

The White Caps:

A Case Study of Violent Resistance to Social and Moral Change in the United States

By Charles C. Isaacs

Indiana University Southeast

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Introduction

Beginning in the 1870s, multiple secret vigilante groups were formed across the United States to violently resist the changing social and moral standards of the country. These groups, collectively known as White Caps, originated in Southern Indiana, and later spread across the United States in the last part of the nineteenth century, committing brutal acts of terrorism against anyone whom the group deemed a threat to the moral and social standards of their specific community. This paper will argue that these White Caps style groups do not fit into our traditional understanding of white extremist groups in the nation during this time. These White Caps groups, did in fact, count another racial group among its ranks, and their identity was based more on resisting social and moral changes, rather than focused directly on violence toward minorities in United States.

The United States in general has a lengthy history with groups of extremists. In fact, in many ways one could argue that the United States itself was founded by a group of extremists. Certainly, the founders of this great nation were extremist in their thinking and were individuals not willing to sit idly by and watch the British Empire enforce its will upon its colonial possession in North America. Today, we are witnessing yet another rise in extremism in the country, coming from the far sides of both political spectrums in this country. The media would have one believe that the violence being perpetrated by these groups in our communities is something that is unprecedented in the history of the United States. This idea could not be farther from the truth; in fact, the violence around the country that occurred with these so-called White Caps groups was far worse than what we have witnessed in recent history. As with much of the

violent extremism the United States has experienced at the hands of fringe groups, it occurs on the precipice of, and I argue because of, great looming social change within this country.

The country was going through a revolution of sorts in the later part of the nineteenth century. It was a time of great social and industrial change in this country. The country had just emerged from the bloodiest conflict in the history of the North America, in the form of the Civil War. The South had lost, and the country was trying to re-build itself ,both physically and mentally. The country was coming to terms with an unimaginable loss of life during the war but also with the assimilation of formerly enslaved African Americans into the post-war society. The subject of the formerly enslaved is one that further strained the country, particularly in the South. The subject of race does play into the narrative of the White Caps, especially as the movement moves into the southern portion of the country. Are the White Caps ever motivated by race? Yes, there are instances where race motivates the actions carried out by the White Caps. This occurs in at least a few instances in Indiana, with documented cases occurring with the group in Harrison County and that continued as the movement moved into Sevier County, Tennessee, and further into the Deep South. Although race does play a factor in some attacks, it is hard to label White Caps, in general, as a white supremacist group or movement although some of its members were certainly motivated by such beliefs.

In fact, from the evidence, groups of White Caps predominantly targeted whites. Furthermore, the White Caps in the southwestern part of the United States were Hispanic and attacked whites who threatened the social norms of their community. While it is impossible and would be incorrect to say that the White Caps were not in some cases motivated by a view of white supremacy, the research, at this point, suggests that these groups were more interested in

morality and protection of the status quo of the community rather than terrorizing African Americans and other minorities living in the United States at the time

Groups of White Caps were more concerned with upholding the social and moral standards of their respective communities. In many of the early accounts, the activities of these White Caps were beneficial to the overall well-being of the community where they operated. The White Caps find their beginnings in the 1870s and existed into the early twentieth century. This was a great time of change in the United States, particularly where these groups operated. The United States was evolving into a modern society. The country was giving birth to a new age of industrialism that would push it further and further away from the agrarian based society it had been for so long. The telegraph, along with locomotive technology, was connecting the country in ways never dreamed of before. Along with these technological advances came new social changes that threatened many of the moral views of the country. Change inevitably causes fear and fear, in many cases, leads to drastic action.

Historiography

In comparison to academic works of the subject of white supremacy and groups of white supremacists, there has been little written concerning White Caps. The majority of what has been written to date has been approached in either in scholarly journals or in theses to satisfy doctoral requirements at various academic institutions. There is extremely little information provided in book form or in other formally published works.

