

# **Lynching Reconsidered**

New Perspectives in the Study of  
Mob Violence

*Edited by*  
**William D. Carrigan**

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## Lynching Reconsidered

The history of lynching and mob violence has become a subject of considerable scholarly and public interest in recent years. Popular works by James Allen, Philip Dray and Leon Litwack have stimulated new interest in the subject. A generation of new scholars, sparked by these works and earlier monographs, are in the process of both enriching and challenging the traditional narrative of lynching in the United States.

This book contains essays by ten scholars at the forefront of the movement to broaden and deepen our understanding of mob violence in the United States. These essays range over the period from Reconstruction to World War II, analyze lynching in multiple regions of the United States and employ a wide range of methodological approaches. The authors explore neglected topics such as lynching in the Mid-Atlantic, lynching in Wisconsin, lynching photography, mob violence against Sicilian Italian immigrants, black lynch mobs, grassroots resistance to racial violence by African Americans, nineteenth century white southerners who opposed lynching and the creation of “lynching narratives” by southern white newspapers. The book speaks to patterns of violence, racism and resistance that are central to the history of the United States.

This book was first published as a special issue of *American Nineteenth Century History*.

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# Introduction: Reconsidering Lynching

William D. Carrigan

I was twenty years old when I decided to devote myself to the study of lynching and mob violence in the United States. Although I had loved history for years, my initial major at the University of Texas at Austin was mechanical engineering because I couldn't answer the question put forward by my parents, 'So, what can you do with that degree other than teach?' I now know you can do much with a history degree. But I didn't have a good answer at the time and dutifully enrolled in a major that might lead to a nice career. The experiment didn't last too long, principally due to my own lack of interest in the subject matter. Calculus, however, must also share some of the blame.

After fleeing engineering, I was encouraged by a friend to take a United States history class taught by George C. Wright. He had just won a teaching award from the university and was reputed to be a dynamic lecturer. So, my friend and I enrolled in his class, which met at 8 o'clock in the morning. It was a fateful decision. Professor Wright would eventually become the advisor of my honors thesis and push me to attend graduate school. I also eventually married the friend who recommended the course to me.

George Wright was a specialist in lynching and mob violence, and I still remember when he showed images and photographs of several lynchings to our class. At least one of the photographs was of Jesse Washington, a black 18-year-old farm worker who was lynched in 1916 before a crowd of some 15,000 people in Waco, Texas. The grisly images shocked me. I had grown up north of Waco in a little community called Chalk Bluff. While my family had only moved to the region after World War II, I still nevertheless felt sick looking at the crowd. I wondered what I would have done if I had grown up in the early part of the twentieth century instead of the latter part. Would I have joined the crowd and endorsed this brutal burning of a human being? It was a disturbing question. I knew what I hoped would be my answer, but that didn't help. I wanted to understand how so many people could come to believe that lynching was an acceptable means of dispensing justice. The question that drove me was akin to the question that drives some scholars of the Holocaust: how did ordinary Germans come to support or at least tolerate what was happening around them?

So, for the last dozen years or so, I have been trying to figure out why ordinary Americans participated in and accepted lynching. One result of all this work was my dissertation, now published by the University of Illinois Press as a monograph under the title *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836–1916*. The collection of essays that you now hold in your hands is a second attempt to understand lynching and mob violence in the United States.

In conducting the research for my own book and in traveling the conference circuit, I came across many folks like me. These were scholars, young and old, who had been influenced by the outpouring of lynching scholarship in the 1980s and early 1990s. They were doing fascinating work that often pushed the boundaries – chronological, geographical, and topical – that framed much of the discussion of lynching. I began thinking that collecting this new scholarship would make a powerful volume of essays that would help chart the future direction of research on mob violence. When Martin Crawford asked me to be the assistant editor of *American Nineteenth Century History*, I didn't wait long to bring up my idea. Martin endorsed the idea immediately, and he and fellow editor Susan-Mary Grant have provided sterling support ever since.

The essays that follow have been chosen because they illustrate the ways in which I think the academic community should reconsider lynching. For decades, the subject of lynching was largely ignored by the academy. American history textbooks said little of the subject, and the historical profession's leaders did not think it a topic worthy of much research. That began to change in the 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement sparked widespread interest in race relations and African American history. Scholarship on lynching slowly grew, culminating with the publications of W. Fitzhugh Brundage's *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* and Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck's *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930*. The cumulative impact of this scholarship made a difference, and many American history textbooks now at least mention lynching and mob violence.

