
COURT HOUSE STEPS A GALLOWS.

Kentucky Mob Hangs Negro After Riddling Him with Bullets.

HODGENVILLE, Ky., Oct. 31.—A mob of fifty or seventy-five determined citizens came down upon this little town about 2 o'clock this morning and took from the jail Silas Esters, a negro, charged with forcing Granville Ward, a fifteen-year-old boy, of New Upton, to commit a crime, and strung him up to the Court House steps.

So quietly and systematically did the mob go about its work that the citizens of the town were in ignorance of the existence of the mob until the negro was in its clutches.

The men composing the lynching party approached the jail, and upon their demand the keys were surrendered to them. The cell in which the negro was confined was entered, and the noose was adjusted about his neck.

He was dragged down the jail stairs and out into the street. He managed to slip the noose from his neck and made a break for liberty. The mob, crazed with anger, made after the negro, howling and firing at him with guns and pistols. The negro fell when about 100 yards from the jail house, riddled with bullets.

The noose was again placed about the negro's neck, and he was dragged to the Court House and swung from the topmost step.

The mob was formed in the neighborhood of the crime. When the work of lynching the negro had been accomplished the members of the mob quietly dispersed and went to their homes.

The New York Times

Published: November 1, 1901

Copyright © The New York Times

The Lynching Party

Pearl Ward and her neighbor Janie Green were playing with their cornhusk dolls by the side of the barn when Pearl's big brother Granville and his best friend Si came out leading their saddled horses behind them.

"Hey, where y'all going?" Pearl asked, "Can I come too?"

"Uncle Frank wanted me and Si to help get things set up for his pre-Halloween party at the general store tonight and you'd just be in the way." Granville added, "Besides, you'll be heading over in the wagon with Daddy pretty soon anyways."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. If I leave later it'll give me plenty of time to get my Abraham Lincoln costume ready for the party."

"You're going as Lincoln?!" Si laughed.

"Yeah, so what?" Pearl clinched her fists, "It's the costume Momma made for Granville when he was my age. It's got a beard she made from a fur collar off her old coat and everything."

"Everybody knows a girl can't be president," Si sneered.

"Well," Pearl hesitated for a second, "Everybody knows a colored can't be neither."

Granville shot Pearl a dirty look as he hopped on his horse and turned towards Si.

"Come on, I'll race you to Hodgenville!" Granville yelled as he took off down the road with Si following closely behind.

Pearl was staring at the cloud of dust the teenagers left in their wake when she heard Miss Maudie call her name.

"Pearl! Lunch is almost ready. Get on in here and wash up."

Pearl turned to Janie and asked, "Hey, you want to eat lunch with us? Miss Maudie always fixes more than enough for everybody."

"Nah, I'm not allowed to."

"Why not?"

"Daddy says no daughter of his is going to ever be seen sitting down at the table with a bunch of dirty n-ers."

"You better take that back!" Pearl yelled, "The Esters are like family to us. That's what my momma always said."

"Well my daddy says your Yankee momma's the one who put all those crazy race-mixing notions in your daddy's head. He wasn't like that before he met her."

The Lynching Party 3

“My momma wasn’t no Yankee! Her family’s from Lexington!”

Pearl really wanted to hit her neighbor but instead she took the doll she was clutching tightly in her hand and ripped its head off. After she threw it on the ground she grabbed the other doll from Janie and ripped her head off too.

“I’m telling,” Janie sobbed as she gathered up her decapitated toys, “You’re not my friend no more.”

“Who cares?!” Pearl yelled as Janie ran back home, “I don’t want to be friends with white trash like you anyways.”

Pearl hurriedly ran her hands under the water pump outside and when she walked in the kitchen her daddy and Mister Henry were already at the table eating and Miss Maudie was standing by the window looking worried.

“Is that little Green girl all right? She looked like she was crying.”

“Yeah, she’s okay,” Pearl looked down at the floor, “She was just sad cause she accidentally broke her doll.”

When Pearl looked back up she could tell Miss Maudie was a little skeptical of her answer but Pearl’s daddy interrupted before she could question Pearl in any more detail.

“Get on over here and eat! We’re going to have to pack up the wagon and leave as soon as you get done.”

Pearl grabbed a biscuit left over from breakfast, a piece of pork and some fried potatoes and tried to forget the sting of Janie’s words. If her momma was still here Pearl knew she would say something to make it better but Pearl was only five when she died and after two years the sound of her voice and even the features of her face were slowly starting to fade away. Pearl also knew that Miss Maudie tried her best to fill in, but it wasn’t the same.

“Girl!” Pearl’s father yelled, “Are you going to stare at that food all day or are you going to the Halloween party in Hodgenville with me? Cause I’m fixing to load up now and if you’re not out there when I’m ready to go then I’m leaving without you.”