The earliest records of White Caps in the United States come to us in the form of newspaper articles reporting on the group's activities. However, in 1899, E.W. Crozier wrote a book concerning the history of the group in Sevier County, Tennessee, titled *The White Caps: A*

History of the Organization in Sevier County which recounts many of the events that transpired in the region in the 1890s.¹ It is arguable that this book was written as a denunciation of the group's activities in Sevier County, Tennessee, by a resident who disapproved of the group's actions. The book details many of the more violent exploits of the group and how they were eventually brought to justice. In fact, given that it was written at the height of the White Caps actions, with many members still awaiting trial for some of their nefarious deeds, this book is considered a primary source for this research.

Perhaps one of the more influential works to date on the issue of White Caps and the groups genesis in Southern Indiana is a 1973 doctoral dissertation by Madeline M. Noble, for the University of Michigan, titled "The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County, Indiana: A Study in the Violent Enforcement of Morality."² This doctoral thesis covers many of the acts committed in the early years of the White Caps movement in Southern Indiana. It discusses its formation, decline, and eventual end in a violent confrontation with two of its targets. The work offers many interesting facts not only of the group but also some of the reasons given for the group's actions. Aside from documenting the historical actors and events committed by the White Caps, Noble's doctoral thesis also contains one of the key elements to understanding who the White Caps and that is the group was largely motivated by social issues in the community. Although the group's dress and tactics are like the early Ku Klux Klan, they are two separate organizations with differing agendas. Noble wrote that "the Klansman attacked Negroes and white republicans from the north[sic] who threatened to undermine the whole southern way of life, while white caps turned against ne'er-do-wells and moral offenders, most of whom were

¹ E.W. Crozier, *The White Caps: A History of the Organization in Sevier County* (Knoxville, Tennessee: Bean, Warters, & Gaut, 1899).

² Madeline M. Noble, "The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana: A Study in the Violent Enforcement of Morality" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1973)

white, as the main threat to the way of life they wished to preserve.”³ This far from excludes them from racial attacks on African Americans during the period; they did attack African Americans in Sothern Indiana based on racial identity.

Another source of information on the White Caps was a book titled *The White Caps of Harrison County... and More*, published in 2011 and written by Karen Schwartz, in association with the Harrison County Historical Society.⁴ While this book’s general focus is the local history of the group, it does touch upon later White Cap movements in the United States. This includes elements of the White Caps in Sevier County, Tennessee, and the White Caps in the American Southwest, known as las Gorras Blancas. The book’s strength lies in the fact that it is useful as an accounting of many of the group’s known activities in Southern Indiana. Schwartz goes so far as to chronologically detail the group’s activities in Harrison County.⁵ Another interesting facet of the book is the attempts by the author to link the formation of the group to Indiana’s history of regulator style groups and vigilantism. The author offers evidence on this throughout the book, going so far as to detail numerous accounts of vigilante and mob justice having taken place in the years preceding the formation of the White Caps.

This paper fits into the historiography of the subject of White Caps and social and moral violence by linking the regional movement of White Caps to a common cause, that of maintaining the social and moral attitudes of their respective community. From the evidence, White Caps were never a nationally organized movement. Each group worked for its purpose and never had any intentions of a national purpose. Secretive in nature, these groups worked to

³ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 80.

⁴ Karen Schwartz, *The Harrison County White Caps... and More*, (Evansville, Indiana: M.T. Publishing Company, 2011).

⁵ Schwartz, *The Harrison County White Caps*, 133.

secure the sanctity of their community as they saw it. This paper will utilize the primary sources from the time to link these groups and utilize secondary sources such as books, dissertations, and journal articles to analyze the groups actions throughout the United States. While not connected, this paper will show that they shared common interests, tactics, and social morals that they felt were being threatened by a changing society around them. They were willing to protect their worldview no matter the cost to the offenders.

Who are the White Caps?

The practice of White Capping was not isolated to Southern Indiana alone. In fact, there are numerous mentions of White Cap style attacks occurring across the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century as word spread of other groups. It appears that White Caps in general were not an organized cohesive confederation of vigilantes roaming the United States. The research does not suggest that there was ever a broad national movement, with groups working in a concerted effort to reign in immoral behavior and other violations of accepted social behavior. There was regional cooperation, between groups, as demonstrated in some of the accounts from Southern Indiana. This cooperation, I would argue, stems not from the organization that one would associate with modern extremist groups but derives from familial and social relations within rural communities. Thus far, there has been no evidence uncovered or brought forward in this research to suggest that White Caps cooperated across regional lines. White Caps in Indiana were not organizing with groups in Tennessee, nor does it appear that White Caps from Tennessee were involved with East Coast activities. From viewing the evidence, one would have to conclude that in general, the White Caps were merely concerned with policing their little corner of the world.

