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Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith

J. Thomas Shipp and **Abraham S. Smith** were young African-American men who were murdered in a spectacle lynching by a mob of thousands on August 7, 1930, in Marion, Indiana. They were taken from jail cells, beaten, and hanged from a tree in the county courthouse square. They had been arrested that night as suspects in a robbery, murder and rape case. A third African-American suspect, 16-year-old James Cameron, had also been arrested and narrowly escaped being killed by the mob; an unknown woman and a local sports hero intervened, and he was returned to jail. Cameron later stated that Shipp and Smith had committed the murder but that he had run away before that event.^[1]

The local chapter of the NAACP had tried to evacuate the suspects from town to avoid the mob violence, but were not successful. The NAACP and the State's Attorney General pressed to indict leaders of the lynch mob, but, as was typical in lynchings, no one was ever charged for their deaths, nor for the attack on Cameron.^[2]

Cameron was later convicted and sentenced as an accessory to murder before the fact. He served some time in prison, then pursued work and an education. After dedicating his life to civil rights activism, in 1991 Cameron was pardoned by the state of Indiana.^[3]



Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, August 7, 1930, photo by Lawrence Beitler

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Incident

The three suspects had been arrested the night before, charged with robbing and murdering a white factory worker, Claude Deeter, and raping his girlfriend, Mary Ball, who was with him at the time.

A large crowd broke into the jail with sledgehammers, pulled out the three suspects, beating them and hanging them. When Abram Smith tried to free himself from the noose as his body was hauled up, he was lowered and men broke his arms to prevent such efforts. Police officers in the crowd cooperated in the lynching. A third person, 16-year-old James Cameron, narrowly escaped death thanks to an unidentified woman who said that the youth had nothing to do with the rape or murder.^[4]

A local studio photographer, Lawrence Beitler, took a photograph of the dead men hanging from a tree surrounded by the large lynch mob;^[5] the crowd was estimated at 5,000 and included women and children. He sold thousands of copies of the photograph in the next ten days.^[6]

Mary Ball later testified that she had not been raped. According to Cameron's 1982 memoir, the police had originally accused all three men of murder and rape. After the lynchings, and Mary Ball's testimony, the rape charge was dropped against Cameron. He said in interviews that Shipp and Smith had shot and killed Claude Deeter.^[1]

Flossie Bailey, a local NAACP official in Marion, and Attorney General James M. Ogden worked to gain indictments against leaders of the mob in the lynchings, but the Grant County grand jury refused to return an indictment.^[7] Attorney General Ogden then brought charges against four leaders of the mob, as well as bringing impeachment proceedings against the Grant County sheriff who had refused to intervene.^[7] All-white Grant County juries returned "not guilty" verdicts for all of the leaders charged.^[8]

James Cameron was tried in 1931 as an accessory to murder before the fact, convicted and sentenced to state prison for several years. After being released on parole, he moved to Detroit, where he worked and went to college. In the 1940s he returned to Indiana, working as a civil rights activist and heading a state agency for equal rights. In the 1950s he moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There in 1988 he founded America's Black Holocaust Museum, for African-American history and documentation of lynchings of African Americans.^[3]

Legacy

- The night of the lynching, studio photographer Lawrence Beitler took a photograph of the crowd surrounding the bodies of the two men hanging from a tree. He sold thousands of copies over the next 10 days.
- In 1937 Abel Meeropol, a Jewish schoolteacher from New York City and later the adoptive father of the sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, saw a copy of Beitler's 1930 photograph. Meeropol later said that the photograph "haunted [him] for days" and inspired his poem "Bitter Fruit". It was published in the *New York Teacher* in 1937 and later in the magazine *New Masses*, in both cases under the pseudonym Lewis Allan. Meeropol set his poem to music, renaming it "Strange Fruit". He performed it at a labor meeting in Madison Square Garden. In 1939 it was performed, recorded and popularized by American singer Billie Holiday.^[9] The song reached 16th place on the charts in July 1939, and has since been recorded by numerous artists, continuing into the 21st century.
- After years as a civil rights activist, in 1988 James Cameron founded and became director of America's Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, devoted to African-American history in the United States. He intended it as a place for education and reconciliation.
- In 2007, artist David Powers supervised the creation of a mural, titled *American Nocturne*, in a park in downtown Elgin, Illinois. The mural depicts the bottom half of the Beitler photograph, showing the crowd at the lynching but not the bodies of Shipp and Smith.^[10] The artwork was

intended as a critique of racism in American society.^[11] After it had been displayed without controversy for nearly a decade, in 2016 dissension was generated after someone posted images of the mural and lynching photo together on social media, and its origin was seen. The mural was moved from the park to the Hemmens Cultural Center.^[12] After hearing public comment, the Elgin Cultural Arts Commission recommended to the city council that the mural be permanently removed from public display.^[10] In May 2018, the artist formally requested the mural be returned to him. The Commission seeks to formalize a response, which may include returning the artwork to the artist, loaning it out, or donating it to a local nonprofit or educational institution.^[13]

