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# “The Veneer of Civilization Washed Off”

## Anti-Black Posse-Lynchings in the Twentieth-Century Rural Midwest

BRENT M. S. CAMPNEY

ABSTRACT: This study seeks to identify anti-Black posse-lynchings in the Midwest between 1910 and 1930, and to examine the ways in which they were framed by the media for their readers. It posits that these lynchings emerged as the foremost type of anti-Black lynching by the second decade of the twentieth century, casting doubt thereby on the prevailing scholarly assumption that the number of lynchings declined precipitously in these years. Because most of these incidents received little attention at the time and few received significant attention outside of the locality in which they occurred, this essay uses as its primary documentation the local and regional white newspapers that did record them, however imperfectly, and the data drawn from federal decennial censuses. With its singular focus on white-on-Black incidents, this study targets posse-lynchings as just one of several types of racist violence used to enforce white supremacy over Blacks, and, as such, it does not consider any of the white-on-white posse-lynchings that may have occurred in these years, although these, if present, might merit their own study.

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KEYWORDS: history of lynching; Illinois; Indiana; Iowa; Kansas; Midwest; Nebraska; North Dakota; Ohio; posse lynchings; racist violence; rural Midwest

“Negro Lynched at Meriden, IA,” declared the Cedar Rapids *Evening Gazette* in a front-page banner for its afternoon edition on August 4, 1922.<sup>1</sup> Late that morning, a posse comprised of hundreds of white men and boys had converged on a cornfield near the Iowa village in search of an unknown Black man accused of shooting several whites. Leaving sentries to patrol the periphery, the heavily armed main body advanced into the field and began its hunt. Within a short time, several men spotted the fugitive—a man whose identity was never confirmed—as he ran through a gap in the corn and, within moments, shot him dead. At that point, several more hauled his corpse through the field, tossed it into the back of an automobile, and drove to the mortuary in nearby Cherokee, the Cherokee County seat. “There the body was unceremoniously tossed from the alley thru the rear door to the floor, and placed on a stretcher, where 1500 people were allowed to pass by, single file, cheerfully, hats on,” reported the *Cherokee Chief*. “The veneer of civilization washed off, temporarily, because this animal of a negro had come to his just end.”<sup>2</sup>

Lynching is an infamously slippery concept to define and, given its temporally and spatially shifting and essentially subjective meanings, the term is difficult to classify in an entirely satisfactory way. Focused here on the white-on-Black variety only, I define lynching as the killing of one or more Black people targeted by a mob, consisting of five or more white participants, which claimed to be avenging a criminal offense or a breach of racial etiquette supposedly perpetrated by the victim or victims. While the racist motivations of the mob and its supporters are rarely difficult to identify in the primary sources, and while the victims were often demonstrably innocent of any crime at all, the lynchers usually asserted that their actions were rooted in the desire to exact justice—however extralegally—for some serious wrongdoing, usually a felony.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Negro Lynched at Meriden, IA,” *Evening Gazette* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa), August 4, 1922, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> “Negro Gunman Shot Thru Heart Friday,” *Cherokee* (Iowa) *Chief*, August 7, 1922, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> This definition derives primarily from my own work in *This Is Not Dixie: Racist Violence in Kansas, 1861–1927* (Urbana, Ill., 2015), 2; and from the work of Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America* (New York, 2002), esp. 13–25.

This is by no means the first study to address posse-lynching as a variant of lynching. In his classic *Lynching in the New South*, historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage identified it as one of four basic categories of lynching. Although posses were nominally led by law-enforcement officials and viewed as legally constituted entities, they often included large numbers of un-deputized participants—effectively, any armed white men who wished to join. “Posses straddled a very thin line between being a legal and an extralegal arm of the law,” Brundage argued. “They crossed that line when they murdered unarmed suspects or made no attempt to negotiate with armed suspects before resorting to violence.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, a number of historians of lynching have included an analysis of posse-lynching.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the formative work of Brundage, this work incorporates insights from Christopher Waldrep who, in his influential monograph *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, urged scholars to recognize that the study of lynching is fundamentally intertwined with the study of language and narrative, and that the choice of words or the use of the passive voice by those who chronicled these events usually impacted the ways in which these incidents would be remembered contemporaneously and historically.<sup>6</sup>

This study seeks to identify anti-Black posse-lynchings in the Midwest between 1910 and 1930, and to examine the ways in which they were framed by the media for their readers. It posits that these lynchings emerged as the foremost type of anti-Black lynching by the second decade of the twentieth century, casting doubt thereby on the prevailing scholarly assumption that the number of lynchings declined precipitously in these years. Because most of these incidents received little attention at the time and few received significant attention outside of the locality in which they occurred, this essay uses as its primary documentation the local and regional white newspapers that did record them, however imperfectly, and the data drawn from federal decennial censuses. With its singular focus on white-on-Black incidents, this study targets posse-lynchings as just one of several types of racist violence used to enforce white supremacy over Blacks, and, as

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<sup>4</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana, Ill., 1993), 33.

<sup>5</sup> Building on Brundage’s work on posses, see, for example, Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874–1947* (Urbana, Ill., 2006), 38–41; Stephen J. Leonard, *Lynching in Colorado, 1859–1919* (Boulder, Co., 2002), 87, 118–20, 152.

<sup>6</sup> See Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*. For other studies of language and lynching, see Lisa Arellano, *Vigilantes and Lynch Mobs: Narratives of Community and Nation* (Philadelphia, Pa., 2012); Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *American Lynching* (New Haven, Ct., 2012).

such, it does not consider any of the white-on-white posse-lynchings that may have occurred in these years, although these, if present, might merit their own study.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars of the Midwest have regarded the years from 1910 to 1930, the chronological focus of this article, as the period when the lynch mob essentially surrendered to law enforcement its racist role in the region. While historians have provided in-depth studies of some of the highly sensational and very public mass lynchings in this period, they have, in the aggregate, charted a rapid decline of lynching in the Midwest and attributed this trend to a combination of the professionalization of the police forces and the desire for social stability by influential economic interests, both of which conspired to make police brutality, not mob violence, the face of racist repression thereafter. In *This Is Not Dixie*, for example, I advanced this view, arguing that “lynching had already become a rarity in the state” by the early twentieth century and that “black Kansans generally and an influential group of white ones had undertaken aggressive and overwhelmingly successful steps, albeit for quite divergent reasons, to curb lynch mobs.”<sup>8</sup> Although I continue to believe that the trend that I identified in Kansas was directionally correct, I might have tempered my argument somewhat because I subsequently found four additional posse-lynchings there—a result largely attributable to the fact that I now had access to the luxury of online newspaper databases rather than to the traditional slog through microfilm reels.