So how did the movement spread? It is more than likely that word spread via the most widespread form of public information of the day: the newspaper. Newspapers were the main form of media from which the people of the United States got their information about the larger world beyond their communities. As technological advances such as the telegraph were made in areas, more information was shared with others, and reports spread farther and faster. As it is today, the more sensational news accounts spread faster. Certainly, masked men, riding by the light of the moon, whipping those they saw as threatening their communities would have qualified as sensational. Violence sold newspapers; the White Caps went viral.

Hoosier Origins

The style of violence that came to be associated with groups known as White Caps has its origins in rural Southern Indiana in or around the years of 1872 to 1873. The group originates on the premise that these individuals had a “desire to keep a tighter rein locally on evil-doers and moral offenders.”⁶ In the case of Crawford County in Southern Indiana, the groups’ early outrage appears to be directed at those individuals the group judges to have been acting inappropriately according to the unspoken social and moral standards of the community. Yet what are those standards? One gets the sense from the various acts committed by these White Caps that these violations related to those acts deemed inappropriate to the religious attitudes of the period and also what the traditional social standards of the community would have dictated.⁷ In “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” Madeline Noble documented offenses such as “drunkenness,” “treated elderly father cruelly,” “not providing for family”, and “ran away with neighbors wife.”⁸ One encounter with the White Caps in Crawford County list one

⁶ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,”.96

⁷ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 177-190.

⁸ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 180-182.

“Mrs. Sarah Dunbar” having been visited by the White Caps because she “did not keep a clean house.”⁹ While the reasoning behind the visit may strike modern society as rather odd and petty, it is important to keep in mind the historical context of the period. The accepted social order of the period was that women were to stay at home and tend to the needs of the family, in particular, the home, husband, and their children. Any deviation from the social order would have been viewed as immoral and met with contempt by the community. In fact, many of the cases involving the White Caps revolve around family matters. In a time before a modern welfare system, the importance that was placed on caring for one’s family and extended family far exceeds present day notions. The sanctity of the family unit was enforced by the morals of the day, the community, and the White Caps.

In many ways the White Caps protected those who could not protect themselves. In the highly patriarchal society that was nineteenth century America, abused women and children had nowhere to turn. In 1889, the author John S. Farmer wrote of the White Caps that it was “a mysterious organization in Indiana” that was “trying to correct and purify society a work for which they so not consider the machinery of the law adequate.”¹⁰ The lack of laws to protect women and children, especially in rural areas, often fell to the judgement of the community. One article appearing in the *New York Times* article mentions a case where the White Caps came in defense of those who could not, as with the case of Aron Bitner “ a wealthy farmer over 60 years

⁹ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 182. ** The citation from Noble list this report as appearing in the August 25, 1888 edition of *The Indianapolis Journal*, page 2. To date I have been unable to locate the original publication of this incident in the primary sources.

¹⁰ John S. Farmer, *Americanisms, Old and New: A Dictionary of Words, Phrases, and Colloquialisms Peculiar to the United States, British America, the West Indies, Etc., Etc.: Their Derivation, Meaning and Application, Together with Numerous Anecdotal, Historical, Explanatory*[S.I] (London: Privately Printed by T. Poulter, 1889), 557.

old,” who was whipped for physically abusing his seven-year-old stepson to the point of near death.” As the article states -

A week ago the boy got into trouble again and the story is that Bitner took him out to a shed to punish him. The reporters informant said that 15 minutes afterward the boy’s mother became alarmed and went to see how the punishment was progressing. To her horror she beheld her son hanging from the rafter with a clothesline around his neck. Near by [sic] stood her husband with a fiendish look upon his face. The mother screamed for help, which soon arrived, and after much difficulty the half dead boy was restored to life, but he had a narrow escape, and even now is very ill from the effects of his terrible experience. The story of the alleged brutal outrage was soon noised about, and on Monday about 20 masked men rode into town and, taking Bitner, gave him the whipping he so richly deserved.¹¹

The article goes on to say that very same night, the 20-man group handed out a similar punishment to an Esquire Hildebrand for threatening to kill his wife and daughter.¹² Incidents involving the mistreatment or even suspected mistreatment of family members was a sure way to draw the ire of the White Caps operating in Southern Indiana at this time.

