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## Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases

*Ida Bell Wells-Barnett (1862 – 1931)*

Read by: James K. White and Laura Victoria      Language: English  
 Length: 1 hour and 7 minutes      Style: Collaborative  
 Genre: History, Afro-American Studies

Product Formats and Options				
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As owner and reporter for the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight* Ida B. Wells investigated numerous accounts of lynching that resulted from allegations of the rape of White women by Black men. She concluded that such allegations were fabrications used to justify extrajudicial executions that served to terrorize the Black community and that the accompanying hysteria was a way to conceal the real underlying motives of stifling Black political and economic progress, enforcing the second-class status of Blacks, and limiting the potential threat of competition and loss of power. She turned the narrative upside down, casting the alleged rapists as “poor, blind Afro-American Samsons” who were the victims of devious, mendacious “White Delilahs”. The term “Black Samson” and the use of the story as metaphor derives from an 1865 poem by Longfellow called “The Warning”, which casts the post-Civil War Black male as an “instrument of vengeance and a

cause of ruin”. The term “instrument of vengeance” also appears in “The Confessions of Nat Turner”, an 1831 account of a Virginia slave revolt. She published her findings in *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* in 1892. The failure of the federal government to intervene was interpreted as supportive of the efforts by the Southern states to deny free African Americans the basic rights and freedoms enjoyed by other Americans. Her work was published by Black-owned newspapers throughout the county, which led to the destruction of her office and presses and her move to Chicago. Thankfully, the work survives.

Ida Bell Wells-Barnett (July 16, 1862 – March 25, 1931) was an American journalist, educator, and civil rights leader who fought for equality for African Americans, especially women. She was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and was likely the most famous Black woman in America. She was born into slavery in Holly Springs, Mississippi and was freed by the Emancipation Proclamation within a year of her birth. She lost both parents and an infant brother to yellow fever in 1878 and went to work to keep the rest of her family together. She eventually moved to Memphis and became a teacher and co-owner of the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight* newspaper, where she reported on segregation and inequality. In the 1890’s, as Southern states began to enact Jim Crow, the practice of lynching alleged Black criminals was condoned and used to intimidate Blacks. When her reporting on the motives behind the terrorism of lynching was published nationally by Black-owned newspapers, a white mob destroyed her office and printing presses. A target of constant threats, she moved to Chicago, where she met and married Ferdinand L. Barnett and continued writing, speaking and organizing for civil rights and the women’s suffrage, founding several notable women’s organizations. Outspoken and often controversial, she traveled frequently on national and international lecture tours. She was honored with a special Pulitzer Prize in 2020 “for her outstanding and courageous reporting on the horrific and vicious violence against African Americans during the era of lynching.”