RACIAL LYNCHING, HISTORY, AND THE FILMMAKER’S CRAFT

A Roundtable Discussion of Stephen Labovsky’s
In the Dead Fire’s Ashes – The Lynching a Town Forgot
(Full Circle Studios, 2004)

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Introduction

The lynching of George White on June 22, 1903, on the outskirts of Wilmington, Delaware was an extraordinary event tied to the ordinary, everyday social world of black and white residents. White was an itinerant farm laborer who stood accused of the sexual assault and murder of Helen Bishop, a white teenager and the daughter of a prominent minister and schoolmaster. He was an outsider, the proverbial stranger with a criminal record, and she the paragon of innocence and virtue. These perceptions proved to be more powerful than any consideration of due process or the orderly administration of justice. In the days following Helen Bishop’s death on June 16, their private confrontation along a rural road took on an explosive public overtone.

At the appointed time, several thousand people gathered near the spot where Bishop had been accosted, and almost ritualistically burned White alive in a vengeful act of retribution that was
startling in its finality. "His nerve was good," one onlooker said of the victim, "and he held his head up while he addressed the crowd" in a plea to spare his life. Another bystander protested that despite his role in obtaining White's release from the county workhouse, he had been unable to secure a direct view of the ordeal. "Who's got a better right to see [him] fry than I," he asked a reporter on the scene? George White's last words were reported as, "Mercy, Master, Mercy!"

There were leaders and there were followers that evening, and an air of polite normalcy informed the mob as it went about its ghastly business. The orderliness of the crowd was perhaps its most macabre feature, coupled with the fact that no one protested as the grizzly scene reached its fateful climax. As was often the case in such so-called "spectacle lynchings," hundreds of people waited hours for the ashes to cool so they could retrieve a piece of bone or some other souvenir of the evening's festive fury. In its next-day coverage, one Wilmington newspaper sought swift closure with the summary declaration that the most serious crime in the city's history had been the murder of Helen Bishop and not the death of George White. This judgment spoke volumes about public attitudes toward the killing of George White; it was also an indication of how many local citizens would excuse the lynching itself.

Lynching is a topic of enduring fascination to historians and social critics drawn to the study of violence, race relations, and mob behavior. In the past two years there have been no fewer than five new books and a slew of scholarly and popular articles that either directly or indirectly deal with lynching. Furthermore, renewed investigations into the Emmett Till case (1955), the Birmingham Church bombing (1963), and the Neshoba County murders (1964), provide a fresh reminder of the legacy of racially motivated homicide in American history. On June 13, 2005, the United States Senate took the unprecedented step of offering a resolution of public apology for its historic failure to support federal anti-lynching legislation.

Though less familiar than other high profile cases that have gained notoriety, the lynching/murder of George White is freighted with significance. In that spirit, at its October 2004 annual meeting in Bethlehem, the Pennsylvania Historical Association gathered a panel of historians to discuss the incident and a new documentary film by Wilmington filmmaker Stephen Labovsky. Produced in 2004 and entitled In the Dead Fire's Ashes, the forty-minute film recreates the Wilmington lynching through a series of poignant contrasts that juxtapose archival photographs, on-air commentary, and historical reenactment
of the mob’s actions. With some elaboration, that panel discussion is reproduced in these pages.

_Pennsylvania History_’s editors recognize a local and a regional significance in the subject, and offer this roundtable presentation in the hopes of prompting a wider consideration of race, region, and rights in American history. Although the Wilmington lynching received national and international attention in the summer of 1903, the event and its aftermath bespeak a localism of the most extreme kind. The documentary and the commentaries it inspired offer an opportunity to think anew about history, race, and the filmmaker’s craft.

While the White lynching and the Labovský film have their roots in neighboring Delaware, the incident itself has direct ties to Pennsylvania. Both George White and Helen Bishop lived a good part of their early years in different Pennsylvania communities. Furthermore, Wilmington’s geographic and commercial orientation in 1903 looked northward toward Philadelphia, even if its racial attitudes were said to resemble more southern sentiments. Contemporary accounts drew an explicit link between the Bishop murder and other reports of alleged racial conflict in the Brandywine region, which extends northward toward West Chester and Coatesville, Pennsylvania. In some respects, the 1903 White lynching stands in relationship to the equally sensational 1911 lynching of Zachariah Walker in Coatesville, just twenty miles away.