This work is divided into two major sections. The first defines posse-lynchings as they manifested themselves in the pages of these white newspapers. Initially, it addresses those incidents in newspapers which openly conceded that the posses involved had killed the fugitives without allowing them to surrender—the type of posse-lynchings usually explored in previous studies. Then, it broadens the concept of posse-lynching to include those incidents which did not explicitly report that posses crossed the line

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<sup>7</sup> Intra-racial lynchings among whites were common in the nineteenth-century Midwest and continued, albeit at a greatly reduced pace, well into the twentieth century. As late as 1932, for instance, a white mob hanged a white man named Richard Read near Atwood, Kansas. However, while white-on-Black and white-on-white lynchings shared obvious commonalities (mobs murdering alleged felons outside the bounds of the law), their different aims—racist domination in the case of the former, and intra-racial (but non-racist) regulation in the latter—make the two types of violence, for the purposes of this essay, a matter of comparing apples and oranges. On the Read lynching, see, for example, “Frontier Law Takes Life of Girl’s Slayer,” *Iola (Kansas) Daily Register*, April 18, 1932, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Campney, *This Is Not Dixie*, 115.

into mob behavior, but, as the analysis shows, left little doubt about it as a result of their crafting of questionable narratives riddled with so many contradictions of facts and so much reliance on the passive voice that they collapse under critical scrutiny. The second major section examines the behaviors of the posse members as reflected in their actions—particularly the intra-racial male bonding—during and after these lynchings, and the creation and preservation for decades thereafter of sundown practices: the exclusion of Black people from their communities.

In order to reckon with the significance of posse-lynchings, it is important to understand the history of sundown towns in the rural Midwest. In his 2005 study, sociologist James W. Loewen used this descriptor to identify those places where whites banned Blacks from residing among them, creating an unknown but substantial number of all-white or largely all-white sundown towns, places where Blacks often feared to tread and rarely attempted to settle. In some places, whites permitted Blacks to come to town during the day to trade or, occasionally, to work but warned them to make themselves scarce after sundown, lest they suffer intimidation, torture, or death. Although they created sundown towns as early as the antebellum period, whites accelerated their growth around the turn of the twentieth century and into its early decades. In these years, they often used violence or its threat to expel those Blacks whose presence had previously been tolerated.<sup>9</sup>

A couple of municipalities in Kansas offer striking examples of the way in which whites enforced and maintained sundown practices. Located in Montgomery County, the village of Tyro was likely sundown at its founding in 1886. In 1906, the *Caney News* reported that “there are no negroes there now.” In that same year, however, the owner of the Tyro Brick Company announced that he would import lower-paid Black laborers, provoking the fury of white residents. As the *News* observed, “Tyro is in the throes of a threatened race war.” Although the residents sought economic and

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<sup>9</sup>James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York, 2005). On the rise of sundown towns in the antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction years, see Brent M. S. Campney, *Hostile Heartland: Racism, Repression, and Resistance in the Midwest* (Urbana, Ill., 2019), 13–73. In analyzing these thirteen posse-lynchings, this essay builds on the growing scholarship on anti-Black lynching and racist violence in the Midwest. See, for example, Dominic J. Capeci, Jr., *The Lynching of Cleo Wright* (Lexington, Ky., 1998); Wanda A. Hendricks, *Gender, Race, and Politics in the Midwest: Black Club Women in Illinois* (Bloomington, Ind., 1998); James H. Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America* (New York, 2000); Roberta Senechal de la Roche, *In Lincoln's Shadow: The 1908 Race Riot in Springfield, Illinois* (Carbondale, Ill., 2008).

population growth, they warned that “Tyro had better grow slower but with white people only than faster by reason of negroes being imported.”<sup>10</sup> When several weeks later the factory owner put a single Black man to work in the shale pit, the white workers “made life such a burden for him that he took a walk up the track and hasn’t been seen since.” Notwithstanding the capitalist’s influence, the mob advised him that they would maintain their traditions: “A certain element in Tyro says no negro shall stay in town over night [sic].”<sup>11</sup>

If Tyro was sundown from its origin, McPherson did have a small Black population in the late nineteenth century, although that population declined from forty-four residents in 1890 to thirty by 1900.<sup>12</sup> In the spring of 1910, however, the white population through unknown means drove out all remaining Blacks. The *McPherson Opinion* reflected the mood when it declared that “we would like to see McPherson absolutely free from negroes for all time to come.” Whites allowed real estate values to determine the moment when they shifted from being merely hostile to openly sundown. “Down in the fourth ward we have had and are having a big building boom and the reason why it has never happened before was simply because that ward has been the home of negroes,” explained the *Opinion*. “Now that they have all gone white people are willing to invest their money and build up that section of the city.”<sup>13</sup> Townspeople took no official step to ban Blacks—such an effort would have been illegal—but they achieved the same objective through an unwritten understanding among whites. It was unnecessary to take “formal action probably,” declared the *Opinion*, “but let it be generally known among the business men and the residents of the town that a negro family is not desired.”<sup>14</sup> To keep Blacks away thereafter, whites attacked the occasional visitor who dared enter the town. In 1915, for instance, a policeman killed a Black stranger under highly suspect circumstances, earning the support of grateful white townspeople.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “Race War at Tyro,” *Caney (Kansas) News*, February 21, 1908, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> “Run Out of Tyro,” *Weekly Independent (Coffeyville, Kansas)*, March 5, 1908, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Campney, *This Is Not Dixie*, 142–43.

<sup>13</sup> “Now is the Time,” *McPherson (Kansas) Opinion*, April 1, 1910, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> “None Wanted,” *McPherson (Kansas) Opinion*, May 26, 1911, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> “A Negro Killed,” *Democrat-Opinion (McPherson, Kansas)*, August 27, 1915, p. 1. See also “Shot a Negro” and “Inquest Held Today,” both in *McPherson (Kansas) Weekly Republican*, August 27, 1915, p. 1.

With respect to the study area, scholars have long recognized that the Midwest is notoriously difficult to define, as their strong and often contradictory opinions make clear. More than thirty years ago, geographer James R. Shortridge demonstrated at length that the term originated as a descriptor for Kansas and Nebraska in the late nineteenth century but the idea of the Midwest spread north and east in the twentieth century and can now include states as far-flung as those of the Old Northwest and the upper Great Plains. While scholars agree that these states differ significantly in economic, demographic, topographic, and historic terms, all were free states or territories prior to the Civil War and all claimed small-to-nearly-nonexistent Black populations in the decades after that conflict. This work offers a capacious definition of the Midwest, including Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. Within these eleven states, it finds thirteen posse-lynchings in seven states during the study period, most of them concentrated in the lower Midwest.<sup>16</sup>

Table 1. Posse-lynchings in the Midwest, 1910 to 1930.

Year	State	Municipality	Victim
1911	Ohio	Linndale	John Jordan
1912	Kansas	Hoisington	A. D. McKee
1913	Illinois	Tamms	Unknown
1913	Iowa	Greeley	Robert Williams
1914	North Dakota	Martin	James Henry
1915	Kansas	Geneseo	Clyde Applegate
1915	Illinois	Taylorville	Zack Phillips
1921	Kansas	McCracken	Sam Mitchell
1922	Iowa	Meriden	Unknown
1923	Indiana	Bradford	Edward Daugherty
1926	Kansas	Oakley	Joe Griffey
1929	Nebraska	North Platte	Louis Seeman
1930	Kansas	Burlington	Clarence Hayes

<sup>16</sup>James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence, Kan., 1989), 7. In *Hostile Heartland*, I included Missouri as a part of the Midwest while noting, as did Shortridge, that it fits only problematically into the imagined region.



