

“She Has Shaken This Country”



Ida B. Wells

SHE WAS A LITTLE SLIP OF A THING, a few inches short of five feet tall. Even with her hair swept up and her linen duster on, twenty-two-year-old Ida Wells still looked like a small girl playing grown-up as she took a seat in the first-class ladies' car on the train heading from Memphis to Woodstock, Tennessee. She opened a book and began to read.

When the conductor came by to collect tickets, he took a look at her and barked, *You're not allowed in this car. Move to the next one—the smoker, the one set aside for niggers.* Wells shook her head. She had bought a first-class ticket, she was a lady, and she was going to stay in the ladies' car. In the post-Reconstruction South, however, no black woman was ever considered a lady. No matter how rich, educated, or refined, she was to be ban-

ished to the smoking car, where the windows were filthy, the passengers' drinking heavy, the air foul, and the boisterous conversation equally so.

Ida Wells wasn't moving. When the conductor grabbed her arm to pull her up, she bit him on the back of the hand and braced her feet against the seat in front of her. He ran to get help and came back with two men from the baggage car. After struggling for a few moments, the three finally were able to yank the tiny schoolteacher from her seat. They dragged her down the aisle to the smoking car, as the white passengers stood and applauded. At the next stop, she left the train, her carefully arranged hair now disheveled, her duster wrinkled, dirty, and torn, and the cheers of the whites still ringing in her ears.

Those cheers reflected the triumph many whites surely felt: Finally, almost twenty years after the end of the Civil War, these uppity blacks were getting their comeuppance. For Southern whites, the loss of the war had meant the death of their world, with their towns and plantations reduced to piles of ash, their economy ruined. Perhaps worst of all, a society in which they had been unequivocal masters had been totally destroyed. Blacks no longer bowed their heads and said, "Yes, massa," and "No, massa," obeying without question. Now they thought they were as good as whites, sitting in first-class train cars, shopping in white stores, demanding to be served in restaurants, and talking back. And the hated Yankee government did everything it could to encourage them. In 1875, Congress passed a Civil Rights Act banning discrimination in public places and on public transportation. But the South was determined not to abide by the act, and, to its delight, it discovered that the federal government was not very intent on enforcing it. Indeed, in October 1883, the U.S. Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional. Within a few years, Southern states would erase the rights, political and civil, that blacks had so recently and dearly won, and enact Jim Crow laws throwing up impenetrable walls of segregation.

When Ida Wells was thrown out of the ladies' car, it was September 1883, one month before the Supreme Court tossed the Civil Rights Act aside. But that ruling, in the view of this determined young woman, would not be the last word. Hot-tempered and independent, considered a "heartless flirt" by the many male admirers she had rejected, Wells had "plenty of nerve," as one admirer put it. In early 1884, she filed suit in a local court against the railroad—an action that the Supreme Court had advised blacks to take if they thought they had been wronged. Amazingly, she won. The judge hearing the case had fought for the Union during the war, and he awarded her two hundred dollars. The railroad appealed. Later that year,

Wells again was denied access to a train's ladies' car, and when she protested, the conductor stopped the train and she got off. Again, she sued the railroad, and the same judge who heard her first case ruled once more in her favor, awarding her five hundred dollars, a ruling later overturned by the state supreme court. Wells's second victory caused a sensation among both blacks and whites. "A Darky Damsel Obtains a Verdict for Damages Against the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad," proclaimed the headline in a Memphis newspaper.

The story of Wells's ejections from the ladies' car, and her demands for justice, struck a special chord with other black women. At a time when white women were treated, at least in public, with exaggerated politeness and respect, black women, no matter how cultured or educated or well dressed, were thrown out of theaters, tossed off trains and streetcars, pushed off sidewalks, roughed up by conductors and policemen. It had happened to legendary abolitionist Sojourner Truth, as it had happened to so many others, and, Truth, like Wells and others, had fought back. Truth was sixty-eight years old when a streetcar conductor in Washington tried to push her off the car. When she resisted, he grabbed her right arm and wrenched it. She went to the president of the streetcar company and demanded that the conductor be fired, which the president agreed to do. She then had the conductor arrested for assault and battery.

The flagrant humiliation of black women was tied to the widespread belief, stemming from the days of slavery, that they did not deserve respect or consideration, because they were sexual wantons who led men astray. After slavery, white men did not have the same free sexual access to black women as before, but they still considered them fair game. Women were assaulted on the street, in stores and other public places, the assaults ranging from obscene comments and gestures to physical attacks. The risk of rape was ever-present for black women working in white homes and businesses. And always, so the theory went, the women were asking for it.