Pearl didn’t have to be told twice. She quickly finished up the remnants on her plate and hurried to put on the costume that she’d carefully laid out on her bed. The beard was still a little loose when she put the wires behind her ears and the stovepipe hat kept slipping over her eyes but Pearl had never been as proud of a costume in her life. She still remembered when her mother first showed it to her and said she made it for Granville but some day Pearl would be big enough to wear it herself. Her momma went on to explain what a great man Mr. Lincoln had been and how he was born right here in Hodgenville, Kentucky. Pearl looked in the mirror, made one last adjustment to her beard and headed outside. When she got close to the wagon she noticed her daddy putting some of his jars of homemade moonshine under a blanket in the back.

The Lynching Party 4

“Well hey there Mr. Lincoln, I’m mighty honored to be escorting you to the party,” Pearl’s daddy said, “But I’d appreciate if you didn’t mention what’s under the blanket to your Aunt Edna.”

“Sure Daddy, I won’t tell,” Pearl climbed on the bench in front.

The long ride to Hodgenville was spent mostly in silence because Pearl could smell the liquor on her daddy’s breath. Sometimes it made him real happy but other times not so much, so she decided the best thing to do was stay quiet and not risk getting him riled up. When Pearl’s daddy pulled behind her Uncle Frank’s general store she hopped down and ran over to say hi to her cousin Clemmy.

“Who are you supposed to be?” Clemmy asked.

“Abraham Lincoln,” Pearl replied.

“You can’t be Abraham Lincoln. That’s a boy’s costume.”

“There ain’t no boy’s and girl’s costumes. You can be anything you want on Halloween,” Pearl said, “And what about that dumb princess outfit. You wear it every year.”

“Well at least I’m not a stupid boy.”

“Lincoln wasn’t no stupid boy. He was the only president ever born in the state of Kentucky.”

“Nu-uh, Jefferson Davis was born here too.”

“Jefferson Davis was a rebel. He wasn’t no real president.”

“Was too!”

“Was not!”

“Was too!”

“Girls!” Aunt Edna grabbed them both, “We’re not refighting the Civil War. You need to get on inside. They’re going to be bobbing for apples soon.”

Pearl took a few steps towards the door and then heard her aunt calling her.

“Pearl do you mind running back to your daddy’s wagon. He forgot to bring in the pies that Miss Maudie made.”

“Sure Aunt Edna, I don’t mind.”

When Pearl got close to the wagon she saw Granville and Si taking a mason jar from underneath the blanket.

“A-a-a-h, you better not let Daddy catch you doing that.”

“Well he won’t as long as you keep quiet about it,” Granville said.

“I won’t tell,” Pearl reassured them, “Hey Si, can you hand me your momma’s pies from out of there? Daddy forgot to bring them in.”

“Sure Pearl,” Si said.

After Pearl got the pies she hurried back to the general store to make sure she didn’t miss out on any of the fun. There was candy and games and when they had the costume contest Pearl won first prize. She wanted to show off her blue ribbon to someone but her daddy was already drinking in the back room with the men and Aunt Edna and Uncle Frank were too busy so she set off in search of Si and her brother. When she couldn’t find them inside she went out back to see if they were sneaking a drink. She was almost ready to give up and go back to the party when she heard what sounded like a moan coming from the alley. As Pearl got closer she realized that it was Granville and Si, but something wasn’t right. Granville was kneeling in front of Si and it looked like he had Si’s... Thing in his mouth. As she stood gaping Uncle Frank came up behind her with a bag of trash in his hand.

“Why’re you standing out here with your mouth hanging open Pearlie? Look like you seen a ghost.”

Before Pearl even had a chance to respond, Uncle Frank had dropped the trash, tackled Si, and was pummeling him with his fists. After that it was all just a blur for Pearl. Si’s cries brought the party outside and next thing she knew the men from the back room pulled Uncle Frank and Si apart, but when Uncle Frank started talking they went after Si again and the sheriff had to pull them off and take Si away. Granville just sat in the dirt staring until Si was gone. He finally started to get up but he fell back down when Daddy punched him in the face and told him to get the hell out of his sight. After Uncle Frank dragged Daddy away and Granville rode off on his horse, Aunt Edna took Pearl’s hand and led her back inside.

“Come on honey, we need to find Clemmy and get you two back to the house. This ain’t no place for children to be.”

It was a short walk to Aunt Edna’s and Pearl was still too shocked to speak but Clemmy wanted to hear about everything.

“Momma what happened? I saw the sheriff take Si and Granville had a bloody nose and...”

“Shush it! Right now! We are never going to speak of this night again. Do you understand me Clementine?”

“Yes ma’am,” Clemmy reluctantly agreed.

“You too Pearl.”

Pearl slowly nodded her head.

When they arrived at Aunt Edna’s house she made both girls put on their nightgowns and go to bed immediately. But they weren’t ready for sleep yet. Once Aunt Edna left Clemmy’s room the whispering began.

“Pearl, you were out there. What in the world happened?”

“I don’t know. It was weird. Granville was doing something funny to Si and then everybody went crazy. Uncle Frank attacked Si and Daddy punched Granville and...”