Lawrence Henry Beitler

Lawrence Henry Beitler (October 9, 1885 – March 3, 1960)^[14] was the American studio photographer who photographed the hanging bodies of African Americans Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, surrounded by a large white crowd, including women and children. The photo became an iconic representation of such events. Beitler sold thousands of copies, which he stayed up for 10 days and nights printing.^[5]

Lawrence Beitler	
Born	October 9, 1885 <div>Marion, Indiana, U.S.</div>
Died	March 3, 1960 (aged 74) <div>Marion, Indiana, U.S.</div>
Resting place	Grant Memorial Park, <div>Marion, Indiana, U.S.</div>

See also

- False accusations of rape as justification for lynchings

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- Monroe H. Little, Review of James Madison's *A Lynching in the Heartland*, History-net (<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.cgi?path=65901014054948>) Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070708185824/http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.cgi?path=65901014054948>) July 8, 2007, at the *Wayback Machine*, accessed June 11, 2014
- James Cameron Holocaust Museum founder (http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/james-cameron-holocaust-museum-founder), African American Registry, 2006, accessed July 15, 2008
- Cameron discussed these events in his memoir, *A Time of Terror* (1982). Relevant passages are quoted in several of the "External links" below, including photo notes from the book and website, *Without Sanctuary* (http://withoutsanctuary.org/pics_27_text.html) Archived (https://web.archive.org/web/20110718104714/http://withoutsanctuary.org/pics_27_text.html) July 18, 2011, at the *Wayback Machine* and *Legends of America* (<http://www.legendsofamerica.com/LA-Lynching9.html>) Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20050911211837/http://www.legendsofamerica.com/LA-Lynching9.html>) September 11, 2005, at the *Wayback Machine*. Other accounts are in James Madison's book, *A Lynching in the Heartland*, listed in the "Further reading" section below.
- "The lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, 1930" (<https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/lynching-thomas-shipp-abram-smith-1930/>). March 16, 2014.
- "Lawrence Beitler, a studio photographer, took this photo. For ten days and nights he printed thousands of copies, which sold for fifty cents apiece." from *A Time of Terror*, quoted in *Legends of America*, see previous note. See also *Lynching in the Heartland*, chapter 6, which discusses the photograph in detail.
- Madison, James H. (2001). *A Lynching in the Heartland* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=dGUYDAAQBAJ>). p. 89. ISBN 9781137053930.

8. Madison 2001, p. 89-92.
9. Holiday's autobiography credits her with co-authoring the song, but other sources say Meeropol wrote his own music. "Strange Fruit" (<https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/film.html>), *Independent Lens*, PBS
10. Walker, Janelle (June 14, 2016). "Elgin Arts Commission Recommends Removing Mural from Public Display" (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/elgin-courier-news/news/ct-ecn-elgin-mural-arts-commission-st-0615-20160613-story.html>), *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved June 15, 2016.
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12. Casas, Gloria (May 21, 2016). "City Crew Removes, Relocates Controversial Downtown Mural" (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/elgin-courier-news/news/ct-ecn-mural-move-elgin-st-0522-20160521-story.html>), *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved May 21, 2016.
13. Ferrarin, Elena. "Elgin artist asks city to return controversial 'lynching mural' to him" (<https://www.dailyherald.com/news/20180511/elgin-artist-asks-city-to-return-controversial-lynching-mural-to-him>). *Daily Herald*. Retrieved May 17, 2018.
14. ""Find A Grave". Birth: October 9, 1885. Death: March 3, 1960. Spouse: Rachel E. Comer Beitler (1897–1978). Burial: Grant Memorial Park, Marion, Grant County, Indiana, USA. Plot: C 18" [1] (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=beitler&GSfn=lawrence&GSbyrel=all&GSdyrel=all&GSob=n&GRid=88323992&df=all&>).

Further reading

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- Cameron, James. *A Time of Terror: A Survivor's Story* (<http://atimeofterror.info/>), (Black Classics Press, 1982/reprint 1994).
- Carr, Cynthia, *Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, A Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America*, (Random House, 2007).
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- Myrdal, Gunnar. *An American Dilemma*, (Harper and Brothers, 1944).
- Tolnay, Stewart E. and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992)
- The Evening Road – Fiction by Laird Hunt 2017

External links

- "Strange Fruit: Anniversary of A Lynching" (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129025516>), National Public Radio, includes larger version of original Beitler photo, showing women in the crowd around the hanging bodies
- James Allen, *Without Sanctuary: Photographs and Postcards of Lynching in America* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20090326133205/http://www.withoutsanctuary.org/main.html>), his website related to his published book of same name

- Notes on the photo from Allen's *Without Sanctuary* (https://web.archive.org/web/20110718104714/http://withoutsanctuary.org/pics_27_text.html), includes a quote from Cameron's *A Time of Terror*
- American History: "Lynching" (<http://www.spartacus-educational.com/USALynching.htm>), Spartacus Educational, includes an account of the origin of poem/song *Strange Fruit*
- Lynchings & Hangings in American History (<http://www.legendsofamerica.com/ah-lynching.html>)
- A 2005 interview with James Cameron, the survivor (<https://archive.is/20070318085613/http://www.jsonline.com/news/metro/jul05/339097.asp>), *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 8, 2005. (link may require free registration)

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