This important wave of lynching scholarship, however, only analyzed a portion of the larger story of mob violence in America. These scholars focused on the region, the time period, and the people who suffered most at the hands of lynch mobs: black male southerners who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These scholars were, in my opinion, right to focus their studies as they did. One of the results of their success, however, has been a tendency by those outside of the field to form a narrow view of what lynching was. The recent overview of lynching by Phillip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*, illustrates the ways in which lynching has come to be seen as a crime perpetrated against black men in the South during a set period of years. I think this is unfortunate because lynching was not restricted to the American South, it was not confined to the period from 1880 to 1930, and the victims of Judge Lynch were white as well as black, foreign-born as well as native-born, and female as well as male.

The essays that follow demonstrate the diverse history of lynching. They probe the subject of mob violence in ways that confound the contemporary narrative of who, when, where, and by whom lynchings were conducted. It is my hope that they will encourage future research and that a new wave of lynching scholarship will complicate

the popular narratives of mob violence that currently circulate in the world beyond the ivory tower.

The first two essays in this collection examine mob violence outside of the American South. Michael Pfeifer's 'Wisconsin's Last Decade of Lynching, 1881–1891: Law and Violence in the Postbellum Midwest' explores vigilantism in the Upper Midwest, a region that has drawn little attention from scholars of lynching. Pfeifer finds that Wisconsin, like many other parts of the United States, was divided by the practice of lynching. Some Wisconsites favored popular and informal methods of dispensing justice whereas others supported punishing criminals through due process and a formal legal system. Pfeifer finds that lynching ended earlier in Wisconsin than in other places for two reasons. First, the prominence of so many residents with New England backgrounds helped tip the balance toward those favoring due process. Second, the increasingly strong actions of law officers in shielding criminals from mobs discouraged lynching.

Janice Barrow's essay, 'Lynching in the Mid-Atlantic, 1882–1940,' explores mob violence in a region even less well studied than the Midwest. Focusing on New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland, Barrow demonstrates that the relative infrequency of lynching in the region cannot be attributed to the region's allegedly more benevolent racism. Indeed, Barrow documents that deeply rooted prejudices against both African Americans and European immigrants frequently led to acts of mob violence. In the end, Barrow suggests that economic factors and a legal system increasingly committed to capital punishment are better explanations for the Mid-Atlantic's lynching patterns than differences in attitudes toward blacks and immigrants.

In a volume filled with essays that challenge the traditional story of lynching none is more challenging than Bruce Baker's essay 'Lynch Law Reversed: The Rape of Lula Sherman, the Lynching of Manse Waldrop, and the Debate over Lynching in the 1880s.' Manse Waldrop was a white man. He was lynched by a black mob because he had allegedly raped a young black girl, Lula Sherman. The African Americans who lynched Waldrop were convicted of murder, but a massive petition campaign led to their being pardoned by the Governor of South Carolina. This truly exceptional case, Baker argues, does nothing to undermine the argument that racism was critical to most lynchings in the South. Indeed, this case prompted whites in South Carolina to think more deeply about what justified lynching. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, most concluded that it was the danger of black criminality that justified lynching. In the years ahead, lynching victims were even more likely than before to be African American men. The Waldrop case had proven to be more than an anomalous exception. It was a step on the way to the racialization of lynching in the American South. Baker's insights into the debate over lynching in the 1880s is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the evolution of mob violence in the United States.