In the late 1800s, Southern blacks began their great migration to the North—200,000 alone between 1890 and 1910—to seek better economic opportunities and to flee Jim Crow. According to historian Darlene Clark Hine, many of the black women who left the South did so for yet another reason—to escape sexual exploitation and the possibility of rape.

A black church magazine asked Ida Wells to write a story about her experience on the train and the lawsuit that followed. Her defiant message that blacks must stand up for their rights was so well received that other black newspapers and magazines asked her to write stories and columns for

them. Soon, her outspoken pieces decrying "the contemptuous defamation of black women" and other injustices to blacks were in wide circulation around the country. In 1889 she became co-owner of the *Memphis Free Speech*, a small black weekly, and began using the paper as the chief forum for her condemnation of white society's treatment of blacks.

Then, on a March day in 1892, her life turned upside down. She was in Mississippi on business when she was handed a Memphis newspaper reporting the lynching of a black grocery store owner named Tom Moss. The circumstances of Moss's death, horrifying as they were, weren't particularly unusual: In 1892, a record 255 people were lynched in America. Most were black, and most of the killings were in the South. But for Wells, this was no routine story. She was godmother to Tom Moss's daughter.

Wells rushed back to Memphis and immediately wrote an editorial demanding that the killers be arrested and brought to trial. Everyone knew who they were, but they remained free. When it became clear to Wells that nothing would be done, she proposed a radical retaliation. Blacks, she declared in an editorial, should move out of Memphis. And, as whites watched in astonishment, they did just that—six thousand of them in only two months. White housewives began complaining about a shortage of cooks and maids, and white businesses that depended on black patronage were close to collapse.

Then Wells did something even more audacious. She turned the spotlight of her editorial page on the general subject of lynching. According to the white shibboleth, most black men who were lynched were "lustful brutes" who had violated white women. But Tom Moss had been killed because he had become too successful. His grocery store had lured customers from a white-owned store across the street, and the white grocer had collected a mob of armed men to drive him out. Moss and his co-owners, fighting it out with the mob, wounded three of its members, sheriff's deputies in civilian dress. The black merchants and several friends who came to their aid were arrested, the store looted and razed. Four days later, Moss and his partners were moved from the county jail during the night, taken on a switch engine to a lonely spot outside town, and shot to death.

What was going on here? Tom Moss was not a rapist, yet he had been lynched. Wells decided to investigate how many others like Moss there had been. She pored over court records, read old newspapers, tracked down witnesses—in short, delved deep into this vigilante form of justice, of which there had been more than a hundred examples each year since the first days of Reconstruction. According to widespread belief, such summary and awful executions were the only way to punish "the most terri-

ble crime on the face of this earth" and to deter other black men from fulfilling their heart's desire: "the opportunity to enjoy, equally with the white man, the privilege of cohabiting with white women." For close to two centuries, white men had preyed with impunity on black women in the South. Now they projected their desires, guilts, and behavior onto blacks. What if black men, flush with freedom and new political power, decided to sleep with—maybe even marry—*white women*? And, even more terrifying, what if white women acquiesced?

That was unthinkable, for in the Southern male psyche, the sacrosanct white goddess had become the symbol of white male supremacy—indeed, of the South itself. "Woman! The center and circumference, diameter and periphery, sine, tangent and secant of our affections!" declared one fulsome toast at a celebration of Georgia's centennial in the 1890s. In *The Mind of the South*, W. J. Cash wrote sardonically: "There was hardly a sermon that did not begin and end with tributes in [woman's] honor, hardly a brave speech that did not open and close with the clashing of shields and the flourishing of swords for her glory. At the least, I verily believe, the ranks of the Confederacy went rolling into battle in the misty conviction that it was wholly for her that they fought."

After the South's defeat, the confidence of white men in themselves, their native land, and the submissiveness of their women was unsparingly stripped away. Many women had stepped in to run businesses, plantations, and farms during the war, and when the men returned, they often discovered that their wives, sweethearts, sisters, and daughters were not the demure belles to whom they had bade farewell. For white men, there was a sense of impotence as a result of the humiliations of the war and what they saw as an emerging matriarchy. "I think there was a huge amount of anger on the part of Southern males—unspoken anger, probably unrealized anger—about all that," observed journalist Karl Fleming, a North Carolina native. "They felt their manliness had been destroyed."