In looking at the evidence, one could arrive at the conclusion that, in more than one account, the community in general supported the efforts of the White Caps. An article appearing on the front page of the *Boston Daily Globe* in April of 1888 recounts the exploits of the

¹¹ “The Indiana White Caps: A Gang of Vigilantes Who Use the Whip Freely. The Story of Their Brutality as Told by a Victim – They Woke Up the Wrong Person Once,” *The New York Times*, October 12, 1887,2.

¹² “The Indiana White Caps,”2. (ProQuest)

Crawford County White Caps and notes of the group that “they had been doing good in the counties all around here for some years.”¹³ The article further goes on to say that some of the more reputable citizens of the county had it seems “propose to act as conservators of the morals of their unscrupulous neighbors.”¹⁴ In fact, in the majority of the reported cases, morality or the protection of the social equilibrium of the community was the basis behind the issuing of warnings and for acts of violence perpetrated upon certain individuals. In many of the articles, especially in the early years of the movement in Southern Indiana, it appears that the only community outrage at the group activities stem from instances where an “innocent” was whipped or the group arrived at the wrong residence and disturbed the tranquility of those who lived there.

In conducting the research for this paper, I was unable to discover any indication that there was an officially distributed or published set of community rules by these groups for the citizens to follow. There is evidence from the primary sources that written warnings were given. In one case the following notice was pinned to a post at the railway station in the community of Mott Station, Indiana, which read –

Notice- Phil Zeiner, Harvey Emily, John Long, and Robert Mott, the whiskey ring, had better quit the way they are a-doing. If they don't they will be taken out and whipped. Bob Mott had better leave the country. WHITE CAPS.¹⁵

From the available evidence and from scholarly works written about White Caps, it seems for the most part, after word got out on the White Caps willingness to resort to violent measure to convey their desire for an individual to conform to their wishes, a warning from the

¹³ “White Caps: Vigorous Moral Reform in Indiana. Whipping Wife-Beaters and Thieves,” Boston Daily Globe, April 23, 1888, 10. (ProQuest)

¹⁴ “White Caps: Vigorous Moral Reform in Indiana,” 10.(ProQuest)

¹⁵ “The Indiana White Caps,”2. (ProQuest)

group was all that was needed to ensure social conformity. These warnings in many cases both in Southern Indiana and later nationally came with a warning for the alleged offender to leave the community entirely.

In reading some of the listed reasons behind the attacks, it is plausible to conclude that the local press was fearful or perhaps even in league with these White Caps. This may be one explanation for the apparent infrequency of and in many cases lack of reporting on the group's activities early on in Southern Indiana. One finds that the group's activities were more widely reported in non-local media forms. It is in newspapers of the regional urban centers that you begin to see reporting on the activities of the White Caps. In a report attributed to *New Albany Public Press* in May of 1887, it was written that Samuel Perkhiser, a resident of English, Indiana, located in Crawford County, received a warning from the White Caps due to him being "outspoken against the caps." If a private individual received a warning for outspokenness in the community against the organization, it is feasible that the newspaper editor would have garnered the groups attention as well. Many of the reports appeared not only in the large regional newspapers of the period but nationally as well, with many appearing in the *New York Times*. White Caps in Southern Indiana continued with this basic trend of their version of social and moral justice into the 1890s. Yet, as the group went on, they became increasingly violent, and the scope of their justice drifted to the more extreme. In the case of the Harrison County White Caps, a turn from social and moral justice to outright vigilante mob in the spring of 1893, would see to the groups eventual demise in that part of the country.

