The Chicago Humanities Festival is committed to creating and fostering interest in the humanities. To this end, the Festival provides study guides to help teachers to bring the humanities into the classroom. Every year, the CHF brings an amazing array of authors, thinkers, and artists to Chicago. We hope you will seize the opportunity to bring the excitement of their works and knowledge to your students.

The unit on lynching photography on the following pages was prepared for the 2001 Chicago Humanities Festival: Words & Pictures.

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There are moments in American history that cry out for explanation. Some of the worst have been photographed; the photos show atrocious, sadistic murders being carried out by normal-looking Americans, people who might be anybody’s neighbors. They seem pleased with what they are doing.

From about 1880 to 1930, lynchings were common occurrences in the American South; two or three black Americans were hanged, burned, or otherwise murdered every week. Photographs show that many such murders were well-attended, popular events; we see watching crowds, smiling faces of men, women and children surrounding the mutilated corpse. Proud participants sent the photos as postcards to friends and family members.

The text on the following pages, excerpted from *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, sketches this horrific practice, and photography’s tandem role.

**READING LIST:**

*Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America.*

For an online access to the lynching photography collected in *Without Sanctuary*, go to: [http://www.journale.com/withoutsanctuary](http://www.journale.com/withoutsanctuary)


A lengthy study guide on lynching is available from CHF. See the last page of this document for details.
On a Sunday afternoon, April 23, 1899, more than two thousand white Georgians, some of them arriving from Atlanta on a special excursion train, assembled near the town of Newman to witness the execution of Sam Hose, a black Georgian. The event assumed a familiar format. Like so many lynchings, this one became a public spectacle. As in most lynchings, the guilt of the victim had not been proven in a court of law. As in most lynchings, no member of the crowd wore a mask, nor did anyone attempt to conceal the names of the perpetrators; indeed, newspaper reporters noted the active participation of some of the region’s most prominent citizens. And as in most lynchings, the white press and public expressed its solidarity in the name of white supremacy and ignored any information that contradicted the people’s verdict.

Sam Hose worked for a planter, Alfred Cranford. He asked his employer for an advance in pay (some reported he had tried to collect wages already owed him) and for permission to visit his ill mother. The planter refused, precipitating a harsh exchange of words. On the following day, while Hose chopped wood, Cranford resumed the argument, this time drawing his pistol and threatening to kill Hose. In self-defense, Hose flung his ax, striking Cranford in the head and killing him instantly. Within two days, newspapers reported an altogether different version. Cranford had been eating dinner when Hose—“a monster in human form”—sneaked up on him, buried an ax in his skull, and after pillaging the house, dragged Mrs. Cranford into the room where her husband lay dying and raped her.

If versions of Cranford’s death varied, the story of Sam Hose’s fate did not. After stripping Hose of his clothes and chaining him to a tree, the self-appointed executioners stacked kerosene-soaked wood high around him. Before saturating Hose with oil and applying the torch, they cut off his ears, fingers, and genitals, and skinned his face. While some in the crowd plunged knives into the victim’s flesh, others watched “with unfeigning satisfaction” (as one reporter noted) the contortions of Sam Hose’s body as the flames rose, distorting his features, causing his eyes to bulge out of their sockets, and rupturing his veins. The only sounds that came from the victim’s lips, even as his blood sizzled in the fire, were, “Oh, my God! Oh, Jesus.” Before Hose’s body had even cooled, his heart and liver were removed and cut into several pieces and his bones were crushed into small particles. The crowd fought over these souvenirs. Shortly after the lynching, one of the participants reportedly left for the state capitol, hoping to deliver a
slice of Sam Hose’s heart to the governor of Georgia, who would call Sam Hose’s deeds “the most diabolical in the annals of crime.” The next morning, smoldering ashes and a blackened stake were all that remained. On the trunk of a tree near the scene, a placard read, “We Must Protect Our Southern Women,” and one prominent Georgia woman, Rebecca Felton, gave voice to that sentiment: “The premeditated outrage on Mrs. Crawford was infinitely more intolerable than the murder of her husband.” As for Hose, Felton claimed any “true-hearted husband or father” would have happily dispatched the “beast,” with no more concern than if he were shooting down a mad dog; indeed, “The dog is more worthy of sympathy.”