Like its regional counterparts, Philadelphia newspapers provided extensive coverage of what one press termed “The Delaware Horror.” Replete with photographs taken at the scene, Wilmington and Philadelphia newspapers printed dozens of letters condemning or praising the White lynching. So too did the _Washington Post_ and the _New York Times_. Of no small note was the interest of the fledgling African-American press and reform-minded religious periodicals like _The Outlook_. Taken as a whole, these commentaries bring into relief the boundaries of racial discourse in the region and the nation during the summer of 1903.

It was left to the _Philadelphia Inquirer_ to capture what some thought the most surprising element of the story, namely the apparent geographic oddity of such an incident beyond the American South, where lynchings were more commonplace. Remarking on the episode, the _Inquirer_ referred to the murder of George White as a “real, genuine Southern stake-burning.” In truth, the lynching and its tortuous aftermath were deeply imbedded in the fabric of community relationships in Wilmington, and as such the entire episode
invites a reconsideration of well-established assumptions about race and regional distinctiveness in the Jim Crow era. Such evidence serves as a reminder that cultural norms and social behavior often transgress the artificial restraints of political boundaries.

My own interest in the White lynching dates back some ten years, and is part of a broader investigation into a cluster of brutal northern mob lynchings in the summer of 1903. (I should note that in addition to publishing several articles on the Wilmington episode, I provided commentary for the Labovsky documentary.) Over a five-week period in June and July, mobs stirred to action in such diverse places as Belleville and Danville (Illinois), Evansville (Indiana), and in Wilmington, and with remarkable similarity burned a black man alive. An astute reader will observe that these communities exist along a somewhat porous borderline separating North and South. In each episode, local citizens practiced a form of what Michael Pfeifer has called “rough justice,” an apt phrase meant to suggest an impatience with due process and the orderly administration of the law.

Each episode has its own peculiar features that recommend close scrutiny, and together they form a pattern that illustrates an unorthodox fusion of racial prejudice and democratic principles in the so-called Progressive Era. What most alarmed contemporary critics was the apparent escalation of northern rage just as the southern black migration began to intensify. In Wilmington and elsewhere, local opposition stymied attempts to bring the perpetrators to justice. In my own mind, such acts of collective violence raise unsettling questions about the nature of historical progress.

At its epicenter, the lynching of George White is a tragic tale filled with powerful emotions and conflicting ideologies, intimations of sexual misconduct and political intrigue, charismatic and confrontational personalities, and a clash of titanic proportions between civic and clerical leadership. This is a rich, compelling, and complex story that has its minor triumphs and its great failures. Two ministers stand out for me, especially as they mirror the divergent opinions on race and citizenship in Wilmington. Montrose Thornton, the ardent A.M.E. pastor who condemned the lynching and led a stirring public protest, and Robert Elwood, the charismatic Presbyterian cleric and versatile public speaker who encouraged the mob’s actions, are fascinating historical characters who were drawn into the storm of controversy. Actually, each man placed himself in its path in ways that advantaged his subsequent career. As the story played out over a year’s time, each side’s heroes betrayed their all too human shortcomings.
Ask big questions of little places, Charles Joyner has advised of the process of doing local history. The 1903 Wilmington lynching provides just such an opportunity for introspection and regional analysis. Filmmaker Labovsky’s *In the Dead Fire’s Ashes* concentrates on the lynching itself, with an effective use of scholarly commentary to hint at the broader context for particular events. Labovsky frames his story in a series of contrasting sounds and images. The result is effective and at times poignant: soothing pastoral music and florid landscapes clashing with the stark reality of the subject matter. *In the Dead Fire’s Ashes* is a humane film, meant to provoke dialogue, understanding, and even reconciliation. As judged by the favorable community response, the film is further evidence that the past is not dead, and through new media creative bridges can be constructed to address previous wrongs.

Randall Miller, Yohuru Williams, and Charles Hardy use the Labovsky film to offer reasoned judgments on a range of topics, not the least of which are racial lynching, historical memory, and the art of filmmaking. From a common source they proceed in quite different directions, and from different perspectives each historian asks big questions about the art and craft of doing history in different formats. Each scholar recognizes that for the historical incident and the present-day film, there is more to the subject than the mere sum of its parts. The roundtable concludes with an interview with Stephen Labovsky conducted by journalist Steven Rowland several months after the October 2004 session.

“One sees what one brings,” the historian Henry Adams quipped, and that is as true of these authors as it is of their readers. Engaging, thought provoking, and at times controversial, this roundtable discussion is itself a point of departure, offering *Pennsylvania History’s* readers a new feature and format for exploring Commonwealth history in its regional context. Each essay’s style is less formal and more conversational than the traditional scholarly essay, and though footnotes have been largely omitted, the authors’ observations are no less prescient and instructive.