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The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism
in Central Texas, 1836-1916, and: The First Waco Horror: The
Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP
(review)

Walter L. Buenger

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His organizational structure provides a clear account of when, how and under whom the campus grew or temporarily atrophied. He explains distinctive traditions such as the annual procession to Sam Houston's grave to commemorate both his birth and his contribution to Texas independence. One also learns that though the earliest leaders (Bernard Mallon, Hildreth Hosea Smith and Joseph A. Baldwin) had no previous associations with the new Sam Houston Normal Institute, seven of the nine subsequent presidents were either alumni or faculty prior to their selection. Though Cashion does not directly assess the importance of this legacy, few public institutions can claim greater local influence over institutional development. In sum, this is a book that will interest not only those with a personal interest in Sam Houston State University, but also those fascinated by the evolution of institutions.

San Marcos

RONALD C. BROWN

The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836–1916. By William D. Carrigan. (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2004. Pp. 324. Acknowledgments, map, table, photographs, epilogue, notes, appendices, index. ISBN 0252029518. \$35.00, cloth.)

The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP. By Patricia Bernstein. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005. Pp. 264. Acknowledgments, map, photographs, epilogue, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 158444162. \$29.95, cloth.)

These books by William D. Carrigan and Patricia Bernstein pivot around the ghastly lynching of Jesse Washington on May 15, 1916, in Waco, Texas. The brutal burning and prolonged torture, before a crowd of some fifteen thousand Central Texans, of this eighteen-year-old black man accused of the rape and murder of a white woman shocked Americans at the time and continues to number among the most notorious lynchings in the American South. As the title of his book indicates, Carrigan focuses on the events leading up to the lynching and on why a deeply religious and ostensibly civilized people accepted and participated in such barbarism. Bernstein, on the other hand, sets the stage in Waco, but focuses primarily on the impact of the lynching, on how it changed Waco and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Between them, the two authors provide the long view of both a searing single event and a common occurrence in Texas and the South.

Proponents of happy history will find Carrigan's book a useful corrective. This is not so much a history of the Washington lynching or even a standard history of lynching in the South. Instead, Carrigan explores how a tradition of violence and the memory of white citizen action outside the law underpinned the events of May 15, 1916. Focusing on the area around Waco and McLennan County, Carrigan begins at the Texas Revolution and includes chapters on the role of violence and brutality in the seizing of Texas from Mexico and Mexican Texans, the removal of Native Americans from Central Texas, the subjugation of black slaves and freed

blacks, extralegal white mob action against other whites, and the move toward the lynching of blacks only in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. His most original contribution to our understanding of lynching “is to focus on an underappreciated explanation for the persistence and power of mob violence in American history: historical memory” (p. 3).

Carrigan argues that how people remembered violent local acts encouraged them to behave violently and brutally and that this memory was to some degree collective and common among all whites of Central Texas. The manly seizing of Texas from venal Mexicans, the heroic struggle against savage Indians, the forcible disciplining and subjugation of subhuman blacks, and the ridding of the community of law breaking whites or simply whites outside the mainstream—these things and the glorified words and gestures used to describe and memorialize them made the lynching of Washington acceptable and logical to the majority of white Central Texans. Who needed to wait for the law to act slowly when the people’s justice could and should purify and protect the community?

Bernstein approaches the problem from the other end. Not only is she primarily concerned with what happened after May 15, 1916, she is less analytical and more descriptive. She focuses on what happened and the event’s consequences. Bernstein concisely describes thriving Waco on the eve of the lynching as a place with about as many saloons as churches. She offers a brief history of the rise of the NAACP and the background of the various people involved in the lynching, as well as investigating and publicizing it. In some ways Waco never recovered from the lynching that its white citizens often tried to simply ignore and forget. It certainly never grew to the size and prosperity its boosters predicted in 1916, and white townspeople never explained how a Baptist Mecca could be the site of the burning and sadistic torture of a slow-witted, young black man. The boisterous crowd in front of the charred corpse a local photographer recorded showed no remorse; and the only remorse most white citizens ever displayed was to regret that the lynching was bad for business and hurt the city’s image. The NAACP, as much as any other group, damaged the city’s image by bringing the Washington lynching to the attention of the American public and using it to marshal public support for their anti-lynching cause. They sent in a hired investigator, who secured photos, the names of the leaders of the mob, and the details of the court case against Washington. W. E. B. DuBois then used the pages of *The Crisis*, published by the NAACP, to spread the accurate story of the Washington lynching around the nation and the world.

Bernstein tends to blame individuals for the lynching. It was the fault of a cowardly sheriff eager to be reelected, of a weak judge unwilling to exert his authority, or of a spineless elite who failed to step in. In good journalistic fashion she wraps up the story by telling us what became of the central players in the drama. Still historians will want more. They will want to know why it happened—not just what happened, who did it, and what impact it had. They will want to know what broad social trends lay behind the Waco Horror.

Carrigan’s work contains numerous small nagging errors—voters replaced Sam Houston as president of the Republic because the constitution banned the serving of consecutive terms, not because his Indian policy was not brutal enough. Yet

Carrigan fills a gap left by the more precise Bernstein. Admittedly, his theories are open to question. While Carrigan contends that highly localized and much-celebrated memories of violent acts allowed lynching, the practice was not confined to Central Texas. Northeast Texas had just as many and as brutal lynchings. Georgia and Mississippi outstripped even Texas in the bestiality, horror, and frequency of lynching. Large crowds of eager spectators and participants gathered at other lynching sites, sites where the people had different memories. Still Carrigan does force us to reconsider why lynchings happened in specific places and at specific times. Taken together, then, these books by Carrigan and Bernstein offer as complete a description and analysis of the lynching of Jesse Washington and its causes and consequences as we are likely to soon get. They offer a convenient starting point for an exploration of the role of lynching in the life of a people who claimed to be law abiding, Christian, and civilized.

Texas A&M University

WALTER L. BUENGER