For both white and black men, manhood also was inextricably linked to the holding of political and economic power. Thomas Rainey, a black congressman from South Carolina during Reconstruction, complained that white men retaliated against black men "[j]ust as soon as we begin to assert our manhood and demand our rights . . ." Black males made up the majority of the electorate in several Deep South states after the Civil War. If they actually voted in those numbers, they could control the tax assessor's office, the local courthouse—they could take over the South as well as its white women! "The closer a black got to the ballot box," one black writer observed, "the more he looked a rapist."

Interestingly, in the pre-Reconstruction South, black men were not widely viewed as dangerous brutes with prodigious sexual appetites, and they were rarely accused of the rape of white women—even during the war, when most white men were gone from home. When rape *was* charged, blacks were hardly ever lynched; they were given trials, which, for the most part, were conducted fairly. In more than a few instances, black men and white women became lovers and even spouses, and, while such liaisons were hardly accepted by white society, most did not meet with lethal retribution. The key, of course, was that, as slaves, black men were valuable property. Their lynching would mean significant financial losses for their masters, who, in any case, felt little threat from men over whom they had total control.

This attitude changed with the slaves' emancipation. Only after blacks were free did Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina declare that the black man was "a fiend in human form." Since blacks weren't property anymore, whites no longer had a financial incentive to keep them alive and healthy, nor did whites have the legal power to keep blacks in line. Once they were granted the rights of all Americans, black men, and any children they might have with white women, were seen as powerful threats. Now, if a black man fathered a white woman's baby, the child still would be considered black, but he would now have the right to inherit his white relatives' property. The specter of such potential competition for the South's wealth was as terrifying for its white male elite as any fears of sexual impotence. All this helped lead to the creation of the equally terrifying apparition of the black male rapist, which served to ensure the political and economic hegemony of white men, as well as to keep black men and white women rigidly separate—and subservient. "The killing may be done in our name, but the real reason is much deeper and has been there forever," observed Virginia Durr, a gregarious, strong-willed granddaughter of an Alabama slaveholder who turned to civil rights activism in the 1940s. "[A]nd that is the desire of one man to keep another man in bondage to him, so he may live at ease and the other man must do the hard work."

After the war, the fear of black rape spread through the white South like a virus, a fear that was accepted as truth even by reputable newspapers and magazines in the North. Writing matter-of-factly about "the new Negro crime," *Harper's Weekly* declared that in aiming for social equality, black men were losing "the awe with which, in slavery times, black men had learned to respect the woman of the superior race."

Despite the fact that the odds of a white woman being raped by a black man were, in the words of W. J. Cash, far less than being struck by light-

ning, the fear burrowed deep into the Southern psyche. White females were taught to be constantly on guard against black men. Black males were raised never to look a white woman in the eye, to step off the sidewalk when she came near, to avoid any close proximity to her—in short, never to do anything that would give her (or anybody else) the pretext for crying “Rape.” Any violation of the taboo could bring terrible retribution. Black men might be free in the eyes of the federal government, but the federal government would do little or nothing when white-hooded riders of the newly organized Ku Klux Klan carried them off into the night. Nothing would be done, either, when their bodies were found hanging from trees, smoldering in the remains of bonfires, mutilated beyond recognition, dismembered. Lynching victims were often castrated or otherwise sexually tortured, a reminder from their assailants that real manhood belonged solely to white men. (Black men weren’t the only victims of KKK rampages. Black women were occasionally lynched as well—and routinely raped.)

The lynchings, which continued even after the imposition of Jim Crow laws, served as powerful warnings to the black community as a whole that whites were still in charge, that any attempt at independence or rebellion would meet with a horrible end. Even if they never were the targets of lynching, even if they never saw one themselves, young blacks grew up in a climate of unrelenting fear and terror, knowing full well that they once again were under the white man’s heel.

After her three-month investigation into more than seven hundred lynchings, the facts uncovered by Ida Wells debunked the view that most blacks who were lynched were guilty of sexual assault. Of the cases she probed, only a third of those lynched had even been accused of rape. Many of the others had been killed for affronts to white superiority—acquiring money or property, attempting to vote, fighting a white man, talking back, refusing to obey an order. In some instances where rape had been alleged, what Wells discovered was even more of a bombshell. The so-called rapes had been liaisons between willing adults. After reading about a black man’s rape of an eight-year-old white girl in Indianola, Mississippi, Wells traveled there and found that the girl was eighteen and had visited the man frequently and voluntarily in his cabin. As Wells put it later, black men were being lynched for being “weak enough” to “accept white women’s blandishments.”

