

## PART ONE

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### THE TOLL OF THE MOB

**THE TOLL** of the mob reckons not alone the victims but the lynchers themselves and the economic, social, and cultural meaning of their lawlessness. Three thousand seven hundred and twenty-four people were lynched in the United States from 1889 through 1930.<sup>1</sup> Over four-fifths of these were Negroes, less than one-sixth of whom were accused of rape. Practically all of the lynchers were native whites. The lynching rates have been highest in the newer and more sparsely settled portions of the South, where cultural and economic institutions are least stable and officers of the law are farthest apart, poorest paid, and most dependent upon local sentiment.

Of the twenty-one persons lynched in 1930, many were captured after extended man-hunts organized by undeputized armed men who used bloodhounds and conducted some type of mock trial before the lynching. Though two of the victims were unaccused, and there is grave doubt as to the guilt of many more, the findings of these mob trials were the lynchers' assurance that their victims were guilty of the crimes of which they were accused. The fact that a number of the victims were tortured, mutilated, dragged, or burned suggests the presence of sadistic tendencies among the lynchers; herein lies one of the most baffling phases of the mob situation. Though there were a few notable exceptions, most of the lynchers, chiefly young men between their late teens and twenty-five, were from that unattached group of people which exercised least public responsibility and was farthest removed from the institutions and agencies determining accepted standards of conduct. A

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<sup>1</sup> See "Negro Year Book, 1931-1932," and earlier editions of Year Book for sources of quantitative data on lynchings appearing in this volume.

number of middle-aged women figured prominently in some of the outbreaks; children, too, were present, making more difficult any effective resistance by officers.

Of the tens of thousands of lynchers and onlookers, the latter not guiltless, only forty-nine were indicted and only four have been sentenced. Chief among the factors rendering the courts ineffective was the prevalent indifference of peace officers and court officials and the apathy of the general white public concerning matters affecting Negroes. With but rare exceptions, leaders and members of the local religious and civic organizations were maneuvered by the pro-lynchers into a position of silent acquiescence.

And so the lynchers went unpunished and the communities paid the bills. Hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of property was destroyed with no insurance collectible; indirect financial losses accrued from the unfavorable publicity. Labor was disorganized and racial antagonisms were accentuated, forming the basis for further racial exploitation. The local and state governments were openly defied; the officials along with the general public, by winking at the lawlessness, rendered more difficult the realization of a community where the basic rights of human beings are respected.