

Crusader for Justice

When three friends were murdered in 1892, journalist and early civil rights activist Ida B. Wells uncovered the truth

CHARACTERS

Barrett, the white owner of a Memphis grocery store

Thomas Moss
Calvin McDowell
Henry Stewart } co-owners of the People's Grocery

Mob, a group of white people

Ida B. Wells, a journalist, newspaper owner, and early civil rights leader

Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave who became an abolitionist, a writer, an orator, and a statesman

Narrators A-E

All of the characters were real people. The dialogue is based on actual events and writings but was edited for space and clarity.

WORDS TO KNOW

- **boycott** (v): to refuse, as an act of protest, to buy products or use services
- **lynching** (n): murder by a lawless mob, usually for an unproven crime
- **13th Amendment** (n): the 1865 Constitutional amendment that abolished slavery, stating, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States. . . ."
- **yellow fever** (n): an infectious disease spread by mosquitoes

PROLOGUE

Narrator A: In 1862, Ida Bell Wells was born a slave in Holly Springs, Mississippi. Ida's parents were illiterate. Slaves risked being beaten or killed for trying to learn to read.

Narrator B: The Civil War ended in April 1865. That December, the **13th Amendment** to the Constitution outlawed slavery. Ida's parents soon enrolled her and her siblings in a school for black children. Ida quickly learned to read.

SCENE 1

Narrator C: When Ida is 16, her parents die of **yellow fever**. She takes a teaching job to help support her younger brothers and sisters. But Ida yearns to be a journalist, to speak out against the brutality that blacks face in the South.

Narrator D: In 1889, she becomes the editor and part-owner of *Free Speech*, a newspaper for blacks in Memphis, Tennessee.

Narrator E: Three years later, an event shakes her to her core.

Narrator A: One Saturday afternoon, Wells's friend Thomas Moss is walking to the People's Grocery, a store that he co-owns in a black neighborhood outside Memphis.



The white owner of a nearby shop approaches him.

Barrett: We need only one grocery store around here, and it's mine. You're stealing my customers, and you're going to regret it.

Narrator B: Moss meets with his co-owners to tell them what happened.

Thomas Moss: How do we prevent a **lynching**, Cal?

Calvin McDowell: The police won't protect us. We need everyone in the neighborhood to help us.

Henry Stewart: Why can't whites leave us alone? They're just angry that we've got customers.

Narrator C: That night, shots ring out in the back of the men's store. A

LYNCHING, 1882-1968

4,742

Estimated number of people lynched in the U.S. Of these, 3,445 were black.

200

Number of anti-lynching bills the U.S. Senate failed to act on during this time.

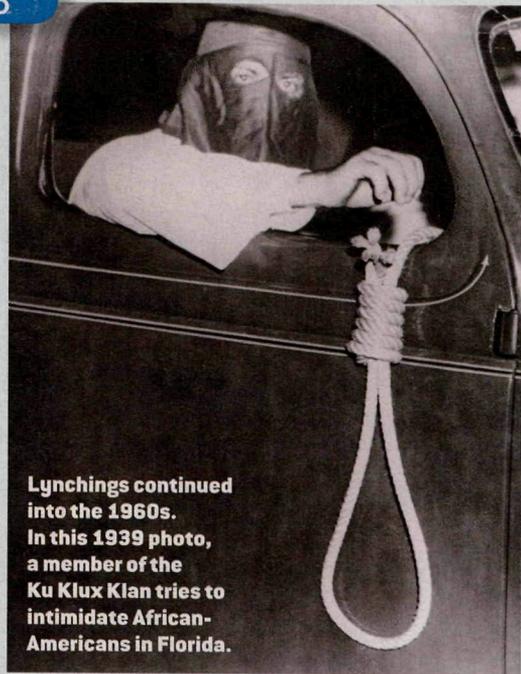
79

Percent of lynchings that took place in the South. Mississippi had the most—581.

SOURCES: ABC News, Archives at the Tuskegee Institute



Ida B. Wells, left, with the widow of Thomas Moss and her children



Lynchings continued into the 1960s. In this 1939 photo, a member of the Ku Klux Klan tries to intimidate African-Americans in Florida.

scuffle between black men guarding the store and white intruders leaves three white men hurt.

Narrator D: All of the black men, including Moss and his co-owners, are arrested and thrown in jail.

Mob: Lynch them! Lynch them!

SCENE 2

Narrator E: A few days later, a white mob breaks into the jail and drags the three shopkeepers away.

Moss: Don't kill me! I have a little girl at home and a baby on the way.

Barrett: You're out of line!

Mob: Kill him! Lynch him!

Narrator A: McDowell grabs a gun from one of the lynchers but can't

protect himself. The mob shoots off his fingers and gouges out his eyes. Moss, horrified, knows he is next.

Moss (to the crowd): Tell my family to go West. There's no justice here!

Narrator B: The mob shoots the three shopkeepers to death.

Narrator C: When Wells learns of the lynching, she writes about it for *Free Speech*, urging blacks to protest.

Ida B. Wells (writing): We must leave this town. It won't protect us or give us fair trials in the courts, but instead murders us in cold blood.

Narrator D: Within months, 6,000 of the 30,000 black residents of Memphis move away, some walking 500 miles to neighboring Oklahoma.

Narrator E: Wells writes that blacks who stayed in town should **boycott** white-owned businesses.

Wells (writing): We've learned that every prominent white man in Memphis supported the lynching. They don't deserve our money.

Narrator A: Enraged by the articles Wells is writing, a white mob ransacks her newspaper

office and sets it on fire.

Narrator B: But Wells will not be silenced. She writes about the hundreds of blacks across the South being lynched each year.

Wells (writing): Consider the case of Sam Holt, a Georgia man who was murdered before a mob of 2,000. His ears and fingers were severed. His body was cut to pieces, the bones sold as souvenirs.

Narrator C: Wells's reporting earns the admiration of the brilliant orator and ex-slave Frederick Douglass.

Frederick Douglass (in a letter to Wells): If the American conscience were half-alive, a scream of horror would rise to heaven wherever your work is read.

EPILOGUE

Narrator D: Wells continued her anti-lynching campaign, and her reporting was recognized worldwide. She went on to champion other civil rights causes for blacks and women. She died in 1931 at age 68. —Suzanne McCabe