For a black woman to publish such revelations was all but suicidal in the South, and friends tried to warn Wells off. She was dragging into the light the South’s dirtiest and most deeply hidden secrets and fears, putting

the lie to its sexual myths. The South's rapists were not black men, but white. And it was the hallowed white belle, not the black female wanton, who sometimes found sexual pleasure with men of a different race.

Brushing aside her friends' warnings, Wells got her pistol, which she had bought after Tom Moss was killed, and put it beside her typewriter as she worked on an editorial for May 21, 1892. Eight Negroes had been lynched since the last issue of the *Free Speech*, she began. Three for killing a white man, and five for "the same old racket"—raping white women. Wells went on to report the sensational results of her investigation—that most black men were lynched for economic or political reasons, that others were killed for engaging in love affairs with consenting white women. "Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women," she declared. "If Southern white men are not careful, they will over-reach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction. A conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women."

Her editorial hit white Memphis like a lightning strike. One of the city's newspapers printed it on its front page, thundering in its own editorial: "The fact that a black scoundrel is allowed to live and utter such loathsome and repulsive calumnies is a volume of evidence as to the wonderful patience of Southern whites. But we have had enough of it. There are some things the Southern white man will not tolerate . . ."

It was fortunate for Wells that she was in Philadelphia on a long-planned trip when this thinly veiled call for her murder appeared. Spurred by the editorial, a mob of whites looted and burned the *Free Speech* office to the ground. Her co-owner barely escaped with his life, and Wells was warned that she herself would be lynched if she ever returned to Memphis. Thumbing her nose at the threats, Wells wrote a story providing proof of her claims, giving names, dates, places, and circumstances surrounding hundreds of lynchings. The *New York Age*, one of the nation's most influential black newspapers, printed the piece on its front page and distributed thousands of extra copies throughout the country. The story caused a sensation, planting the seed for what would soon become a full-blown international campaign against lynching. Wells was its Joan of Arc, touring the country and Great Britain, lecturing, investigating, organizing, and writing—in general, adding further fuel to the fire. Southern white men, "to justify their own barbarism . . . assume a chivalry which they do not possess," she wrote. "True chivalry respects all womanhood, and no one who reads the record, as it is written in the faces of the million mulattoes in the South, will for a minute conceive that the southern white man had a very

chivalrous regard for the honor due the women of his race or respect for the womanhood which circumstances placed in his power . . ."

Shortly before he died, an elderly Frederick Douglass wrote a letter to Wells saying: "Brave woman! You have done your people and mine a service which can neither be weighed or measured." A prominent black clergyman in Boston remarked of Wells: "She has shaken this country like an earthquake."

But no group was more energized than Wells's own generation of young Southern black women, come of age in the late 1800s, many born in slavery but young enough to have escaped some of the institution's emotional shackles. Articulate and assertive, they were much less inclined to submit easily to white domination, much more inclined, like Wells, to protest and fight back.

Like their mothers, these young women knew that for them the Victorian dream of womanhood—staying home, raising the children, being protected and sheltered—was precisely that: a dream. Just as in slavery, most blacks were mired in poverty or teetered dangerously close to the edge, and most black women had to work, along with men, in order to eke out even a bare living. But many in the younger generation had a precious opportunity not available to the women before them—the chance to be educated—and, urged on by their mothers, they grabbed it with alacrity.

In the antebellum South, schooling had been considered a privilege belonging to white males. White girls were rarely educated, and it was a crime to teach slaves of either sex to read and write. With the coming of emancipation, the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern church-sponsored organizations sent thousands of teachers to the South to start schools for blacks. Voracious for the knowledge so long denied them, black children flocked to the schools, spurred on by their parents, mostly their mothers, who saw learning as the gateway to a better life and the first step toward racial equality. When public education for blacks was cut back or abolished after Reconstruction, mothers worked day and night to pay for their children's education. "The men talk about it," wrote Frances Harper, ". . . but the women work most for it."

Mothers pushed both sons and daughters to complete basic schooling. But more often than not, daughters were the ones encouraged to go on to college—a reverse image of white society, where higher education was generally thought wasted on girls. A young black woman grew up knowing she probably would have to be self-sufficient, and a college degree allowed her to teach—the only realistic alternative to a life spent in domestic service or in the fields. Most other jobs, unskilled work and pro-

fessions alike, were basically closed to her. And there was more incentive for her to finish college than for her brother, who would have even fewer job opportunities demanding a college degree.

So young black women by the thousands, with a self-confidence and independence unknown to most white women of the time, poured their energies into education. They did so with the understanding that they were working for their race as much as or more than they were for themselves. In the process, many became social and political activists: Most of that era's prominent black women leaders started their careers as teachers or remained educators all their adult lives.