Most historians who study southern white opposition to lynching focus upon southern liberals like Jesse Daniel Ames or George Washington Cable. Few historians have examined southern conservatives who opposed lynching. Christopher Waldrep's essay on John Cashman suggests that the debate over lynching, even in the heart of Mississippi,

was more contested and complex than historians have been willing to admit. Waldrep uses the 1904 lynching of Luther Holbert to demonstrate how the false assumptions of historians have led them to misread key documents in the history of lynching. John Cashman's description of the Holbert lynching has been used to demonstrate the barbaric savagery of the American South, but historians citing Cashman's prose have missed the fact that Cashman himself was deeply opposed to lynching and that his narrative of lynching was designed to accomplish the exact same purpose to which later historians put the passage: to discredit lynching by focusing on its most immoral and savage characteristics. Cashman was a racist, conservative ex-Confederate who opposed lynching on the grounds of law and order and a belief in an apolitical constitutionalism. Cashman's story challenges the assumptions that scholars make about lynching in the American South. It suggests that lynching was not predestined after the Civil War, that there were conservative as well as liberal alternatives to the bloody mob violence of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cashman, Waldrep argues, was not an isolated crank but was instead part of the New South movement which sought to promote sectional reconciliation, racial peace, and industrial growth. Cashman's views did not isolate him from southern society. His newspaper was not a failure. He surpassed and eventually bought his main competitor in Vicksburg, the *Herald*. Cashman suggests that southern white opposition to lynching may have been more important than previously recognized by scholars. There is no doubt that it is a topic that has been neglected for too long.

Kidada Williams's essay, 'Resolving the Paradox of Our Lynching Fixation: Reconsidering Racialized Violence in the Nineteenth Century' is an important contribution to the scholarship on racial violence. Williams believes that scholars and the general public have become fixated upon lynching and lynching victims and have lost sight, at least in part, of the more frequent, if less spectacular, forms of racial violence that plagued African Americans before, during, and after the so-called 'lynching era.' She also argues that a fixation on lynching has obscured African American resistance and agency and spotlighted black victimhood. Williams argues that scholars should reconsider how they study racial violence by beginning their studies prior to 1880 and by focusing on black resistance throughout the nineteenth century. When this is accomplished, the national and international anti-lynching campaigns of the twentieth century will be seen in a different light.

The next two articles collected here argue that historians should consider more carefully the sources that are used to study lynching. Susan Jean's essay examines newspapers, the single most important source for studying lynching. Focusing on daily and weekly papers from Florida in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jean argues that newspaper accounts of lynching episodes displayed surprisingly little variety and were instead unified around highly stylized narratives of racial violence. These narratives helped to control how lynching was represented and perceived. They guided readers in judging the actions of lynch mobs and impeded the development of anti-lynching forces. Jean concludes that historians must pay careful attention to the language of their sources, and to larger regional narratives in which local newspapers participate, in order to understand mob violence in the American South.



Amy Louise Wood's essay 'Lynching Photography and the Visual Reproduction of White Supremacy' helps historians analyze the images of lynching victims. Historians have been aware of lynching photographs for years, but there has been little serious scholarly work done on how to understand and analyze these images. With the recent and ground-breaking publication of James Allens's *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, the need for critical insights into this all-important source has become even more important. Wood argues that lynching photographs, like newspaper accounts of lynching, claimed objectivity but were in fact very effective defenders of lynching and white supremacy. As with newspaper accounts, lynching developed its own 'photographic conventions' that spread throughout the southern states. In lynching images, mobs are portrayed as 'stalwart and controlled' while black victims are 'defiled.' Unlike newspaper accounts, Wood observes, lynching photographs were taken during the lynching with the compliance of the lynchers and are clear examples of 'visual sensationalism.' These photographs had a special power at the time due to the way photographs were seen. They were simultaneously objective and windows onto the inner moral truth of individuals. One of the most important points made by Wood is that the meanings intended to be conveyed in lynching photographs were not stable once those images left the local area and region in which they were produced. This fact meant that these photographs, created originally to bolster white supremacy, could be imbued with different meanings and therefore be used to oppose lynching.

'The lynching of Sicilian Immigrants in the American South, 1886-1910' provides a fitting final essay to the volume. Clive Webb demonstrates how the process of 'reconsidering lynching' can open up new areas of study and simultaneously lead us to a better understanding of more familiar terrain. On the one hand, Webb's essay provides the first region-wide study of the lynching of Italians in the South, noting that no other ethnic minority (with the exception of persons of Mexican descent) were lynched so often in the American South. On the other hand, Webb's work also helps us better understand classic issues such as the nature of white racial ideology and black resistance to lynching in the South.

