

95th ANNIVERSARY OF DELRAY LYNCHING RECALLS LINGERING INJUSTICE

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“LYNCHING BEE REPORTED NEAR DELRAY CANAL; Official Report of Negro’s Death Not Received.”
“NEGRO TAKEN FROM JAIL AND LYNCHED BY MOB AT DELRAY”
“NEGRO TAKEN FROM DELRAY JAIL AND LYNCHED.”

These lurid headlines, from the *Pensacola Journal* (front page), *Tampa Tribune* (page 13-B), and *Palm Beach Post* (page 6-A) respectively, of Sunday, October 17, 1926, all introduced the same, and apparently the only reporting of the Associated Press coverage of a lynching murder had that occurred fully three weeks earlier in the article below, which raises many more questions than answers as to what occurred:

MIAMI, Oct. 16 – (AP) – Sam Nelson, alias Joseph Johnson, negro [sic], was taken from the jail at Delray and lynched near the city by unidentified persons on September 26, according to reports from reliable sources reaching here tonight.

No official announcement of the incident has been made, although a coroner’s jury was said to have investigated the affair and to have rendered a verdict that Nelson suffered “death at the hands of parties unknown.”

The negro was said to have been charged with attempted criminal assault on a white woman in Miami. On the afternoon of September 26, he was arrested by authorities in Delray, sixty miles north. The following morning the steel door of the jail was found battered open, and the negro gone. A short time later the body of Nelson, riddled with bullets, was found on the bank of a canal near the Military Trail, four miles west of Delray.

A jury was declared to have been empanelled, and to have returned its verdict to an unnamed justice of the peace. Miami police said tonight they did not recall an assault case of this kind, nor had they been informed of the lynching.

This incident takes its place in the grisly catalogue of that singularly American custom of human sacrifice known as lynchings, which claimed more than 4,400 reported African American lives -that-mattered alone between 1877 and 1950, an average of more than one per week in the nation for 73 years.

This statistic, be It noted for the record, does not even include all the of other ethnicities, nor the thousands of victims of anti-Black “race riots” and wanton massacres, nor the untold number of “racially” motivated murders that have not been recorded, nor the lasting impact of these incidents on the families and communities of victim and their subsequent generations, and these are only the incidents that actually resulted in deaths, not counting the numberless non-fatal injuries.

All of those factors make the remembrance of the lynching of Sam Nelson (or Joseph Johnson) 95 years ago this month all the more significant today, precisely because it is a case about which so much more is unknown than known (as the news coverage, fully three weeks after the incident, made clear, even then), and which continues to raise more lingering questions than answers which we may never find,

and therefore it represents the much larger picture that lynching embodies in this nation's history, which continues to haunt us today.

Although the specific (yet unspecified) circumstances are, as in all lynchings, quite unique regarding the arrest and jailing of Mr. Nelson in Delray on a Sunday afternoon on very questionable charges, after which a mob was allowed to batter open the steel door and leave his bullet-riddled body to be found the next morning four miles away, the case is also quintessentially typical of America's lynching culture, sharing such notable common denominators as the open complicity of law enforcement officials, and the always inevitable verdict that the crime was done by persons unknown, in spite of there having been hundreds of witnesses present.

Proverbially "Justice deferred is justice denied," but this does not mean that justice is not still deserved, for Mr. Nelson and for all freedom-loving humanity, even 95 years after his death.

With the carefully contrived absence of records (and even information at the time) we may indeed never know who was responsible for the killing, or even who exactly was killed, but those uncertainties are exactly why this incident must be memorialized (along with Palm Beach County's other recorded lynching, of Henry Simmons in 1923), and not ever forgotten, even as efforts must continue to investigate what might possibly still be found.

Such efforts, now under way, are today even more important than ever, as we witness blatant efforts by state legislatures, and school systems, and others to deprive our current and next generations of students of their birthright to know the true and complete history that has made us who we are.