Prior to undertaking this analysis, the thirteen posse-lynchings examined here should be placed into context with the broader history of lynching in the Midwest over the same two-decade period. In these same states, howling mobs of whites invaded jails, seized prisoners, and hanged or burned them in public spectacles that more closely resemble popular assumptions about lynchings than posse-lynchings. In Omaha, Nebraska, a mob of thousands seized William Brown from the courthouse in 1919, hanged him, and burned his corpse; in Mulberry, Kansas, a mob of approximately a thousand hanged a Black teenager named Albert Murray in 1920; in Duluth, Minnesota, an enormous mob hanged three Black youths that same year; and in Marion, Indiana, another mob of thousands hanged two Black teenagers, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, in 1930. In an unusual incident in Chicago in 1924, a mob of hundreds formed spontaneously, killing William Bell with a baseball bat. Yet, as heinous and widely documented (and denounced) as they were, these five spectacle lynchings evidently comprise *the sum total of such high-profile incidents in the entire Midwest over the entire period*.<sup>17</sup> In fact, when investigators of anti-Black violence do focus on the Midwest from 1910 to 1930, they tend to focus on the lynchings in Omaha and Marion, incidents that generated widely circulated photographs, revealed the level of sadistic hatred animating this violence, and brought national and international condemnation of those places and their white inhabitants.<sup>18</sup>

In offering this analysis of previously undocumented, under-investigated, or recently unearthed posse-lynchings, therefore, this study substantially increases the total number of known lynchings in the Midwest during this period, swelling the number of killings from the five often

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, the appendices in Pfeifer, *Rough Justice*, 155–83; Michael J. Pfeifer, *Lynching Beyond Dixie: American Mob Violence Outside the South* (Urbana, Ill., 2013), 261–317; and Campney, *This Is Not Dixie*, 220–43.

<sup>18</sup> On the Omaha lynching, see Michael L. Lawson, “Omaha, a City in Ferment: Summer of 1919,” *Nebraska History* 58, no. 3 (1977), 395–417; Laurel Sariscsany, “‘They Can’t Convict Anyone Anyway’: The Trials of the Omaha Lynching and Riot of 1919,” *Nebraska History* 100 (2019), 152–63. Historian Ashley M. Howard is producing a much-needed new study of the Omaha lynching and its legacies. See Ashley M. Howard, “More Than a Snapshot: Historical Violence, Memorialization, and the Many Afterlives of Will Brown,” paper delivered at the American Historical Association Annual Meeting, New Orleans, January 7, 2022. On the Mulberry lynching, see Campney, *This Is Not Dixie*, 144–45, 180. On the Duluth lynching, see John D. Bessler, *Legacy of Violence: Lynch Mobs and Executions in Minnesota* (Minneapolis, Minn., 2003), 183–224; Michael Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth* (Saint Paul, Minn., 2016). On the Chicago lynching, see Campney, *Hostile Heartland*, 50. On the Marion lynching, see Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland*; Cynthia Carr, *Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, a Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America* (New York, 2006).



Midwestern locations of spectacle lynchings and posse-lynchings,

Erin Greb Cartography

better-known spectacle lynchings to a total of *eighteen* lynchings. In so doing, it shows that lynchings were *far* more common in the Midwest than previously recognized and that the ‘common’ type of lynching in the region was the posse-lynching and not the spectacle lynching that so often makes its appearance in the scholarship.

To be clear, some of these under-investigated and recently unearthed posse-lynchings *have* been documented in previous studies: two of them (the Linndale and Tamms incidents) appeared on the maps or in the inventories of scholarship by historian Michael J. Pfeifer and sociologists Charles Seguin and David Rigby; four others (the incidents in Hoisington, Taylorville, North Platte, and Burlington) appeared in my own two recent monographs on racist violence in the Midwest. However, none of these incidents are yet widely known and most have received only cursory, if any, discussion. To the best of my knowledge, the other seven posse-lynchings analyzed here are previously ‘undocumented,’ original to this analysis, and eleven of the thirteen are original to my own research over the past two decades.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For the inclusion of Linndale and Tamms, see Charles Seguin and David Rigby, “National Crimes: A New National Data Set of Lynchings in the United States, 1883 to 1941,” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 5 (2019), 1–9; Charles Seguin, “Lynching Dot Map: One Dot for

In some instances of posse-lynchings, white newspapers, however grudgingly, conceded that the manhunters had gunned down their victims without affording them the opportunity to surrender. In 1913, the *Manchester Democrat* reported on a killing near Greeley, Iowa, where a Black man named Robert Williams died at the hands of a posse in an incident headlined as “Unknown Negro Wantonly Killed.” In this case, the victim attracted attention as he passed through Delaware County in search of work. A marshal concocted a story that Williams was a criminal on the prowl and spread the word among local white men to capture him “dead or alive.” More than a dozen men quickly formed a posse and set out in search of the visitor. Spotting the posse, “the colored man jumped over the fence and started through a piece of brush and timber,” explained the *Democrat*. As Williams sprinted into an open field, “a dozen or more shots are said to have been fired in the direction of the negro.” He fell to the ground with several bullets in his back and perished.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in 1915, the Decatur *Daily Review* reported the killing of Zack Phillips, one of two Black men accused of shooting and injuring a train conductor, by a posse near Taylorville, Illinois. “The Taylorville men did not give the negroes time to speak or act before they opened fire,” admitted the newspaper. “The shooting was the result of a man-hunt in which nearly 1,000 Taylorville men took part.”<sup>21</sup>

More commonly, accounts in white newspapers obfuscated the history of these killings. An analysis of the papers’ narratives, contradictory statements, use of passive voice, and ever-present, clumsy and questionable assertions of white self-defense reveals that the posses killed their victims without permitting them to surrender. In 1913, for instance, two Black men passed through Tamms, Illinois, where they allegedly assaulted a white man and passed counterfeit currency. In response, “a posse consisting of deputy sheriffs and citizens pursued them to the woods, firing as they went and some time [sic] later the body of one of the blacks was found lying in a field.” The other man escaped, added the *Cairo Bulletin*,

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every Lynching Victim in the US 1883–1941,” accessed July 18, 2022, [http://www.charlieseguini.com/dot\\_map.html](http://www.charlieseguini.com/dot_map.html). Pfeifer identifies the Tamms incident. See Pfeifer, *Lynching Beyond Dixie*, 279. Although a book of limited utility due to methodological and theoretical issues, the Tamms lynching is also referenced in Ralph Ginzburg, *100 Years of Lynchings* (Baltimore, Md., 1988), 260.

<sup>20</sup> “Unknown Negro Wantonly Killed,” *Manchester (Iowa) Democrat*, November 26, 1913, p. 1. For the name Robert Williams, see “Seven of Farmers’ Posse Indicted,” *Manchester (Iowa) Democrat*, December 17, 1913, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> “Shot Negro at Sight,” *Daily Review* (Decatur, Illinois), November 6, 1915, p. 1.

but “*it is thought* that he was the one killed at Beech Ridge Thursday by deputy Sheriff Andy Holmes, when in company with Deputy Sheriff Hezekiah Rumpfelt, they were attempting to arrest the man and *he drew a gun*.”<sup>22</sup> Rumpfelt, it should be noted, had led the posse that killed the first fugitive and, as the *Bulletin* observed, was one of the officers who arrested and killed the second one a short time later.<sup>23</sup> I classify the first of these Tamms killings as a posse-lynching but the second one, perpetrated by two lawmen, as a police killing.