“That better not be talking I hear,” Aunt Edna yelled from the other room, “Don’t make me have to go out in the dark and cut a switch!”

The girls heeded the warning and all conversation stopped. But that didn’t mean Pearl was able to sleep. She tossed and turned for what seemed like forever but she must have nodded off because she was startled awake when Uncle Frank came in.

“Edna!” Uncle Frank yelled, “Where’s my gun?”

“Frank! Quiet down, you’re going to wake the girls.”

But it was too late. Pearl and Clemmy were already up and listening at the door.

“Oh, sorry, but we’ve been talking down at the store and I think this thing’s got to be taken care of tonight.”

“Oh no Frank, think about Pearl. You know how much the Esters mean to her. They’ve been a lot more than just tenant farmers to Willie’s family, especially since Elizabeth died.”

“Well I’m sorry but if you ask me, Elizabeth got all this trouble started to begin with. Letting the colored help sit at your table and treating the Esters boy Si like another son, I knew nothing good would come of it.”

“But still, I just don’t know about all this. Can’t you let the law handle it?”

“Edna, you know the law can’t do what needs to be done. It’s Granville’s good name that’s at stake here.”

“All right. I guess you should do what you think’s best. Your gun’s in the back of the hall closet.”

The girls rushed back to their bed and after they heard Frank leave and Edna shut her bedroom door, Pearl got up and started putting on her shoes.

“What are you doing?” Clemmy whispered.

“Going to help Si. You coming?”

“Well, I don’t know. If Momma finds out...” Clemmy hesitated.

But Pearl was already lifting the window open so Clemmy rushed to get her own shoes on and followed. As they got closer to the jail the girls saw their fathers dragging Si down the stairs by a rope around his neck. Clemmy grabbed Pearl by the arm and pulled her behind a bush.

“Hey! What are you doing?” Pearl cried, “We’ve got to save Si.”

“It’s too late Pearl. There’s nothing we can do,” Clemmy replied.

The Lynching Party 7

Pearl reluctantly stayed behind the bush and watched Si tug at the rope around his neck as he was dragged down the street. And just when she thought it was hopeless, Si managed to get free and start running.

“Go Si, go,” Pearl whispered.

And that’s when the barrage began.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!

#

Pearl’s eyes fluttered open as she dazedly looked around.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!

“Keep your pants on! I’m coming!” Pearl yelled as she reached for her cane.

She rose slowly and quickly glanced at the calendar to verify that yes, it’s May 1987 and she really had left the nightmare behind. She started turning the door handle when she heard a shout.

“Open up old lady! It’s the police!”

She finished turning the knob and threw open the screen.

“Jimmy!” Pearl gave her nephew a big hug.

“Aunt Pearl! You’re getting a little slow in your old age ain’t you?”

“Oh you hush,” Pearl lightly tapped Jimmy’s arm, “Where’s your friend? I thought he was coming with you this time.”

“Well Dave, Dave’s not feeling too good. Maybe he’ll be able to make the next trip.”

“He really seemed to like that vegetable soup I made him last time. Let me run out to the pantry and get a few jars that I canned up.”

While Pearl was in the other room someone knocked on the door and Jimmy let her know he would get it.

“Lisa, good to see you again. I don’t think I’ve seen you since your mamaw’s funeral.”

“Yeah, I believe that was the last time.”

“Are you two just going to stand there letting in flies? Come on in and sit down Lisa. Jimmy here just drove up all the way from Florida.”

“Florida? Really? So what are you doing down there?”

“I own a bar. A gay bar,” Jimmy smiled.

“Oh my, well,” Lisa stammered, “Yes, okay... Well, I really have to get going. Amy’ll be getting out of cheerleading practice any minute now. I just wanted to stop by and thank Pearl for the beautiful flowers on Mamaw’s grave.”

“You know every Memorial Day weekend I always set aside some of the best blooms from my garden to put on Clemmy’s grave.”

“And we do appreciate it. Well, like I said, I’ve got to get going but I’ll give you a call in a few days to check up on you.”

“Okay honey, you be careful driving home, you hear?”

“I will.”

Once Lisa left Pearl turned towards Jimmy, “Do you really have to make her that flustered every time you see her? Alcohol and homosexuality? You’re liable to give her a heart attack. She’s a strict Pentecostal you know.”

“Oh I’m just kidding around with her Aunt Pearl. Flustered isn’t that bad. At least she doesn’t beat the shit out of me or scream “Be a man!” like Papaw did. I still can’t believe I’m taking you over to Upton to put flowers on that old son of a bitch’s grave.”

“Jimmy! I have had it with that kind of talk! You never knew the Granville that I did and that’s partly my fault. I made a promise to Clemmy’s momma years ago that I would never speak of the night that changed my brother forever but I think you need to know.”

Pearl walked over to her desk and pulled a yellowed newspaper clipping from the back of a drawer and handed it to Jimmy.

“Here, read this and then we can have a nice long talk about your Papaw Granville.”