The event that Madeline Noble would describe in her dissertation as the “Conrad Hollow Tragedy,” began on March 9, 1893.¹⁶ As another historian details, “The body of John Edward Conrad was found near his home on Mosquito Creek, near the Ohio River bottoms.”¹⁷ A subsequent investigation would lead to Mr. Conrad’s sons, Bill, and Sam, being accused of his murder. It was known or at least widely reported that the two Conrad brothers physically abused their father frequently, at the behest of their mother Elizabeth. Both sons were arrested, but the charges were later dismissed due to lack of evidence.¹⁸ The White Caps became subsequently involved as “the Conrads had been judged guilty of their father’s murder by all their neighbors and nearly everyone in the county, despite the grand jury’s dismissal of all the charges against them.”¹⁹ The Conrad family, whom the White Caps had singled out as troublemakers, “began receiving warnings from the white caps [sic] to leave the county, which they refused to heed.”²⁰ The community wanted the Conrad family gone from Harrison County, by any means necessary. The White Caps would seek their justice on the Conrad boys, yet the Conrads had other plans.

Perhaps one of the best pieces of evidence that the White Caps of Harrison and Crawford counties, as well as other parts of Southern Indiana, were accepted by the community in general, is the fact their raids were never seriously challenged by the community. Noble sums it up succinctly with the following statement: “that a major ambush of white caps [sic] did not occur in either county until 1893, twenty-years after the inception of the order, was, in itself, remarkable.”²¹ The White Caps had finally taken on a pair of individuals who were more than ready to meet violence with violence and on the night of August 6, 1893, the White Caps met

¹⁶Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 126.

¹⁷ Schwartz, *The Harrison County White Caps*, 196.

¹⁸ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 127.

¹⁹ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 127.

²⁰ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 129.

²¹ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 127.

their match. The front page of *The Indianapolis Journal* for August 7, 1893, read “ THE CONRADS’ DEADLY GUNS,” along with “FOUR WHITE CAPS KILLED,” with a smaller headline below reading “ Two Men with Shotguns Laid for a Band with Fatal Effect.”²² The White Caps had come to the Conrad farm that night looking for their justice and found their end. The two Conrad boys were waiting in the woods above the Conrad cabin and “opened fire” on the group killing five White Caps in total and maiming several others.²³ The group retreated and soon after the Conrad family crossed the river into Kentucky.²⁴ Things got worse for the White Caps.

Community support seemingly evaporates over night for the group. Interesting though support wains not for the sake of the Conrads but over the fact that the White Caps did not aid their fallen comrades, many of whom were prominent citizens.²⁵ The August 11, 1893 edition of *The Indianapolis Journal* reported of the members of the White Caps ‘They were all prominent and respected citizens, and in good circumstances financially.’²⁶ In a letter to *The Indianapolis Journal*, the following was said :

Dear Sir – You had better to tell those people to let those Conrad boys alone or there will be ---- to play. They did what any one else would [sic] do; that is, to take care of yourself. Conrad Bros. can get 25 good stayers. So White Caps look out and let

²² “The Conrads’ Deadly Guns,” *The Indianapolis Journal*, August 7, 1893,1.(loc.gov)

²³ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 130-134.

²⁴ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,”132.

²⁵ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,”132 ; “How the White Caps Fell,” *The Indianapolis Journal*,” August 11, 1893,5. (loc.gov).

²⁶ “How the White Caps Fell,” *The Indianapolis Journal*,” August 11, 1893,5. (loc.gov)

other people alone. Let the law take its course. So White Caps had better beware of 25 stayers. Can come at any notice. So look out.²⁷

The White Caps were finished in Harrison county and in Indiana soon thereafter as word of the Conrad affair spread. They had lost the support of the local community and certainly any support they had abroad. Had the White Caps not sought to meddle in the justice system and just stuck with social and moral issues, would they have remained a relevant force in the community? It is hard to say, but regardless they were finished but the ideals and tactics of the group had already spread to other parts of the United States.

Down South

As previously mentioned, violence by White Caps was not limited to one specific area of the country. As word of the activities spread, it appears that others in and around the country began to adopt and copy the actions carried out in Southern Indiana. Many of these instances of attacks would have qualified as copy-cat style forms of violence, but others became actual organized clusters of White Caps. Perhaps most famous are the accounts are those coming out of Sevier County, Tennessee. The activities of the White Caps in that area of the country started out just as those in Southern Indiana; however, this group began to set itself apart in many ways from other White Caps groups. The group in Sevier County would differentiate itself not only in its openness in the community and its resistance to the established law and order of the community but also, in its level of violence meted out against those it saw as immoral or, in its final years, standing in its way.