Even if “it [was] thought” that the second victim was the same one pursued by the posse in Tamms a short time earlier, he could just as readily have been an unrelated Black man innocent of any role in the crimes alleged. In this sense, the victim of this killing—like so many Black mob victims across the Midwest—was first a victim of the popular linkage of criminality with Black people collectively, which, to the satisfaction of many whites, made nearly any Black person guilty and his or her killing justifiable. Historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad has demonstrated that whites have held Blacks to a standard of collective guilt historically by utilizing the alleged or actual criminality of one Black person to condemn all Black people as criminal. He called this “racial criminalization: the stigmatization of crime as ‘black’ and the masking of crime among whites as individual failure. The practice of linking crime to blacks, as a racial group, but not whites . . . reinforced and reproduced racial inequality.” He dubbed this longstanding linkage the “Condemnation of Blackness.”<sup>24</sup>

Missing in the accounts of the Tamms killing is incontrovertible evidence that the posse killed the victim without permitting him to surrender, an element that is partially compromised by the admission that the posse was “firing as they went” but largely concealed by the use of passive voice and the claims of an armed confrontation between Black and white men, skewing the reality of the situation thereby from a one-sided man-hunt to the self-defense of white men from one or more Black aggressors. Nevertheless, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* hinted at the lack of deliberation

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<sup>22</sup> “Posse Pursues Two Desperadoes,” *Cairo (Illinois) Bulletin*, September 13, 1913, p. 6 (emphasis added). In this quotation and in subsequent ones, I italicize those words that reflect the tortured nature of the narratives being spun by these editors.

<sup>23</sup> On Rumpfelt’s involvement in the lynching, see also “Posse Kills One, Wounds One,” *St. Louis (Missouri) Globe-Democrat*, September 13, 1913, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2019), 3.

shown by those in the pursuit. "As the fugitives ran along a country road leading to a stretch of dense woods, Mayor L. C. Davis of Tamms met them" as he returned to town in a buggy. "Members of the posse called to the Mayor, asking him to halt the fugitives. He fired two shots at them, but they continued to run."<sup>25</sup> Certainly, if the first impulse of the town's mayor (a man who, more than any other, might have been expected to stand on the side of the law) was to pull a gun and open fire on the two Black men attempting to outrun a white posse, then there is little reason to believe that the rest of the townsfolk were adhering scrupulously to any legal constraints during their hunt.

Elsewhere, editors relied increasingly on the passive voice to disguise their stories about posse-lynchings as self-defense and to induce thereby skepticism into the minds of their readers. In 1923, posses in southern Indiana pursued Edward Daugherty, accused of assaulting a white woman in Mitchell. "Chasing the fugitive from one woods to another, he finally *was located* in a barn . . . near Bradford, where *he was killed* after he had engaged in a pistol duel" with an officer, reported the *Muncie Morning Star*. According to accounts, Charles Hammond, a farmhand, shot the Black man—as had his counterpart in McCracken—just in the nick of time as the fugitive was preparing to shoot another officer. Yet, reporters who seemed unwilling to endorse fully that claim expressed their skepticism in the passive voice. The *Star* wrote that "*it is stated* that the shot was fired just in time to save the life of Captain John F. Platt."<sup>26</sup> After a coroner's jury acquitted Hammond, the *Mitchell Tribune* asserted that "*it was shown* at the inquest that Hammond fired the fatal shot just as the negro who had been surrounded . . . was in the act of shooting [Platt]."<sup>27</sup>

Over time, local newspapers became more careful to insert ambiguity into their accounts. In 1926, a posse near Oakley, Kansas, captured and killed Joe Griffey, a Black man accused of murder. The *Oakley Graphic* claimed that, when arrested, Griffey dropped his jammed weapon and raised his hands in the air. However, his killers later claimed that he attempted to grab another gun from a member of the posse and to escape as they were putting him into an automobile. The *Graphic* asserted that "this gun also

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<sup>25</sup> "Posse Finds One of Two Fugitives Slain After Chase," *St. Louis (Missouri) Post-Dispatch*, September 11, 1913, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> "Negro Is Killed After Hot Chase by Indiana Posse," *Muncie (Indiana) Morning Star*, July 2, 1923, p. 1 [emphasis added].

<sup>27</sup> "Hammond Freed," *Mitchell (Indiana) Tribune*, July 5, 1923, p. 2 [emphasis added].

jammed, but the posse took no chances and immediately fired. The fellow dropped to the ground; death had been instantaneous.”<sup>28</sup> Another local newspaper, the *Colby Free Press and The Colby Tribune*, did not include the alleged exchange at the car. Instead, it simply stated that “a posse was quickly formed and drove rapidly to the scene of the shooting” where a gunfight (prompted, of course, by the Black fugitive) ensued and “numerous shots from the posse quickly ended his career of crime.”<sup>29</sup> Under the title “Kansas Posse Kills Negro Murderer,” an Associated Press report suggested no struggle and no convenient succession of jammed guns; it simply stated that “The negro was found hiding in a clump of weeds about six miles north of Oakley, and was shot to death.”<sup>30</sup> In general, news agencies like the AP or large urban newspapers somewhat removed from the locations of these incidents were far more likely to describe the actions of posses as that of lynch mobs than were newspapers closer to the scene of the event and committed to the protection of both the identities of the killers, and the image and reputation of their towns.

Following the posse-lynching of Clarence Hayes, accused of shooting two Coffey County police officers in Burlington, Kansas, in 1930, the *Kansas City Times* reported that the victim was “killed when he surrendered to a posse of about 100 men.”<sup>31</sup> In response, local whites disputed the narrative presented by the *Times*, insisting that Hayes fired upon the posse until he was slain in a gunfight. Then at the behest of several prominent white residents, the coroner convened an “inquest ‘in order to get a record and as a protection to members of the posse should relatives of the negro ever try to make trouble.’”<sup>32</sup> Although it is impossible now to determine whether or not the Burlington posse gave the victim a chance to surrender, whites there clearly understood that the distinction was critical in deciding their culpability. As a result, they shaped the relevant documents in a way that would preclude both a demand for an investigation by the Hayes family and any legal liability for their own actions.<sup>33</sup> Here again, the *Times*, a white, urban paper in Missouri and a hundred miles from Burlington, described

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<sup>28</sup> “Sheriff’s Posses Get Murderer,” *Oakley (Kansas) Graphic*, March 19, 1926, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> “Pierson Killed by Crazy Negro,” *Colby (Kansas) Free Press and The Colby Tribune*, March 18, 1926, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> “Kansas Posse Kills Negro Murderer,” *Iola (Kansas) Daily Register*, March 18, 1926, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> “Killing Angers a Town,” *Kansas City (Missouri) Times*, May 7, 1930, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Campney, *Hostile Heartland*, 180.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

the killing as a mob action, a charge that prompted the fevered efforts of the local officials to provide a record of the shooting favorable to their claims about the sequence of events.