W. Fitzhugh Brundage authors the Conclusion to this collection. Brundage is particularly well poised to evaluate the contributions of these scholars and to place them in historiographical context. His own work influenced many of the historians working on lynching today, and he continues to be active in the field. His observations on the future of lynching studies are an apt way to end this volume and, I hope, a springboard for even more research on this important topic.

Mob violence was an important and lasting aspect of American history. It was not confined to black southerners, to western cattle rustlers, or to a specific time period. It played a role in western expansion, in the sectional conflict, in the Civil War, in Reconstruction, in conflicts between labor and management, in the rise of Jim Crow, in the Great Migration, and in the development of capital punishment. Much research remains to be done if we are to understand fully this important part of the American past.

# CONTENTS

## **Introduction:**

Reconsidering Lynching

*William D. Carrigan* vii

1 Wisconsin's Last Decade of Lynching, 1881–1891:

Law and Violence in the Postbellum Midwest.

*Michael J. Pfeifer* 1

2 Lynching in the Mid-Atlantic, 1882–1940.

*Janice Hittinger Barrow* 15

3 Lynch Law Reversed: The Rape of Lula Sherman, the Lynching  
of Manse Waldrop, and the Debate over Lynching in the 1880s

*Bruce E. Baker* 47

4 'Raw, Quivering Flesh': John G. Cashman's 'Pornographic'  
Constitutionalism Designed to Produce an 'Aversion and  
Detestation', 1883–1904

*Christopher Waldrep* 69

5 Resolving the Paradox of Our Lynching Fixation:

Reconsidering Racialized Violence in the American South after Slavery.

*Kidada E. Williams* 97

6 'Warranted' Lynchings: Narratives of Mob Violence in  
Southern White Newspapers, 1880–1940.

*Susan Jean* 125

7 Lynching Photography and the Visual Reproduction of White Supremacy

*Amy Louise Wood* 147

8 The Lynching of Sicilian Immigrants in the American South, 1880–1910

*Clive Webb* 175

## **Conclusion:**

*W. Fitzhugh Brundage* 205

**Notes on Contributors** 219

*Index* 221

# Wisconsin's Last Decade of Lynching, 1881–91: Law and Violence in the Postbellum Midwest

Michael J. Pfeifer

On 21 September 1891, scores of people poured into Darlington, Wisconsin from the surrounding countryside. Shortly before noon, the crowd of hundreds met a train bearing a 26-year-old prisoner, Anton Sieboldt, from Monroe, where he had been taken for safekeeping. Sieboldt, born to Prussian immigrant parents, was a hired hand who labored on a nearby farm. He had murdered a young farmer of Irish descent, James Meighan, as the two traveled together by wagon into Darlington for lumber. The previous Wednesday afternoon, the two had quarreled under the influence of whiskey. After severely wounding Meighan, Seiboldt reportedly obtained a wagon wrench from a woman at a nearby house and used it to kill Meighan with a blow to the

## 2 Lynching Reconsidered

skull. Authorities soon apprehended Sieboldt and lodged him in the county jail at Darlington, as talk of lynching began. The next night a large crowd assembled at the town's stockyards, apparently planning to seize Sieboldt. Authorities outwitted potential mobbers by secreting Sieboldt in the county poorhouse, and then taking him the next morning to Dumbarton from where he was removed by morning train to Monroe.<sup>1</sup>

As the train pulled into Darlington on Monday, several of the murdered Meighan's acquaintances assured Sheriff John Lindsay that they would not make any trouble, and the sheriff went off to dinner. The sheriff later argued that he had offered some defense of the jail and prisoner, once he knew what was under way. In any case, a mob of 50, perhaps half of them Irish farmers from the vicinity of Meighan's home in Willow Springs, six miles from Darlington, reportedly including Jim Lange, the town chairman and member of the Lafayette County Board, easily broke into the jail and used a sledge to break through the locks on Sieboldt's cell. The mob placed a rope around Sieboldt's neck as he fought them; someone hit Sieboldt over the head with a sledge hammer; and the lynchers dragged their victim across the street to a small ash tree in a square at the intersection of Main and Catherine Streets. There, approximately a thousand men, women, and children (dismissed from school at noon) watched as Sieboldt died. Many more carefully examined the 'gallows tree' in the days that followed. The lynching site adjoined the Baptist, Methodist, and Congregational churches, with the high school across the street, and a monument to Lafayette County's perished soldiers and sailors a short distance away.<sup>2</sup>

