

New book recounts Waco lynching of 1916

By Steve Wisch

It is easy to glide past Waco if you're traveling to or from Austin on Interstate 35. Many stop there for gas or to grab a burger. The city has sprawled in recent years. A massive entertainment complex that abuts the Brazos River, and restaurants and hotels are visible and inviting from the highway.

What is not visible from the highway, nor discernible from a careful tour of Waco, is any memorial to a black teenager who was lynched and burned alive on the courthouse lawn on May 15, 1916.

Now, an important new book recounts this ghastly deed and explains its signal importance in the development of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People – known to all as the NAACP – the organization that spearheaded the Civil Rights Movement, which has literally transformed America in the last 50 years.

In "The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and

the Rise of the NAACP," Houston author Patricia Bernstein offers a detailed account of the white heat of mob violence run amok.

The year was 1916. Waco's population was approximately 30,000 and it was one of Texas' most prosperous cities. The cotton trade flourished and the city had more than 100 manufacturing operations. It sported the Lone Star State's first skyscraper – the 22-story Amicable Life Insurance Company. Known as the "City with a Soul," it was home to 63 churches, seven banks, nine railroads and four colleges (including Baylor University).

Yet, for all of its cultural pretensions, Waco, like much of Texas and the South, was a hotbed of racism. This simmering hatred lies at the heart of Bernstein's story.

Jesse Washington, a mentally retarded 17-year-old black teenager, stood accused of killing Lucy Fryer, a woman in her mid-50s. Mrs. Fryer and her husband owned a farm where Washington, with other members of his family, lived and worked. On the evening of May 8, Mrs. Fryer's body was found. Her head had been crushed. Blood stained her

clothing. Washington was arrested after blood was found on his clothing.

After extensive questioning, he confessed to the crime and revealed the location of the murder weapon – a hammer, covered with blood and cottonseed lint.

After his arrest, he fell asleep in the back of a car; community furor began building to the crescendo that would culminate in his horrific demise. The crime took place on May 8 and one week later, Washington had been tried, convicted, lynched and burned, his body desecrated as a vengeful mob competed for souvenirs, his body parts and clothing.

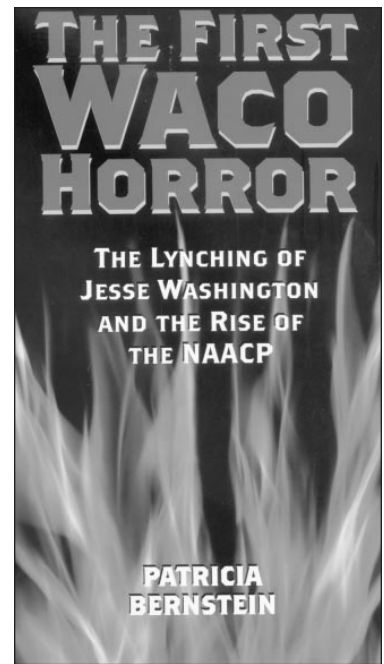
The trial was a sham, a true travesty of justice. By May 11, a grand jury convened and returned an indictment within 30 minutes. Just four days later, Washington's trial took place. Before the trial, a Waco newspaper predicted, "It is not expected that the trial of the Negro who is charged with this heinous crime will occupy much time."

Washington's trial took less than a day. Some 2,500 people crowded into the courtroom, hundreds more in the hallways

and courthouse grounds. An air of vigilantism permeated the proceedings. One man in the courtroom, fingering his handgun, said, "Might as well get him now." Another responded: "Let them have their trial. We'll get him before sundown..."

The trial began at 10 a.m. and lasted less than two hours. The jury deliberated for four minutes before convicting Washington. Pandemonium erupted. Washington was seized, dragged from the courtroom. Dragged into the courthouse square, he was butchered, burned and hanged for almost two hours. Between 10,000 and 15,000 people witnessed the lynching. No effort was made to stop the lawlessness. The mayor and police chief blithely watched from a window on the second floor of city hall.

The aftermath of Jesse Washington's lynching infused new energy into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Elizabeth Freeman, a white suffragette of enormous grit, went to Waco and conducted an investigation which was publicized in "The Crisis," the NAACP's journal. Newspapers



The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP, By Patricia Bernstein, Texas A&M University Press, 252 pp., \$29.95

across America and in Europe published stories about the lynching.

Bernstein's book renders a vivid account of a sordid episode in Texas history. And, it is a story that bears retelling. Only by remembering can we hope to muster the courage to confront the horrors of tomorrow.

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