Just as in slavery, black women placed enormous importance on helping others within their community. Family and community relationships were always tightly interwoven, with people depending not just on their families for emotional, social, and economic sustenance but on everyone living around them. Eleanor Holmes Norton's memory of her own upbringing—"black children [being] raised, not simply by their parents, but by their neighborhoods"—was true in American black culture from the days of slavery. As black women fought for satisfying lives for themselves, they organized to establish schools, clinics, orphanages, homes for the elderly, lodging for women workers, and other social services. (In many communities, if it hadn't been for black women's organizations, there would have been little or no provision of social services for blacks, since white-controlled government and private agencies routinely ignored their needs.) Women's groups were formed to fight for better health care, housing, and education. And when Ida Wells began making headlines with her antilynching crusade, these young black women jumped into that fray as well.

In their activism, they were following the example of their early-nineteenth-century female forebears, and their example, in turn, would be followed by their daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters in the twentieth century. "I think that women's voluntary organizations have been in the forefront for whatever social change there is," Dorothy Height, longtime president of the National Council of Negro Women, declared in the 1970s. "The fact that this is a male-dominated society . . . indeed a white-male-dominated society, means that males are so involved in the systems and institutions . . . that they don't feel the need to do anything to bring about change. . . . As a black woman, I would have to say that it's been the women . . . who have dared to tackle the racial issues."

In 1896, black women coalesced around the issue of lynching as the result of a vicious attack on their character. Ida Wells had long been used

to such attacks: Most whites in the country paid little attention to her campaign or to her, except to cast aspersions on her character and morals. Northerners were often just as bad as Southerners, with even the sober, respectable *New York Times* chiming in to label Wells "a slanderous and nasty-minded mulatress" and to declare that a proclivity to rape was part of the nature of black men. But in 1896 the president of the Missouri Press Association went even further. In an assault on Wells, he wrote a letter calling all black women "prostitutes, thieves and liars." In an enraged response, more than a hundred local and regional organizations of black women joined together in forming the National Association for Colored Women, the first national black women's network. Realizing that the images of the black rapist and the sexually loose black woman were designed to rationalize white society's determination to keep blacks of both sexes under its heel, the NACW listed as two of its main goals the elimination of lynching and an end to the image of black women as morally defective.

As the first national black organization to focus on issues of racial discrimination, the NACW paved the way for the work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Urban League, and, eventually, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. As historian Paula Giddings wrote about these black women activists: "They had defended the race when no one else had. They had defended themselves when their men had not."

In the minds of many female activists in the 1890s, black men had fallen short in the fight for racial justice, doing little but talk about it. An editorial in the NACW newspaper, *Woman's Era*, urged "timid men and ignorant men" to stand aside. This was a "woman's age," NACW leaders felt, a time for black women to assume leadership in promoting the advancement of their race. Many black men, however, took emphatic exception. John Hope, the president of Atlanta Baptist College, for one, chided members of Atlanta women's clubs for their "brow-beating spirit" and the "caustic remarks" they had made about men, and charged the women with being "more masculine than feminine." Black men should be encouraged to assert their authority and demonstrate their masculinity, Hope declared, adding that "the surest way for our men to become more manly is for our women to become more womanly." In other words, women should focus less on assuming leadership in the fight against racism and concentrate more on supporting their men.

Hope's remarks reflected a tension between black men and women that had been growing since the Civil War and emancipation. During Reconstruction, the federal government had encouraged newly freed slaves to

emulate the gender and family roles of the country's dominant white culture, asserting that husbands should act as heads of their families and wives should be subservient and stay home with their children. Even though staying home was a financial impossibility for most black women, they still were expected to submit to their husbands' control. In 1855, a gathering of free black men had complained about how slavery had stripped away manhood from their brothers in bondage. "As a people," the men declared, "we have been denied the ownership of our bodies, our wives, home, children, and the products of our own labor." Once male slaves were freed, they sought to claim what they saw as those rights of ownership, particularly the control over black women to which white men had previously laid claim.

In the years following the war's end, the Freedmen's Bureau received frequent complaints from black women about physical abuse by both white and black men. When Frances Harper toured the South in the late 1860s, she reported, "Part of the time, I am preaching against men ill-treating their wives." And a black nurse wrote to a Northern magazine that "[w]e poor colored women wage-earners in the South are fighting a terrible battle. . . . On the one hand, we are assailed by white men and on the other hand, we are assailed by black men, who should be our natural protectors . . ."