The last lynching in Wisconsin, in the southwestern county seat of 2000 persons 'nestled in a bend of the Pecatonica river,' was not an anomaly.<sup>3</sup> Four lynchings had occurred in the state in the previous decade, another 12 in the 30 years after statehood in 1848.<sup>4</sup> Wisconsinites remembered these previous mob killings as they praised and condemned the Darlington lynching. As had happened with each of the lynchings that had occurred in the 1880s, Wisconsinites re-examined the status of crime and punishment and social order, and their conversation revolved around the implications of the state's abolition of the death penalty in 1853. The impetus for abolition of capital punishment in the northeastern United States had stemmed from concern over the effects of public executions on the masses that avidly viewed them. The movement eventually reached the growing Midwest, where anti-death penalty forces achieved their legislative aims in Michigan (1846) and Wisconsin. Several thousand had watched the public hanging of John McCaffary in Kenosha in 1851, leading a Madison editor to bemoan 'Murder before the people, with the horrors removed by the respectability of those engaged in its execution.' Assemblyman Christopher Latham Sholes, who published the *Kenosha Telegraph*, led the legislative campaign for abolition with Waukesha County farmer-legislator Marvin Bovee.<sup>5</sup>

However, some postbellum Wisconsinites argued that a criminal justice system that offered life imprisonment as its greatest penalty could not sufficiently deter murderers or protect communities. Lynching in Wisconsin, like the mob violence that plagued the southern, western, and lower midwestern portions of the United States in the mid to late nineteenth century, punctuated an extensive popular conversation over the goals

of a changing criminal justice system.<sup>6</sup> Lynchers and their defenders argued for a harsh, communal vision of the punishment of homicide, especially of those homicides aggravated by the maliciousness of the manner of killing, or the gender, generational, or social status of the murder victim. Wisconsinites who advocated 'rough justice' were often, but not exclusively, rural and working class residents. They expressed a profound suspicion of the deliberative and unpredictable nature of due process law, particularly of the insanity plea, which some well-publicized Gilded Age murders and trials had made suspect. Wisconsinites who deplored lynching were often middle class in outlook and lived in towns and cities. By contrast, they stressed the importance of the observance of due process for the protection of the rights of the defendant, the promotion of social order, and the flow of capital. While the state's early abolition of the death penalty in a sense indicated the triumph of due process values, Wisconsinites who held rough justice values contested that victory over the next four decades through periodic lynchings that called into question the efficacy of a criminal justice system that eschewed capital punishment.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike its southern neighbor Iowa, where 21 died at the hands of lynch mobs from 1880 through 1907, Wisconsin was not a magnet for southern border state immigrants and their yeoman traditions of collective retribution for offenses that breached masculine honor.<sup>8</sup> The Yankees, Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians that peopled Wisconsin resorted less often to mob killings.<sup>9</sup> Although historians have devoted much attention to lynching in the South and some to mob violence in the West, only recently have historians begun to analyze the infrequent but socially significant collective killings that occurred in the upper Midwest.<sup>10</sup> Despite the intense communalism and the substantial defense elicited by the five lynchings in Wisconsin in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the practice was never as deeply rooted in the upper American Midwest as it was in the lower Midwest, the West, and the South. A political culture rooted in the Yankee heritage of Wisconsin's most influential residents that stressed probity, regularity, and communal governance, and a farm and industrial economy characterized by a vibrant capitalism, meant that respect for due process law and the promise that it might ensure social and economic order were strong counter-currents to the temptations of Judge Lynch.

The abolition of the death penalty in 1853 signaled that Wisconsin stood at the vanguard of the legal reforms that originally emanated in the humanitarian and perfectionist tendencies of a growing middle class in the Northeast. Yet Wisconsin was not immune to a characteristic nineteenth century American disease. In peculiarly traumatic circumstances of aggravated homicide, particularly in more recently-settled western counties, Wisconsinites sometimes brutally acted out a rough justice ideology shaped with reference to ethnic solidarities and to their state's abolition of capital punishment. However, after 1891, Wisconsin authorities increasingly acted to avert lynching and to thus avoid the stain to the state's reputation. Meanwhile, Wisconsinites of all stripes acquired a respect for abstract concepts of law and for the role of professionalizing law enforcement and penal agencies in safeguarding the public interest in crime control. Thus the 'Neck-Tie Party' which claimed Anton Sieboldt's life in Darlington would prove the final of its kind.