In yet another rendering, newspapers simply accepted the posse members' claims that they had fired on their victims only in self-defense—claims often undermined by an abundance of evidence. In 1915, two Black men stopped in the all-white village of Geneseo, Kansas, where their mere presence alarmed the townsfolk. "Two negroes who were lurking around Geneseo yesterday afternoon attracted the attention of Marshal Jack Gage by their evident desire to avoid public notice," reported the *Claflin Clarion*. Evidently, the newspaper did not entertain the possibility that the visitors may have tried to avoid public notice because they feared the glares of hostility that greeted them. Based on his suspicions, the marshal organized a group of residents into a posse: "In company with other citizens the officer traced [the Black men] to the outskirts of town where one of them ran while the other offered resistance from behind an automatic." As was often the case with this self-defense narrative, one of the whites then proved "too quick and 'got the drop' on him."<sup>34</sup> However, the *Lyons Daily News* offered a more damning but somewhat qualified account of the incident, writing that the dead man, Clyde Applegate, dropped his gun and then dashed for the brush. Several members of the posse "yelled at him to stop and fired into the air a couple of times, but he paid no attention to them so they shot at him and one of the bullets took effect."<sup>35</sup>

In 1921, three Black men stopped in all-white McCracken, Kansas, where they too attracted hostility immediately. "In the afternoon around three o'clock, three strange negroes blew into town and proceeded to look it over," reported the *Stockton Review*. "Their actions were so suspicious that the marshall [*sic*] and merchants became suspicious."<sup>36</sup> Claiming to know that the strangers were armed, the white men "went to the railroad track and awaited their coming. When the negroes neared the officers," the marshal stepped out and ordered them to raise their hands. Because one of the Black men failed to do so quickly enough and, supposedly, "attempted to draw a gun," a member of the posse shot him dead.<sup>37</sup> Crowing that the

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<sup>34</sup> "Negro Killed at Geneseo," *Claflin (Kansas) Clarion*, July 29, 1915, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> "Negro Shot at Geneseo," *Lyons (Kansas) Daily News*, July 29, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> "Shoots Hold Up Man," *Stockton (Kansas) Review*, November 3, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> "Got the Criminal First," *La Crosse (Kansas) Chieftain*, November 3, 1921, p. 7.

dead man, Sam Mitchell, was now “sleeping in the McCracken cemetery,” the *La Crosse Republican* insisted that once again it “was a case of the quickest man” and that the shooter—as had his counterpart in Bradford, Indiana—pulled the trigger “in the nick of time.”<sup>38</sup> Although the *McCracken Enterprise* provided few details in its account entitled “Smash Bad Gang,” it clearly emphasized that “a coroner’s investigation exonerated [sic] the city officials of blame for shooting and it was clearly shown that they were acting in [the] line of duty.”<sup>39</sup>

Regardless of the way in which newspapers reported each individual incident, posse-lynchers displayed certain common behaviors during and after these lynchings. Under the guise of defending their communities from dangerous intruders, these white men used the opportunity provided by the posse hunt to forge an *ad hoc* racist brotherhood. “Several Cleghorn people hurried away to Meriden Friday and took a joyful part in the final rounding up of the desperate negro whose blood-thirsty career was brought to a close that day,” reported the *Marcus News*. “In these days of autos, distance counts for little and the people of Cleghorn missed none of the thrilling escapade.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the participants regarded their role in the hunt as a lawful expression of their courage and manhood. “A great deal of praise is spoken for Sheriff Sangwin for his method of handling the coon hunt,” declared the *Cherokee Chief*. “Lloyd has no yellow streak, as is manifested by the fact that he assumed the most dangerous positions, and told the men he wouldn’t ask them to follow him thru the cornfield unless they felt perfectly willing to volunteer. Many went with him, however.”<sup>41</sup> After the posse-lynching that followed, other county officials bestowed upon the sheriff a ‘manly’ trophy for his leadership during the crisis. According to the *Chief*, the Cherokee County board of supervisors praised “Sheriff Sangwin very highly for his work during the negro hunt and presented him with the cartridge belt and holster used by the desperado.”<sup>42</sup> With their embrace of this event as a legally justified male-bonding exercise, the participants in this Iowa posse exemplified Brundage’s conclusion that posse-lynchings “combined the fellowship of a hunt with the honor

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<sup>38</sup> “Robber Killed at McCracken,” *La Crosse (Kansas) Republican*, November 3, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> “Smash Bad Gang,” *McCracken (Kansas) Enterprise*, November 4, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> “Cleghorn Shares Excitement of ‘Coon Hunt,’” *Marcus (Iowa) News*, August 10, 1922, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> “Local News Briefs,” *Cherokee (Iowa) Chief*, August 7, 1922, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> “Body of Gunman Sent to Iowa City,” *Cherokee (Iowa) Chief*, August 10, 1922, p. 1.



of serving the alleged needs of the community. Ignoring the moonshine drinking and violence that accompanied most manhunts, newspapers often portrayed posses as protectors of home and hearth."<sup>43</sup>

While the immediate motives behind posse-killings and the narratives crafted around them often differed, the participants and their supporters often utilized them to introduce, re-establish, or maintain sundown practices. Those involved in the 1929 posse lynching in North Platte were vocal about their intention to clear the city of Black people. They laid siege to the home of Louis Seeman, an accused felon and now fugitive, and they intended to kill him outright, prompting him to commit suicide rather than fall into their clutches. After Seeman's death, white townspeople drove some two hundred Black residents out of the city. "All Negroes were ordered to leave town," reported the *Falls City Daily News*. "They began their exit yesterday afternoon, some on foot, others by horse and buggy and the rest by bus, motor car and train." In North Platte however, whites were unsuccessful in establishing a sundown town. Within days, Blacks began to return to the city, to their homes and to their jobs. In all likelihood, they did so because, in a larger city like North Platte, Black labor formed an indispensable part of the local economy.<sup>44</sup> In smaller places though, whites reestablished the sundown practices which had eroded over the years, and they did so quite aggressively. In Hoisington, whites had instituted such restrictions with the founding of the town in 1888 but had permitted the development of a small Black colony outside of the municipality and south of the railroad tracks. When, from the white perspective, that Black population began to grow too large during an economic boom which began in 1910, a white posse lynched a Black man. Following the killing in 1912, they drove out nearly all Black residents to prevent them from benefitting from the boom.<sup>45</sup>

Even when whites were not as explicit about their intentions as their counterparts in North Platte or Hoisington, they revealed them in a combination of demographic and anecdotal data captured for the small towns in which posse-lynchings occurred. In Delaware County, Iowa, the site of the 1913 posse-lynching in Greeley, census records showed that there were just two Black residents in 1910 and only three in 1920, an insignificant

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<sup>43</sup>Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 34.