Black women activists often paid a high personal price for their independence and assertiveness, pressured as they were to conform to Victorian standards of female respectability and subservience. In a diary she kept in her early twenties, the headstrong Ida Wells, for example, revealed a constant internal struggle between her desire for male companionship and attention and her reluctance to get married and give up her freedom. Her ambition and unconventional lifestyle (she didn't marry until she was thirty-two, to Chicago lawyer Ferdinand Barnett) made her the target of a number of scurrilous rumors, among them the stories that she was involved with a white man "for money" and that she'd had an illegitimate child. The rumors, she noted, were started by men.

Wells's outspoken leadership of the antilynching crusade in the 1890s also aroused masculine anger. Once, she said, she almost refrained from going to the scene of a lynching because of complaints from black men that she was stealing their thunder. "I had been accused by some of our men of jumping ahead of them and doing work without giving them a chance," she declared.

It was an accusation that would be revived in the late 1960s, leveled against Wells's female successors in the civil rights battle.

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Despite intense social pressure on them to be "proper ladies," many Southern black women had plunged wholeheartedly into the turbulence of political and social action by the turn of the century, and they were increasingly impatient with white women for not doing the same, particularly in the battle against lynching. "[W]hat a mighty foe to mob violence Southern white women might be, if they would arise in the purity and power of their womanhood to implore their fathers, husbands and sons no longer to stain their hands with the black man's blood!" proclaimed Mary Church Terrell, first president of the NACW, in 1904.

But only a few white women in the South would dare even think about violating one of its most rigid taboos and work together with blacks, let alone align themselves with blacks against white men. Indeed, after the Civil War, Southern white women were often more ardent than their men in bemoaning equality for blacks and in promoting the idea of the Lost Cause—the transmutation of the South's defeat into a romantic, heroic crusade. Throughout the South, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, an organization of rebel soldiers' female descendants, erected hundreds of monuments to Confederate fighting men on courthouse and state capitol lawns, emblazoned with the inscription "Lest We Forget."

Notwithstanding their taste of independence during the Civil War, many white women in the South were anxious to return to the world of their past. Instead of challenging the authority of husbands and fathers, they were content, at least outwardly, to return to the submissive life of a Southern lady. "The self-respect of the home-coming, defeated Confederate demanded that manliness be thus buttressed; moreover, in a very primitive sense, Southern women had to compete with each other for the men they outnumbered," according to Mississippi newspaper editor Hodding Carter. "Coquetry, charm, the ability to attract became practical necessities for the woman who sought a mate or would heal a husband's wounds of the body and the spirit."

When the battle for women's suffrage revived in the early 1900s, the movement's leaders, in an attempt to win the support of white Southern women, once again cast off their black allies. Ida Wells-Barnett, who had fought just as hard for women's suffrage as for an end to lynching, was ordered not to march in a massive woman's suffrage parade in Washington in 1913, for fear her presence might offend white Southerners. Defiant as ever, Wells-Barnett slipped into line with the Illinois delegation and marched anyway.

Efforts by white suffragists to gain Southern support, however, turned

out to be fruitless. The former Confederate states rejected the Nineteenth Amendment. Particularly frightening to white Southern politicians was the idea of black women being given the vote. "Experience has taught us that Negro women are much more aggressive in asserting the 'rights of the race' than the Negro men are," said Senator Tillman. Another archracist, Senator J. K. Vardaman of Mississippi, warned, "The Negro woman will be more offensive, more difficult to handle at the polls than the Negro man."

Determined to keep a tight rein on women, regardless of race, white male Southerners paid little attention to the evidence that a small minority of white women were, in fact, emerging from their cocoons. Like Northern women more than half a century before, they were doing so through their churches, even though most churches adamantly opposed any change in women's subordinate role. By the early twentieth century, Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian women had organized societies throughout the South to support foreign missionary work and help the poor and needy at home. Church leaders, only too happy to have women assume these responsibilities, would have been horrified to know they were giving women the tools to break the fetters of dependence forged in part by their own institutions. Finally allowed a voice, Southern white women, particularly Methodists, quietly set about exercising it, although they were careful to talk of their newfound freedom as the assumption of responsibilities, not of rights.

The Methodist Church was noted in the South for its concern for social issues, but its women members were much bolder in their social activism than the church itself. Methodist women's groups built and supported dozens of settlement houses for mill workers and coal miners, and created other social welfare institutions. They urged equal pay for women workers, the abolition of child labor, and aid for black education. And when the South's first interracial movement took shape in the 1920s, Methodist women were among its most vocal supporters.