Support for the lynching in Darlington in 1891 was substantial, particularly in southwestern Wisconsin, but it was not uniform or unqualified. The *Darlington Democrat and Register* reported that citizens in that city and county believed 'the murderer got just what he deserved' but nonetheless regretted the lynching 'and especially the time and place it occurred – at high noon on a cloudless day – on our most public street – among our churches – near and in full view of our public schools.'<sup>11</sup> A letter writer from South Lamont styling himself HIRED MAN expressed little regret, arguing that 'No one feels sorry for the man that was hung. I have never heard a person express a word of sympathy for him; all seem to think that he was a desparate [sic] criminal, a terror to whatever community he lived in.'<sup>12</sup>

The South Lamont writer stressed Sieboldt's alleged lack of remorse, the heinousness of his crime, the suffering of his victim's family, the protection afforded to the community by his removal from it, and the lessons for the personal behavior and morality of those who remained.<sup>13</sup> Nearby, in the Grant County seat of Lancaster, editors found a rationale for the collective killing of Sieboldt in the supposed inadequacy of the punishment afforded to murderers in the state. The *Lancaster Herald* opined that 'While Judge Lynch is a dangerous confidant there are cases where one hesitates to censure severely, especially where the law does not sanction capital punishment.'<sup>14</sup> The *Herald's* competitor, the *Lancaster Teller*, expressed a like mind, arguing that the Lafayette County lynchers possessed a vision of the law more perfect and demanding than that practiced in the courts, asserting that 'It too often happens that lynch law is administered not so much as a vengeful punishment of crime and criminals, but because of a desire to express condemnation of the law's inadequacy and delays.' In the view of those in rural southwestern Wisconsin who defended the collective killing of Sieboldt, a criminal justice system that lacked the death penalty and which emphasized procedural safeguards could not sufficiently deter murder or keep communities secure.<sup>15</sup>

But dissenting voices were also heard. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* reported that some in Darlington wanted it to be known that town residents had not performed the lynching. Underlying a chasm of class and culture over the benefits of rough justice versus due process, in the town's stores and saloons people tended to believe the lynching would 'serve as a timely warning to other persons with murderous intentions.' Yet 'the more conservative citizens' deplored the affair and its murderous violation of law. 'Mr. Warren Gray, a well-known citizen and church member,' stated '[I] regard it as one of the worst things for the county that ever happened... There is no doubt that Sieboldt's crime was an atrocious one but that was no excuse for the lawless manner of his death.' This opinion was echoed by 'John Bray, another church member,' who nonetheless thought it prudent not to prosecute the lynchers 'just now.' Meanwhile the county's district attorney, Jeff Simpson, in the face of threats, thought it best to move slowly, with a secret grand jury investigation that might culminate in prosecution at the December term of court, although many of the lynchers' names were known to the sheriff and others.<sup>16</sup>

For its part, the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, viewing the events from the lakeside industrial metropolis more than 100 miles to the east, excoriated 'LA FAYETTE COUNTY'S

DISGRACE.' The *Sentinel*, taking a much harder line against this lynching than it had against mob killings in the early to mid 1880s, declared that 'lynch law' was never 'excusable' in Wisconsin, that the incident represented an atavistic quest for vengeance, and that the guilty parties ought to be fully prosecuted. The *Sentinel* argued that if the legal penalty – a life sentence – was not 'severe enough' for 'La Fayette county' citizens, they ought to seek to have the death penalty restored.<sup>17</sup>

Wisconsin's diverse array of ethnic loyalties also factored into the interpretation of the mob killing of Anton Sieboldt. A Milwaukee German Catholic newspaper, the *Seebote*, underlined the fact that a lynching party of Irish had murdered a German and argued that Sieboldt would not have been lynched if he had not been, in the colloquial parlance, 'a Dutchman.' The *Milwaukee Sentinel*, representing that city's Yankee establishment, denied that 'race feeling' had anything to do with it and asserted that racial and ethnic allegiances and antagonisms had never played a role in the Badger State's heritage of mob violence.<sup>18</sup>