<sup>44</sup>"Negroes Flee from North Platte, Neb.," *Falls City (Nebraska) Daily News*, July 16, 1929, p. 1. On this posse killing, see Campney, *Hostile Heartland*, 180. See also "Negroes Return to North Platte," *Evening State Journal (Lincoln, Nebraska)*, July 17, 1929, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup>Campney, *This Is Not Dixie*, 78–79, 132.

number in a population of 17,888 and 18,183 respectively.<sup>46</sup> In addition, newspaper accounts indicated the intensity of anti-Black sentiments in the area. The *Manchester Democrat* conceded that there was absolutely no evidence to suggest that Williams, the victim, had “committed an offense in Delaware county, except that he was asking for food and lodging at a farm house.”<sup>47</sup> In a distinctly racist dispatch however, the *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette* blamed Williams for his own murder—suggesting that his mere presence in the area was his real crime. “He had terrorized the neighborhood by making himself an undesirable wanderer,” it asserted. “Feeling against the negro was strong, as was evidenced by the large number who were quick to join the pursuers.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, whites in Martin, North Dakota, took exception to the presence of James Henry in 1914 and ordered him to leave town.<sup>49</sup> One of the men involved, C. R. Cady, took a particularly active role in trying to “force the negro to leave,” advising Henry that “niggers are not wanted.” When Henry then shot Cady in what appears to have been self-defense, he escaped from town with a crowd in hot pursuit. “They caught Henry on the outskirts of the town. There he was instantly killed.”<sup>50</sup> In Sheridan County where the village of Martin was located, census records demonstrated that the total population decreased from 8,103 to 7,935 between 1910 and 1920. In neither census year, however, was a single Black resident enumerated there.<sup>51</sup>

In a variety of ways, white residents embraced the ostensible motives for posse-lynchings. Those who lived in the small and isolated towns where most of these events occurred often experienced a burst of ghoulish

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<sup>46</sup> *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910, Vol. II: Population 1920, Alabama-Montana* (Washington, D.C., 1913), 622; *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920, Vol. III: Population 1920, Composition and Characteristics of the Population by States* (Washington, D.C., 1922), 322.

<sup>47</sup> “Seven of Farmers’ Posse Indicted,” *Manchester (Iowa) Democrat*, December 17, 1913, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> “Negro at Point of Death; Shot by Iowa Posse,” *Evening Gazette* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa), November 24, 1913, p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> “Martin Posse Kills Fleeing Colored Man Who Had Shot White,” *Ward County Independent* (Minot, North Dakota), November 12, 1914, p. 1. See also “Second Death Occurs from Martin Shooting,” *Fargo (North Dakota) Forum and Daily Republican*, November 13, 1914, p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> “Martin Posse Kills Fleeing Colored Man Who Had Shot White,” *Ward County Independent* (Minot, North Dakota), November 12, 1914, p. 1; “Negro Was Lynched,” *Daily Gate City* (Keokuk, Iowa), November 9, 1914, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910: Statistics for North Dakota* (Washington, D.C., 1913), 606; *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920, Vol. III: Population 1920*, 760.

excitement or participated in the grotesque racist humor which ensued. Reflecting the growth of the motion picture industry at the time, newspapers frequently compared these killings to the exhilarating escapades that had appeared on film. Describing the 1915 posse-lynching in Taylorville, Illinois, which was witnessed by a large group of citizens gawking from their automobiles nearby, the *Edwardsville Intelligencer* exclaimed that “the excitement reeled out like a moving picture film.”<sup>52</sup> Similarly, after the 1921 posse-lynching in Kansas, the *Stockton Review* told its readers that “the little town of McCracken over in Rush county staged a killing last Thursday evening that furnished the town with all the thrills of a Deadwood Dick seven reeler.”<sup>53</sup> After the lynching in Cherokee, Iowa, the *Cherokee Chief* resorted to dark humor, dubbing the unknown victim ‘Slim’ or ‘Lightning Slim’ because he was slender and, according to those who cornered and killed him, lightning quick with a pistol. It served up laughs for its readers for weeks thereafter using that moniker. On one occasion, it joked that “‘Lightning Slim’ . . . had a slim chance, and probably thought lightning struck him.”<sup>54</sup> On another, it speculated that “a watermelon isn’t at its best [if] you can’t sit down to eat it on account of buckshot.”<sup>55</sup> Then, on its front page, the *Chief* provided a chilling and viciously racist cartoon that removed any lingering question as to whether Black visitors were welcome there. Entitled “If ‘Lightning Slim’s’ Spirit Could Speak,” the cartoon showed the ghost of a Black man, a look of terror upon his face, standing amid the cornfield where the posse-lynching had occurred and raising his hand as if to stop any other Black people who might consider coming to Cherokee County. In the dialogue bubble, the ghost said in racist dialect: “KEEP AWAY FUM DIS COUNTY, ALL YO’ WAT’S BENT ON DOIN’ EVIL!”<sup>56</sup> With its morbid and repeated racist wit, threatening cartoons, and dehumanizing language, the newspaper reinforced the same racist hatred that had been on full display during the lynching itself.

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<sup>52</sup> “Armed Posse Surrounds in a Wood Two Negroes,” *Edwardsville (Illinois) Intelligencer*, November 6, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> “Shoots Hold Up Man,” *Stockton (Kansas) Review*, November 3, 1921, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> “Uncle Bud’s Column of Bubble Stew,” *Cherokee (Iowa) Chief*, August 7, 1922, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> “Uncle Bud’s Column of Bubble Stew,” *Cherokee (Iowa) Chief*, August 14, 1922, p. 2. On the longstanding racist association between Blacks and watermelons, see William R. Black, “How Watermelons Became Black: Emancipation and the Origins of a Racist Trope,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8 (March 2018), 64–86.

<sup>56</sup> Cartoon, “If ‘Lightning Slim’s’ Spirit Could Speak,” *Cherokee (Iowa) Chief*, August 7, 1922, p. 1.



Cartoon from the front page of the *Cherokee (Iowa) Chief*, August 7, 1922. On August 4, 1922, a large posse of white men had pursued and killed an unnamed Black man. Three days later, the newspaper portrayed the victim with this racial stereotype.

The posse-lynchers could be almost certain that they would avoid any legal consequences for their crimes. In some instances, as noted above, coroner's juries concocted stories that painted the deceased Black victims as dangerous criminals and their white slayers as honorable defenders of public safety. In other instances, the authorities merely shrugged. In Linndale, Ohio, in 1911, a "Posse of Ohio Farmers" killed John Jordan, a Black man accused of assaulting a white farmer. However, the authorities decided that no investigation was needed.<sup>57</sup> The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reported that "no attempt will be made to find out who shot and killed Jordan and no arrests will be made, police say."<sup>58</sup> Similarly, the local authorities in North Dakota were less than enthusiastic about prosecuting the lynchings from the

<sup>57</sup> "Robber Killed by a Posse of Ohio Farmers," *Dayton (Ohio) Herald*, June 27, 1911, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> "Mob Kills Negro in Running Fight," *Plain Dealer (Cleveland, Ohio)*, June 28, 1911, p. 13.

village of Martin and its environs. "An inquest will be held tomorrow, but it is believed that there will be no prosecution," reported the *Ward County Independent*. "Several members of the posse pursuing the negro fired at about the same time and it has been impossible to determine who brought the man down."<sup>59</sup> In other instances, the authorities initially threatened action against members of the posses involved but retreated because they lacked the cooperation required from the townspeople and, perhaps, because they feared a public backlash inimical to their own interests. Those in Taylorville, Illinois, confronted that choice. "It is frankly admitted that Phillips was shot after he had thrown away his gun and put up his hands, but it is not thought that the coroner's jury will take any action," reported the *Daily Journal-Gazette*. "Members of the posse are saying little about the killing, and if they know [who fired the lethal shot], positively refuse to tell."<sup>60</sup>

On rare occasions however, posse-lynchers did pay a modest price for their roles in these events. Those involved in the lynching of Robert Williams in Greeley, Iowa, paid for their crimes with fines rather than jail sentences—relatively light penalties which came as no surprise because, as the *Manchester Democrat* explained, those involved were "from some of the best families of Delaware county, and all are of upright character."<sup>61</sup> According to the paper, "Each Member of Negro Posse [Was] Fined \$500 and Costs."<sup>62</sup> The *Davenport Democrat* softened their guilt with its assertion that "this deplorable affair seems to have been the result of a combination of mis[in]formation and wanton recklessness."<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, by paying fines, the guilty members of this Iowa posse suffered far more than did their counterparts elsewhere.