The Commission on Interracial Cooperation, formed in 1919 after a spate of riots and lynchings, was, for its time, a radical social experiment—blacks and whites coming together to foster interracial understanding and dialogue and to fight racial violence. Initially, the CIC was a male-only group, with considerable resistance to the idea of including women, but the CIC's head, Methodist minister Will Alexander, quickly realized that if the organization was to have any chance of success, it must include those who actually were doing most of the work of social activism. In October 1920 the CIC Women's Council was formed, pledging itself to work for the end of both lynching and the sexual exploitation of black women.

For the first time, black and white women began meeting together in groups across the South, with whites getting an education from blacks on the sexual double standard and other consequences of racial oppression. Yet, dedicated as they might have been to improving racial understanding, both black and white women fumbled badly in the struggle to communicate with one another. They were divided by a chasm of expectation and experience that most, in the end, could not bridge. Regardless of their race, they also were trapped in a web of dissemblance, accustomed to hiding their true feelings behind a nonthreatening facade, unable, in the final analysis, to get much beyond what poet Adrienne Rich has called "the caricatures of bloodless fragility and broiling sensuality." Carrie Parks Johnson, the first head of the women's council, breathlessly revealed just how little she had known about black women: "I saw these colored women, graduates of great institutions of learning. I saw doctors, lawyers, poets, sculptors and painters. I saw women of education, culture and refinement. I had lived in the South all my life, but didn't know such as these lived in the land."

Black women were hostile toward white women for not taking more of a lead in fighting racial violence and discrimination, not realizing how much nerve it took for a Southern white woman during that period merely to espouse racial justice. And white women in the interracial movement were unable to shed fully their racism or their deeply ingrained feelings of superiority. While they opposed racial injustice, the CIC's whites did not advocate social equality between the races, and they believed that white and black women in the organization should work, for the most part, in parallel committees. When blacks and whites joined forces, black women sometimes were subjected to social indignities, including being told to enter meetings by the back door.

While the Commission on Interracial Cooperation deserves credit for its steps to organize a dialogue between the races in the South, no matter how halting or marred by bias, it achieved little of substance in its fight against racial violence. By 1930, one of the commission's white female leaders had decided to take matters into her own hands. Talk was fine, Jessie Daniel Ames believed, but it was far from enough. By nature, Ames was a woman of action. It was time, she resolved, for white women to accept the challenge flung at them for so many years by black women. Time for white women to confront their men openly about lynching.

The wife of an Army surgeon, Jessie Ames had been widowed young and left with three small children. As wife and widow, however, she had never

been a homebody. Involved in the fight for women's suffrage and racial justice from her early twenties, the red-haired Texas native referred to herself as "a born rabble rouser." Her children often felt "orphaned and neglected" by her work, she acknowledged, and she never made enough money to support them properly. She complained of being always in debt—"furniture mortgaged, car mortgaged . . . bank notes up to the hilt." But, in her single-minded view, all that paled in importance compared with the need to prevent lynching.

She had begun this work as a paid CIC field secretary in the Southwest, appearing before audiences who believed "that no Southern woman of fine sensibilities would speak the word 'lynching' in private, to say nothing of talking from a platform about it by name." Hate mail and gossip didn't stop her from speaking, nor did they stop her from conducting personal investigations of individual lynchings, much as Ida Wells had done more than twenty years before.

In 1928, Jessie Ames was put in charge of women's activities for the CIC, but she soon ran afoul of Will Alexander and the other male leaders, who had a hard time coping with a woman who did not fit the stereotype of a Southern lady. They considered Ames too assertive and domineering, too insistent on her own way. She, on the other hand, saw them as not aggressive enough in the antilynching battle. "The men were out making studies," she said years later, "and so the women had to get busy and do what they could to stop lynching."

Ames agreed with black women that she and other white women had a moral responsibility to fight lynching. Just as important, she felt, was the need to combat the *notion* underlying lynching—that killing black men was a form of chivalry toward white women. The idea that white women, powerless and weak, had to rely on white men to guard them from rape kept the women in line as much as it did black men. It was an idea that still permeated Southern society decades after Reconstruction. At the University of Alabama, for example, members of a prestigious men's honorary society still hewed to the custom of dimming the lights at their dances and carrying in a cart filled with ice. One of the members would then raise his glass and make the following toast: "To woman, lovely woman of the Southland, as pure and chaste as this sparkling water, as cold as this gleaming ice, we lift this cup, and we pledge our hearts and our lives to the protection of her virtue and chastity."

