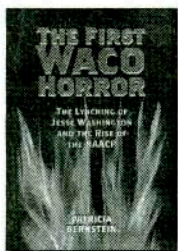


# Ghost of 1916 lynching still haunts Texas city



## The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP

Patricia Bernstein,  
Texas A&M  
University Press,  
\$29.95

Waco-area government has yet to make peace with scandal investigated by the then-fledgling NAACP

By Mike Cox

SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

I don't have the negative, but somewhere I still have the faded 8-by-10 print of the photograph my grandfather took one night in 1930.

Seventy-five years ago, my grandfather still used flash powder. But for this shot, lighting was not a problem.

Granddad sat his camera on a corner fence post, opened the shutter all the way, and took a photo that was lit by the fire beneath the body of the black man hanging by a chain from a tree in the North Texas town of Sherman.

Then city editor of the old Fort Worth Press, Granddad covered the whole sordid affair — one of the last public lynchings in Texas — for his newspaper. Never published, the image he captured on a plate negative showed a human form silhouetted by flame.

Fourteen years before the mob violence in Grayson County, another photographer documented a horrific lynching, this time in Central Texas. The photographer took six images of a young black man being tortured, burned and killed in front of as many as 15,000 onlookers in downtown Waco. Among the spectators were three men who should have been desperately trying to intervene: the city's mayor and police chief and the McLennan County sheriff, whose prisoner had been seized by a mob. Instead, they did nothing.

Commercial photographer Fred Gildersleeve didn't just happen on this frenzied, awful scene. Like many others, he knew it was going to happen — and he figured he could make a buck or two peddling prints after the fact.

But his images had another effect, giving the nation's fledgling civil rights movement stark evidence of America's racism. Years later, they inspired Patricia Bernstein, a Houston publicist, to write **"The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP"** (Texas A&M University Press, \$29.95).

# COX: African American who was lynched had already been given death sentence

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The Waco horror began with one family's horror: the May 8, 1916, murder of a McLennan County farm wife, 53-year-old Lucy Fryer. Her husband found her body inside their home; her skull had been crushed and she appeared to have been raped.

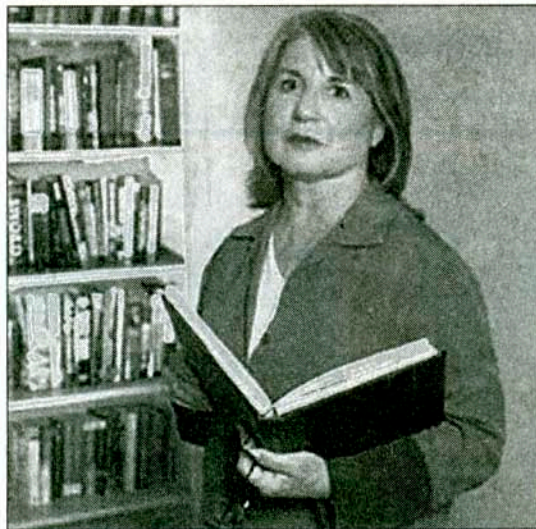
That evening, sheriff's deputies arrested 17-year-old Jesse Washington, a field hand who had been working only 250 yards from the Fryer residence. His clothes were bloody, but Washington said that came from a nosebleed.

Washington, who may have had mental retardation, eventually told officers he had hit Fryer on the head two times with a hammer and then raped her. He also told interrogators where he had hidden the hammer.

Justice was swift to the point of absurdity. Within a week, Washington was indicted, tried, convicted and sentenced to death. But the people of McLennan County were not content to let even this perverse system of justice take its course.

On May 15, before the judge had entered Washington's sentence in his docket, courtroom spectators rushed the bench and seized the teenage defendant. A sheriff's deputy went for his pistol but quickly thought better of it. Later, facing community ostracism, the lawman offered sworn affidavits that he had not tried to interfere with the mob.

Washington was hustled from the courtroom and stripped. Some later said he may have been castrated. Someone put a chain around his



Patricia Bernstein, author of 'The First Waco Horror,' says the area's elected officials have refused to take responsibility for the 1916 atrocity.

neck, and dragged him off to be tortured and burned alive.

Washington's legal hanging would have come soon enough. His young court-appointed attorneys, who had not even offered a final argument in his defense, did not intend to appeal the conviction.

Bernstein could have chosen any number of Texas lynchings to write a book about. An estimated 4,600 lynchings occurred in the U.S. from 1880 to 1930, nearly 500 of them in Texas. In fact, only Georgia and Mississippi had more impromptu executions attributed, as newspapers of the day often put it, to "Judge Lynch."

But the Washington incident was different. The fledgling NAACP sent a white suffragette, Elizabeth Freeman, from the north to McLennan County to investigate the lynching. Armed with her findings and Gildersleeve's grisly photographs, the organization turned the case into a national

scandal.

Bernstein spent five years researching and writing "The First Waco Horror." The result focuses a strong spotlight on a dark and all-but-forgotten chapter of Texas history.

Bernstein carries her story into the present, noting that nearly 90 years after the fact, a black Waco City Council member tried unsuccessfully in 1998 to get his colleagues to approve an apology for the lynching. Though Congress recently voted to apologize for failing to pass an anti-lynching law when it might have done some good, the powers that be on the Brazos have not yet been so inclined.

Still smarting from the media attention that the 1993 Branch Davidian incident brought to Waco, Council members preferred to let bygones be bygones. And a motion in the county Commissioners Court to put up a courthouse plaque providing details of the Jesse Washington incident died for a

lack of a second.

As Bernstein writes, "The old way of thinking seems to continue in Waco: Ignore the ugly past, don't talk about it, refuse to take responsibility for it, and it will go away."

Though Bernstein interviewed several Wacoans who still remembered the lynching, it won't be too long before any living memory of the incident is gone. But what happened that spring day is an indelible stain on the city and the era.

"The darkest crimes never seem to be forgotten," Bernstein writes midway through her book, in a passage that would have made a fitting conclusion. "They blight the locale where they occur. Buildings may be torn down and replaced, fields replanted, thousands of sweet, ordinary days may pass after the one day of monumental evil, but the shadow, however faded, lingers."

Mike Cox's column on Texana runs in the American-Statesman every month. [mikecox@austin.rr.com](mailto:mikecox@austin.rr.com)