Finally, small, rural municipalities accounted for almost all of these posse-lynchings. In fact, eleven of the thirteen involved in these incidents had fewer than two thousand residents and seven had fewer than one thousand. Only North Platte and Taylorville had more than five thousand residents (See Figure 2). In most cases, the victims were strangers who had arrived in the locality a short time before their deaths.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> "Martin Posse Kills Fleeing Colored Man Who Had Shot White," *Ward County Independent* (Minot, North Dakota), November 12, 1914, p. 1.

<sup>60</sup> "Negro Band of Thieves," *Daily Journal-Gazette* (Mattoon, Illinois), November 8, 1915, p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> "Seven of Farmers' Posse Indicted," *Manchester (Iowa) Democrat*, December 17, 1913, p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> "Greeley Young Men Are Sentenced," *Manchester (Iowa) Democrat*, December 9, 1914, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> "Murder Trial at Manchester," *Davenport (Iowa) Democrat*, March 26, 1914, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> This finding affirms the conclusions in Campney, *Hostile Heartland*, 161–85.

**Table 2.** Posse lynchings and population size.<sup>65</sup>

Year	State	County	Municipality	Population <sup>66</sup>
1911	Ohio	Unknown	Linndale	512
1912	Kansas	Barton	Hoisington	1,975
1913	Illinois	Alexander	Tamms	400
1913	Iowa	Delaware	Greeley	383
1914	North Dakota	Sheridan	Martin	<b>566</b>
1915	Kansas	Rice	Geneseo	561
1915	Illinois	Christian	Taylorville	5,806
1921	Kansas	Rush	McCracken	491
1922	Iowa	Cherokee	Meriden	218
1923	Indiana	Harrison	Bradford	<b>1,271</b>
1926	Kansas	Logan	Oakley	<b>1,617</b>
1929	Nebraska	Lincoln	North Platte	12,061
1930	Kansas	Coffey	Burlington	2,273

Posse-lynchings were concentrated in the Lower Midwest, as Map 1 plainly reveals. In fact, aside from the posse-lynching in Martin, North Dakota, no such incidents revealed themselves in the northern tier of states,

<sup>65</sup> The size of the population provided for each municipality is the one enumerated in the census year closest to the incident referenced. The population data used in this chart is compiled from *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910: Population, Vol. II, Alabama-Montana* (Washington, D.C., 1913), 442, 590; *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910: Population, Vol. III, Nebraska-Wyoming* (Washington, D.C., 1913), 335, 371; *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920: Population: Number and Distribution of Inhabitants* (Washington, D.C., 1921), 219, 408; *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920: Vol. III, Composition and Characteristics of the Population by States* (Washington, D.C., 1922), 268; *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930: Population, Vol. III, Part I: Alabama-Missouri* (Washington, D.C., 1932), 871, 878; *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930: Population, Vol. III, Part II: Montana-Wyoming* (Washington, D.C., 1932), 82.

<sup>66</sup> With respect to the statistics in Figure 2, there are three instances where for census purposes the population statistics referenced in bold for the villages identified are aggregated with those for the townships in which they were located. In the first, the population of the village of Martin was included with that of the surrounding Martin Township. In the second case, the population of Bradford, an unincorporated village, was consolidated with both Palmyra, an incorporated village, and the balance of Morgan Township in which both villages were located. In the third case, the population of the village of Oakley was also consolidated with that of the surrounding township of Oakley. In all three cases, the number of residents in these townships did not exceed 1,617, a number suggesting that the villages in which the posse-lynchings occurred probably numbered in the hundreds.

including South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. These findings affirm a claim by historian Michael J. Pfeifer in his review of *Hostile Heartland*: “While Campney claims to be writing about the Midwest and tries to debunk the region’s self-conception of itself as relatively innocent racially, virtually all of his evidence is from the Lower Midwest.” Pfeifer predicted that the same pattern would not hold in “the Upper Midwestern and North Plains states.”<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, Loewen found and I corroborated the finding that sundown towns were more common in the more northerly areas of the Midwest and therefore less susceptible to posse-lynchings because there were far fewer Blacks in those areas. This paper seems to confirm the comment by Pfeifer that posse-lynchings tended to occur more often in the Lower rather than the Upper Midwest, and to attribute the difference to the more rigorous application of sundown practices in the more northerly locations, as anticipated by Loewen and myself.

The definition of posse-lynching developed for this study may skew the geographical findings, as a killing in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, reveals. In this case—similar in many respects to the incident in Martin—a Black man named William Brown took exception to racist slurs directed at him by some whites not long after he had arrived in town (although Sioux Falls, unlike Martin, was not a sundown town). When a police officer attempted to arrest him for defending himself, Brown shot him in apparent self-defense, and then fled as a large crowd of whites converged on the scene. Within moments, a thousand men formed into roaming posses in search of Brown, “threatening to hang ‘the nigger,’ if they should find him.”<sup>68</sup> Amid the pandemonium, including attacks on the lives and property of other Black residents, another officer spotted the fugitive on a nearby street.

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<sup>67</sup> Michael J. Pfeifer, review of *Hostile Heartland*, in *The Historian* 82 no. 4 (April 15, 2021), 507, DOI: 10.1080/00182370.2020.1889224

<sup>68</sup> “Negro Shoots Two Before He’s Killed,” *Mitchell (South Dakota) Capital*, August 4, 1910, p. 2. Brown had been in town for at least a month, as the *Daily Argus-Leader* noted when it referenced the July 4, 1910, prizefight between the Black boxer, Jack Johnson, and the white boxer, Jim Jeffries, a fight that Johnson won to the great dismay of many white Americans. Brown, claimed the *Argus-Leader*, was “the one negro in the city who made himself obnoxious on the night after the Johnson-Jeffries fight, and trouble was prevented at that time by other colored men getting Brown off the street.” See “Wild Negro Ran Amuck,” *Daily Argus-Leader* (Sioux Falls, South Dakota), August 1, 1910, p. 1. The victory of Johnson over Jeffries precipitated anti-Black violence in towns and cities across the United States, as Geoffrey C. Ward noted in *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (New York, 2004), 230–31. In this sense, the killing of Brown in Sioux City may be regarded, at least in part, as a delayed example of such violence resulting from white animosities over the prizefight and over any Black person who dared to rejoice over Johnson’s victory.

After Brown supposedly aimed at him and, as in Oakley, found that his gun had jammed, the officer shot him dead.<sup>69</sup> Since the officer evidently encountered and killed the suspect in an individual capacity rather than in the company of the posses roaming nearby, this incident would be classified as a killing by a police officer rather than a posse-lynching, despite the fact that the distinctions between them are difficult to discern.

