 1919 in Chicago consisted of over 25 riots in the streets. On July 27, 1919 white and black people collided in a savage combat on the South Side of Chicago and this was the peak of

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "A Duluth's Disgrace," page 18.

what a black activist James Weldon Johnson, named The Red Summer 1919.²⁷ The riots were extended from April to November of the year of 1919.²⁸ This now was produced by the migration of blacks to the Midwestern region and the friction between the two races in this city after World War One. Black Soldiers had come home from this war felt as if they were not being treated with respect like white soldiers.²⁹ Many factors led to this Red Summer of 1919, but one in particular was July 27, when four young black boys were just drifting in the water and accidentally ended up in the white section. A white man saw them and started throwing rocks at them. He hit one of the boys, Eugene Williams, in the head and Williams fell into the water and died.³⁰ When a black policemen tried to arrest the man who threw the rock, a white police officer tried to stop him. Word broke through to the black community. Then the riots began. If the Midwest was innocent and fit the myth of the safe, these riots would have never happened.

As we know from history, we have pointed fingers at the South as being racist. The South has identified as being the region where slavery was practiced, where Emmett Till was brutally killed, and other events in history like the Civil Rights movement. In theory we stereotype the South as backward and corrupt.³¹ Lynchings in the South started a widespread crisis in the South, which sparked specific characteristics that would soon describe the South. These characteristics such as moralism, racism, sexual tension, honor, rurality, and localistic republicanism.³² The people in the South used lynchings as a form of economic power,

²⁷ Norvell B. Stanley, and William M. Tuttle, Jr. "Views of a Negro During 'The Red Summer' of 1919." *The Journal of Negro History* 51, no. 3 (1966): 209-18. doi:10.2307/2716062.

²⁸ Adam J. Hodges. "The Red Summer of 1919: Toward a Synthesis." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 12, no. 1 (2013): 141-44. www.jstor.org/stable/41721090.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jim Bowman. "The Way We Were: The Long, Hot Summer When Chicago Erupted In Violence." *Chicago Tribune*, Aug 29, 1982.

³¹ Kathleen Belew, "Lynching and Power in the United States: Southern, Western, and National Vigilante Violence," 86.

³² Ibid 87.

specifically towards African American men. Not only did the white people of the South benefit from the racial order created by lynchings but the act also helped to nullify black claims to citizenship and forced them to work for cheap labor.³³ Lynchings that occurred, made it easier for the South to be described as the racist and gruesome region.

The similarities of lynchings that occurred in the South and the Midwest are almost completely the same. A lynching of a black man Frazier B. Baker, and his infant daughter Dora Baker, happened on February 24, 1898, in Lake City, South Carolina.³⁴ Frazier Baker was just appointed postmaster in September of the same year, and the white people of that town did not approve because of his skin color, so they started a protest against the hiring of Baker. When the protest began these white protestors boycotted the office in which Baker was doing his job and when this had no effect, they decided to burn down the office, which then resulted in building a new one for him to work in.³⁵ After the opening of his new office, there was an attempt to assassinate him and his black duty, but it failed.³⁶ These protesters did not stop. After the attempt to assassinate him they got charges filed against him that Frazier was abusing his position and that he be removed. Investigators were sent to Lake City to investigate but when they arrived at Baker and his daughter were already murdered.³⁷ A mob of two hundred to three hundred men set fire to Fraser Baker's house, and when Baker tried to escape with his daughter Dora in his arms the crown fired at them, and shot them both. Three other daughters and his son and wife

³³ Ibid 89.

³⁴ "THE SOUTH CAROLINA LYNCHING." 1898.Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922), Feb 24, 6.
<https://search.proquest.com/docview/172763847?accountid=8432>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

were shot, but not killed but were wounded, and Frazier and Dora were burned inside of their house.³⁸

The gruesome lynching of Frazier Baker and the three victims in the Duluth, Minnesota lynching have proven that the Midwest is no better than the South. Something both of these cases have in common is the motive of racial discrimination. Both of the mobs in these cases were driven by the fact that these men were black. Racial discrimination lies within both of these regions, which contradicts the myth of innocence that was once believed to be in the Midwest. All of these victims had families, which neither mobs cared about, because these acts of violence were selfish and cruel. Now when describing the Midwest, we can identify it with the same characteristics as we do in the South.

The false narrative of the Midwest has been produced throughout history. What defines the Midwest has played a huge part in covering up the sins that lie here in this region. The effect the Duluth lynching had on the Midwest, was certainly shock and disappointing news in theory the Midwest was not like the South. It has been proven that over 4,000 lynchings have taken place all over America, including the Midwest and not just the South.³⁹ Map makers at *Aunt Studio*, made a map that records historical lynchings of all races and that shows that the majority of lynchings that have taken place have been black people.⁴⁰ This map just shows that there were multiple instances where black people were lynched in the Midwest. This innocence of the Midwest has been what has defined this region. It was the region where blacks moved during the Great Migration, or where the Union army fought to free slaves. But instead we have to face the reality that the Midwest is a region that has had lynching and race riots and it is not this perfect

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Laura Bliss. "A Map of American Lynchings That Spans More Than a Century." CityLab, January 19, 2017. <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/01/a-comprehensive-map-of-american-lynchings/513293/>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

region as described to be. Historically we pay more attention to the South because even according to *Aunt Studio*, “4,000 black people were killed in lynchings in a dozen Southern States. . .”⁴¹ The South does have a history of being the racist region but that does not mean these characteristics did not happen and still do happen throughout the rest of America. Education systems in America may not touch on the fact that there were lynchings, or riots throughout the whole United States, because we the people still need to believe that we are a great nation. So putting the racial blame on the South allows us avoid and hide the exact problems we have going on in the Midwest. People like William Brown, or Eugene Williams, Frazier and Dora Baker, and the three men were lynched in Duluth deserve to just be covered up, it needs to be told.

⁴¹ Laura Bliss. “A Map of American Lynchings That Spans More Than a Century.”