According to this idea, a woman's right to protection depended on her remaining an ice goddess. If she violated the Southern code of proper feminine behavior, she could no longer count on men galloping to her

rescue. Chivalry was "pressed like a crown of thorns against our heads," Jessie Ames asserted. Beneath its facade lay the belief of white men that "white women are their property [as] are Negro women."

The number of lynchings had declined considerably since the late 1800s, but every year black men were still meeting horrible, lawless deaths in the South. In 1930, an upsurge of lynchings propelled Ames into action. On November 1, she and twenty-five other white women activists, most of them leaders of church women's groups, gathered in Atlanta to form the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching. It was an event of profound social and psychological importance—a confluence of proper white Southern ladies rejecting their role as object and symbol, declaring their independence from the tyranny of the female ideal, mounting a public protest against the heinous crime supposedly committed on their behalf. "Public opinion has accepted too easily the claim of lynchers and mobsters that they were acting solely in the defense of womanhood," the new association's members declared. "Women dare no longer to permit the claim to pass unchallenged nor allow themselves to be the cloak behind which those bent upon personal revenge and savagery commit acts of violence and lawlessness."

Within months of the association's formation, state councils had formed in all fourteen Southern states, with thousands of women, most of them from small towns and rural areas, pledging themselves to take action against lynching. By the early 1940s, more than forty thousand women—the mainstays of Southern churches, who made cookies for bake sales and raised money for missionary societies and arranged flowers on the altars—had become ASWPL members.

This was a ladies' group without precedent. Instead of sipping tea and engaging in genteel conversation, they confronted Southern politicians, reminding them they now had the vote and were prepared to use it as a weapon. They sent telegrams to all Southern governors promising their political support if the governors used their "power and influence" to halt lynchings. Local sheriffs and other law enforcement officers were urged to sign pledges declaring they would do everything they could to prevent mob violence. When Southern members of Congress and other officeholders continued to argue that lynching was needed to stop rape, women showered them with letters and telegrams ordering them to "quit dragging the good name of Southern white women through the mud."

But association members didn't stop with words. Like Ida Wells, some of them turned investigative reporter, driving down rutted back roads in their hats, their white gloves, and their polite demeanor to interview wit-

nesses to lynchings that allegedly stemmed from assaults on white women. Quite frequently, they discovered there had been no such assault. Realizing that investigations alone, while rebutting the main rationale for lynchings, probably would not deter the killings, the women decided on a much bolder course. They would work to halt mob violence themselves, no matter what rationale was used to justify it.

Lynch mobs often let everyone know about their plans hours, and occasionally even days, before they took action—a fact that helped ASWPL women mobilize opposition. The women frequently were tipped off by newspaper and wire service reporters, who called them with news of impending lynchings. In one such case, an AP reporter phoned Jessie Ames on Christmas Day, 1934, to tell her that a mob was gathering in Georgia's Schley County to lynch a black man who had reportedly murdered a policeman. Ames, in turn, called Mary Addie Mullino, who lived in the county. Leaving her family in the middle of Christmas dinner, Mullino rushed to call the sheriff and everyone else she could think of who might be able to stop the violence. Not until she was assured that a lynching had been averted did Mullino finally leave the phone.

Not surprisingly, such unladylike behavior by the women of the ASWPL was often met with taunts of "nigger lover," attacks in the local newspaper, and threatening letters and phone calls. Some women, fearing that their husbands and families would try to stop their work, kept what they were doing a secret. Montie B. Greer, of Potts Camp, Mississippi, for example, didn't tell her husband about her lynching investigations, or the threats that followed, until long after she'd finished her work with the association.

And what were the results of this unparalleled campaign? By 1941, more than 1,300 law enforcement officers had signed antilynching pledges, and many of them had actually saved prisoners from mobs. In counties where association members flexed their muscle, the number of lynchings had declined far more dramatically than in counties where the group had no influence. Even though lynchings had hardly been eradicated, their main rationale—protecting white women from black men—had lost much of its social force.

But while Ames and the members of her group had shown extraordinary courage in their antilynching campaign, they, like the Southern white women before them, found it impossible, in the end, to transcend completely the taboos and shibboleths with which they had been raised. In the late 1930s and 1940s, the women of the ASWPL refused to lobby for a federal antilynching amendment, contending that it violated states' rights.

Defending the exclusion of black women from their organization, they felt that whites, not blacks, were the most effective instruments of social reform. While protesting racial injustice, they supported social barriers between blacks and whites.

Subversive in their early thinking and actions, these women had played an important role in the battle for human freedom, but they couldn't take it to the necessary next step. The stage had to be yielded to women who could.

Women like the two unlikely friends Pauli Murray and Eleanor Roosevelt.

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