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This work contributes to the scholarship on lynching and the Midwest in substantive terms, increasing the number of known lynchings in the Midwest in the 1910 to 1930 period. Indeed, while I had previously identified the posse-lynchings in Hoisington, Taylorville, North Platte, and Burlington, and while Pfeifer and Charles Seguin and David Rigby included the Linndale and/or Tamms incidents in their tabulations, the present work uncovered seven more apparently undocumented lynchings in the region. Furthermore, it found two of these previously undocumented lynchings in Iowa and three of them in Kansas, states which Pfeifer and I, respectively, have investigated intensively. Very recently, an investigation into the largely forgotten lynching of George Tompkins in a park in Indianapolis in 1922 prompted a reversal in the cause of death from suicide to homicide. This investigation demonstrated that the victim's hands were tied behind his back at the time of his death. Research along these lines suggests that lynchings of all types remain to be uncovered in the Midwest and that posse-lynchings may outnumber lynchings of other types during the period under investigation. Eventually, such research may challenge the credibility of the notion that lynching was mostly extinct in the Midwest during this period.<sup>70</sup>

In terms of the study of sundown towns, this work shows how the white perpetrators of these slayings used these incidents as a way of creating all-white sundown towns or reinforcing their earlier reputations for racial intolerance. It also demonstrates how the local authorities put their tacit stamp of approval on them through their inappropriate use of coroner's

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<sup>69</sup> "Negro Shoots Two Before He's Killed," *Mitchell* (South Dakota) *Capital*, August 4, 1910, p. 2. See also "Negro Man Hunt Ends in Killing of Black," *Minneapolis* (Minnesota) *Morning Tribune*, August 1, 1910, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> On the recent investigation into the lynching of George Tompkins and the corrected coroner's report, see <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/black-mans-death-indiana-ruled-lynching-nearly-100-years-later-rcna19955>, accessed 3/23/2022.



reports to sanitize their actions or simply through their willful failure to pursue the perpetrators. Finally, it shifts the scholarly focus on midwestern anti-Black violence away from the urban areas that are the usual sites of investigation—Chicago, East St. Louis, Marion—to the rural areas that customarily escape such analysis and, implicitly at least, are often regarded by historians as bucolic areas free of racial strife rather than as retrogressive areas subject to intense and prolonged racist behavior.

This work also challenges some of the assumptions and conclusions of the historiography of lynching. In *Hostile Heartland*, I introduced the concept of a “late lynching period” when, beginning in the mid-1920s and running through the early 1940s, white midwesterners, who had now largely abandoned the mass public spectacle lynchings in the town square so common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, continued to kill Blacks in so-called underground lynchings. In these affairs, I explained, small groups—often posses—killed Black men, almost invariably strangers, in clandestine executions intended to avoid public attention and conducted in rural and usually sundown (or at least overwhelmingly white) areas.<sup>71</sup> While this study affirms many of my assertions, it refines two of them. First, with its attention to posse-lynchings, it suggests that white midwesterners had initiated the “late lynching period” earlier than I had previously proposed, given the number of incidents in the 1910s. Second, with the posses composed of hundreds of participants in places like Hoisington, Taylorville, and Cherokee County, it also suggests that white midwesterners were more amenable to larger mobs in the *early* “late lynching period” than in the *later* one when these affairs became increasingly unacceptable socially.

This study also demonstrates that sundown towns were really constant works-in-progress, places where whites periodically used various means, including violence, to reinforce the reputations of their municipalities. In *Rough Justice*, Pfeifer demonstrated that most of the mobs that threatened to lynch Blacks in Iowa in the early twentieth century occurred in those areas of the state with the largest concentrations of Blacks, such as southeast Iowa where several post-Civil War all-Black colonies, some mining communities, and the state’s larger municipalities were located. “In other words,” he wrote, “during the early twentieth-century racial lynch-mob syndrome, white mobs sought blacks

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<sup>71</sup> Campney, *Hostile Heartland*, 161–85.

wherever blacks lived in Iowa.”<sup>72</sup> However, with its identification of two previously unidentified lynchings, both in sundown areas, this work suggests that, while white Iowans in areas of Black concentration were likely to lash out with racist violence, so too did those in rural and heavily white or sundown areas. Hence, it seems to indicate that the focus on anti-Black violence must be more geographically inclusive and attuned to the differences in the size of the Black populations and in the methods used and the objectives sought by the surrounding majority white population.

Like the work of Brundage and others, this study focuses on posse-lynchings as an important subset of lynching, showing, as scholars did previously, that those incidents where posse-lynchers unambiguously executed their victims without providing them with the opportunity to surrender (as in Meriden, Greeley, Hoisington, Linndale, Martin, and Taylorville) constituted acts of mob violence, even if the popular understanding of lynching privileges the image of lynch mobs taking prisoners from the authorities and hanging them. Furthermore, as revealed by the analysis and by Map 1, it demonstrates that posse-lynchings were not a *subset* of lynching in numerical terms; instead, they constituted fully thirteen of the eighteen (72.2%) known lynchings in these seven states over the study period—a change which may well become more pronounced as the investigation of these kinds of incidents expands.

Methodologically, this work identifies an approach to identifying posse-lynchings even when the white press and local authorities attempted to conceal them with claims of shoot-outs initiated by Black aggressors and justified by claims of self-defense. Like the work of Christopher Waldrep, it focuses on a close reading of the rhetoric and narrative surrounding lynching, a reading that often elucidates contradictions, provides insights into the identification and interpretation of these events, and offers analytical clues to researchers even when the chroniclers—as they often did—attempted to portray posse-lynchings in ways designed to deflect attention from themselves.

Finally, this study affirms the importance of the research tools now available in the search for and analysis of posse-lynchings. Earlier studies, such as those completed by Pfeifer and myself, relied heavily on the

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<sup>72</sup>Pfeifer, *Rough Justice*, 92.

labor-intensive effort required in pouring over newspaper microfilms.<sup>73</sup> While they revealed a number of incidents and insights in the states addressed, they did not reveal all of those incidents addressed here simply because of the advantages now provided by online newspaper databases. Similarly, with the methodology developed here to reveal intentionally obscured posse-lynchings, this study provides the means to identify even more of these lynchings. Supported by an increasingly complete set of online newspapers and equipped with a more productive methodology, future studies will surely provide greater insight into both the numbers and the characteristics associated with posse-lynchings in the Midwest and, indeed, across America.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> In my own case, the research for *This Is Not Dixie* was almost entirely completed using micro-filmed newspapers in the years between 2002 and 2008, while *Hostile Heartland* represented a heavier reliance on online newspaper sources, albeit supplementing substantial research completed over many years through microfilm.

<sup>74</sup> In a recent reflection, W. Fitzhugh Brundage recalled the difficulties in studying lynching when he undertook his study in the 1980s and early 1990s: “[A] serious challenge to the study of lynching that is easy to overlook in our age of near instantaneous virtual newspaper searches was the difficulty of studying lynching before the existence of comprehensive newspaper archives.” W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “Closing Reflections,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 20, no. 1 (January 2021), 165.