The leading newspaper in Atlanta urged its readers to “keep the facts in mind” when they judged the actions of the lynchers. “The people of Georgia are orderly and conservative, the descendants of ancestors who have been trained in America for 150 years. They are a people intensely religious, homeloving and just. There is among them no foreign or lawless element.” The newspaper then provided the “facts” of Hose’s alleged offenses, rendering his fate that much more explicable. “When the picture is printed of the ravisher in flames, go back and view that darker picture of Mrs. Cranford outraged in the blood of her murdered husband.

In a subsequent investigation, conducted by a white detective, Cranford’s wife revealed that Hose had come to the house to pick up his wages and the two men had quarreled. When her husband went for his revolver, Hose, in self-defense, picked up and hurled the ax, which killed Cranford instantly. Hose then fled the scene. He never entered the house, she told the detective, nor did he assault her. Still, another investigation, conducted by Ida B. Wells, a black journalist who had been driven from Memphis in 1892 for her “incendiary” editorials on lynching, reached the same conclusions. The results of neither investigation were of any apparent interest to the white press or presumably to the white public.

Thousands of black men and women met the same fate. Varying only in degrees of torture and brutality, these execution rituals were acted out of every part of the South. Sometimes in small groups, sometimes in massive numbers, whites combined the roles of judge, jury, and executioner. Newspaper reporters dutifully reported the events under such lurid headlines as “COLORED MAN ROASTED ALIVE,” describing in graphic detail, the slow and methodical agony and death of the victim and devising a vocabulary that would befit the occasion. The public burning of a Negro would soon be known as a “Negro Barbecue,” reinforcing the perception of blacks as less than human.

The use of the camera to memorialize lynchings testified to their openness and to the self-righteousness that animated the participants. Not only did photographers capture the execution itself, but also the carnival-like atmosphere and the expectant mood of the crowd, as in the lynching of Thomas Brooks in Fayette County, Tennessee, in 1915:

*Hundreds of kodaks clicked all morning at the scene of the lynching. People in automobiles and carriages came from miles around to view the*
corpse dangling from the end of a rope. . . Picture card photographers installed a portable printing plant at the bridge and reaped a harvest in selling postcards showing a photograph of the lynched Negro. Women and children were there by the score. At a number of country schools the day’s routine was delayed until boy and girl pupils could get back from viewing the lynched man.

During a lynching at Durant, Oklahoma, in 1911, the exuberant and proud lynchers bound their victim to some planks and posed around him while photographers recorded the scene. A black-owned newspaper in Topeka, Kansas, in printing the photograph, wanted every black newspaper to do likewise, so that “the world may see and know what semibarbarous America is doing.” Many photographs of lynchings and burnings (such as the burning of Sam Hose) would reappear as popular picture postcards and trade cards to commemorate the event. A Unitarian minister in New York, John H. Holmes, opened his mail one day to find a postcard depicting a crowd in Alabama posing for a photographer next to the body of a black man dangling by a rope. Responding to the minister’s recent condemnation of lynching, the person who sent the card wrote, “This is the way we do them down here. The last lynching has not been put on card yet. Will put you on our regular mailing list. Expect one a month on the average.”

This is not an easy history to assimilate. It is a necessarily painful and ugly story, as it includes some of the bleakest examples of violence and dehumanization in the history of humankind. [. . .] Obviously, it is easier to choose the path of collective amnesia, to erase such memories, to sanitize our past. [. . .]

Even as these scenes recede into the past, they should continue to tax our sense of who we are and who we have been. [Lynching photographs are] a grim reminder that a part of the American past we would prefer for various reasons to forget we need very much to remember. It is part of our history, part of our heritage. The lynchings and terrorism carried out in the name of racial superiority cannot be put to rest, if only because the issues they raise about the fragility of freedom and the pervasiveness of racism are still very much with us.
Bring the chy into the Classroom!

Lynching Study Guide

With the support and cooperation of The New-York Historical Society, the Chicago Humanities Festival has prepared an extensive study guide on lynching. There are a total of eight lessons:

- Introductory lesson
- Creation of the Southern Economy
- A Shifting Paradigm: From Plantation to Congressional Seats
- Social Control and its Limits: Jim Crowism and the Making of an Underprivileged Underclass
- Historical Records: Lynchings in the Media
- Lynchings: Eye Opening News in the Chicago Press
- Case Study: Leo M. Frank (1884-1915)
- Voices: Letters in Response to Lynching

Each lesson plan provides background information, vocabulary, questions, student handouts, and suggested approaches.

To request a free copy of these materials, please contact the CHF education staff:

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