But ethnic identities and nativism had influenced lynchings as well as the response to acts of collective violence in Wisconsin's history. On 26 September 1868, for example, the ethnic solidarity of Irish in and around Richland Center transformed an overflowing crowd of mourners gathered at the cemetery for the funeral of 20-year-old, recently married Anna Wallace, into a mob that soon descended on the nearby Richland County Jail. Pulling 15-year-old John Nevel from the jail, women stoned him and men hanged him from a tree until he was dead. Nevel, whose father farmed near the Town of Dayton, had allegedly shot Wallace and then decapitated her with an axe, supposedly to obtain the \$25 she had earned picking hops. The *Richland County Republican* noted that the 'Rev. J.M. Reid, Col. Hasentine, Dist. Attorney Wilson, Judge Fries, Sheriff McMurtry, Esq. Lovelas, Constable Barrett, and many other worthy citizens' had tried to dissuade the mob; but 'the people of the outraged settlement' ten miles from the Center could not be dissuaded.<sup>19</sup> The *Republican* cited a litany of factors that made the mostly Irish lynchers' action understandable, from the nature of the crime to the defenselessness of the victim to the purportedly lax record of the district's courts.<sup>20</sup>

Twenty years later in Trempeleau County, the strength of communal ties among Norwegians informed the lynching of Norwegian farmer Hans Jacob Olsen by Norwegians at the Town of Preston, Trempeleau County on 24 November 1889. Olsen had made threats of violence against his family. When the *Milwaukee Sentinel* castigated the *Seebote*'s supposed attempt 'to sow dissensions between the people of this state of different national origins,' it denounced the Trempeleau County mob killing as 'the worst outrage, probably, in the whole list' of lynchings in Wisconsin. However, a recent historian argues that the eventual conviction of Olson's wife, Bertha, her son, and two other men and their sentence to life in prison for the collective killing resulted from Yankee nativism in league with 'liberal legalism and American gender ideals [which] privileged the rights of the individual man over those of his wife, family, and community.'<sup>21</sup>

As in the Darlington affair in 1891, lynchings in Wisconsin in the 1880s usually evoked a mixture of opinions that underlined cultural divisions over the changing

nature of criminal justice. In July 1881, brothers Edward and Alonzo Williams avoided arrest by brothers Charles and Milton Coleman by shooting the two officers dead in Durand. A posse of 200 men and boys, eventually assisted by the Ludington Guard dispatched by Governor William Smith, scoured the dense woods of the Chippewa River Valley but could not find the Williams brothers. Law officers captured Edward Williams, alias Maxwell, four months later in Nebraska. On November 19, at the conclusion of Williams's preliminary hearing in Durand before a crowded courtroom of men, women, and children, a man called out 'Hang the son of a b---h!' A mob of 12 or more men seized Williams from law officers, placed a noose around his head, and dragged him down the courthouse steps to an 'old oak tree east of the courthouse,' from which he was hanged. The still-handcuffed Williams suffocated, and law officers soon cut down his corpse.<sup>22</sup>

The *Durand Courier*, although contradicted by a report written by the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*'s correspondent, stressed that the lynching was 'quiet and orderly' and that 'While our citizens generally do not countenance the lynching, we hear no regrets.' The *Courier* cited the supposedly haphazard administration of criminal justice in Pepin County:

Many of our citizens were afraid that through some twist of the law, he might possibly escape a just punishment for his bloody crimes. This county has had one experience of this kind when one of the parties escaped and the other, though sentenced to Waupun [the location of the state penitentiary] for life, was pardoned out in less than eight years, and we want no more such foolery.

Expressing support for rough justice and a lack of sympathy for the lynched man and those who were offended by the collective killing's breach of due process, the *Durand* editor derided the critics of the lynching as 'Sickly sentimentalists' and mocked 'the morbid anxiety of the sentimental whiners,' such as the *Eau Claire News*, which had stated that it was 'cowardly' of the mob to hang Williams while he still bore handcuffs.<sup>23</sup>

However, the editor of the nearby *Dunn County News* saw the affair very differently as he lamented the denigration of due process law in the collective killing of Ed Williams: 'As a matter of fact, the men engaged in this affair, trampled upon all law and that action culminated in the highest crime known to the law. It is impossible to justify their conduct by any rule of right and justice.' In *Eau Galle*, a writer noted a 'diversity of opinion' in their town but also a fear that the lynching indicated a cultural degeneration: 'the general sentiment down this way is that a more brutal affair never happened anywhere, and that it is a reflection upon the morality and civilization of Northwestern Wisconsin.'<sup>24</sup>

The profound doubts that some Wisconsinites voiced over the mob murder of Ed Williams were not echoed three years later when a mob of several thousand hanged riverman Nathaniel 'Scotty' Mitchell in La Crosse. Instead, at that time, a critique of the use of the insanity plea in a series of well-publicized homicide cases combined with collective outrage at the murder of a well-known business and political leader to produce an unequivocal defense of lynching. In 1881 Charles Guiteau, a disappointed Republican office-seeker who apparently suffered from profound mental illness,



assassinated President James Garfield in Washington, D.C. Guiteau's legal defense of insanity failed to convince a jury, and he was eventually legally executed. Yet his trial received immense publicity as prosecution and defense summoned experts in the infant field of psychiatric medicine. As a result of the Guiteau trial many Americans, particularly rural ones, became convinced of the dangers of the 'insanity dodge.'<sup>25</sup>

On the evening of 16 October 1884, hundreds of people had filled downtown La Crosse to celebrate a major Republican election victory in Ohio with fireworks, speeches, and a parade. Frank Burton, the head of the local chapter of the Blaine and Logan Clubs, stood at a city intersection ready to lead the marching clubs of the Plumed Knights.<sup>26</sup> Nathaniel Mitchell then stepped from the crowd and fatally shot Burton, a 38-year-old Chicago native who had run a grain brokerage office in La Crosse since the early 1870s, in the head and breast, and kicked the fallen man twice in the head, exclaiming 'G—D—him, he knows what I shot him for.' Mitchell, probably born in 1853, had emigrated from England to labor in Wisconsin's North Woods as a lumberman in the winter and on raft boats on the Mississippi River in the summer.<sup>27</sup>

A river pilot, former employers, and other acquaintances of Mitchell's would later say that he had been hospitalized several years before, after he was injured 'by [a] line striking him,' that he was 'peaceable' except when drunk, and that Mitchell had spent time in jail for a row at a La Crosse 'house of ill-fame.'<sup>28</sup> A motivation for Mitchell's attack on Burton eventually emerged. Two years earlier Burton, serving as acting Surveyor of Customs at La Crosse, had denied Mitchell a certificate that would enable him to enter the marine hospital. Burton had instead admonished the English raft man 'to go to work and stop drinking and he would not need the benefits of the marine physician.'<sup>29</sup>

Law officers quickly spirited Mitchell down Fourth Street to the jail, as members of the crowd began to shout, 'He has shot Frank Burton; there he goes; Lynch him! Don't let him get off the street!' The crowd surged down the street and filled the jailyard, joined by others to whom word had rapidly circulated, until approximately 3,000 surrounded the jail. The La Crosse County sheriff, undersheriff, and other officials stood outside the jail, trying to dissuade the crowd which angrily demanded the prisoner. The admonishment by one of the officers that 'gentleman, that man is insane' provoked laughter and a retort that 'Yes, all these late murderers are insane, give us the man we will cure him — damn him.' The debate went back and forth for some 20 minutes; then the mob organized a party to break into the jail and secured sledgehammers and other tools from a nearby blacksmith's shop. As hundreds of women and children watched, and as the 'Best citizens' reportedly observed with 'blanched faces,' the mob rushed the jail twice, only to be cleared out of it.<sup>30</sup>

Yet the third time was successful. The mob employed sledge-hammers to break down the cell doors and pulled Mitchell out, to the crowd's cheer. To someone's declaration that Mitchell was crazy and should not be lynched, a mobber rebutted by referencing a recent case in Wausau where a defendant had used the insanity plea: 'So was Bennett crazy.' As the crowd 'raged about like bloodhungry animals' and refused to let Mitchell make a final statement, one avid observer suggested burning Mitchell with torches. After officers confirmed that he indeed was the man the mob was seeking,