²⁷ "How the White Caps Fell," The Indianapolis Journal," August 11, 1893,5. (loc.gov)

Today, Sevier County, Tennessee is known for its beautiful resort towns of Gatlinburg and Pidgeon Forge at the base of the Smokey Mountains. Yet, 130 years ago it was buzzing with White Caps. If you have ever visited this beautiful area of Tennessee, you yourself have stood in the backyard of perhaps one of , if not the most, violent, and ruthless groups of so-called White Caps that operated in the United States during the nineteenth century. In 1899, a publisher by the name of E.W. Crozier wrote a book detailing numerous acts committed by the White Caps of Sevier County titled *White- Caps: A History of the Organization in Sevier County*. In his book, Crozier works to uncover the origins of the group in the region and show how it progresses from a secret group dedicated to principles of protecting the social and moral norms of the community to one of outright lawlessness and in some ways on the verge of rebellion. Crozier writes that “About the year 1892, certain communities in Sevier county had become infested with lewd characters whose conduct was very obnoxious to the good citizens, and after repeated, but unsuccessful efforts by legal methods to punish these evil-doers in the courts, the good citizens became disheartened, feeling that the law was not furnishing that protection to society as it should.”²⁸ Hence, the White Caps took matters into their own hands to “protect” society.

The circumstances surrounding the formation of the Sevier County White Caps is very similar to the reported reasoning for the formation of the Harrison County White Caps in Southern Indiana. In Noble’s dissertation on the White Caps of Harrison and Crawford Counties, it makes mention of a letter from 1881 that was sent to the *New Albany Daily Ledger*, which attempted to defend the actions behind certain White Cap raids.²⁹ That letter mentions that the law was unable to properly protect its citizens and that “many of the better citizens were driven

²⁸ Crozier, *The White Caps*, 10.

²⁹ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 67.

to abate a nuisance.”³⁰ Likewise the “better” citizens of Sevier County Tennessee felt the same need to protect themselves against the threat they saw encircling them. In Crozier account of the matter, “ A few persons, who, if not the best citizens, were nevertheless, recognized as law-abiding men, an agreement was reached to notify in writing such immoral characters as they wished to get rid of that they must leave the community within a certain time or they would be punished by a severe whipping laid upon their backs with hickory withes.”³¹

From Crozier’s account, one could get the sense that White Caps groups operating in and around Sevier County were accepted if not welcomed by the community at first. While Crozier’s book tends to focus its narrative on the more extreme acts committed by the group in later years, it does make mention of some of the moral and social infractions that brought about the group’s wrath. Crozier notes that the first raid made by the White Caps that takes place in Sevier County was against a group of “lewd women living in Emert’s Cove in the upper end of Sevier County.”³² The author goes on to further state that “some half dozen women were whipped by masked men and notified to quit the community at once or like punishment would follow with increased severity.”³³ The women chose to move out of the county to which the author reports the community was in approval.

Crozier also lists that other instances of White Caps attacking citizens resulted from cases of alleged adultery to woman acting “impure.” In fact, by Crozier’s there seems to be a recurring theme to these attacks involving immoral women. One case involved a Ruth Massey the “wife of James Massey and sister-in-law of Dr. Z.D. Massey,” who the book reports to have been “ a

³⁰ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 67-68.

³¹ Crozier, *The White Caps*, 10. Note: the word *withes* is another term for a green switch or branch cut from a tree.

³² Crozier, *The White Caps*, 11.

³³ Crozier, *The White Caps*, 11.

beautiful young woman, but, like other unfortunate young women, had strayed from the path of virtue.”³⁴ The reader is left to decide for themselves what exactly social norm of the community Ruth Massey had violated but it most likely was an issue involving a sexual nature or perhaps something seen as a violation of the perceived marital obligations of the community and period. It is interesting that during the White Caps assault on Ruth Massey that her husband James is present and seemingly held against his will and forced to witness the events as they unfold.

Crozier writes:

The White-caps[sic] battered down the door of the Massey home and both husband and wife were taken in their night apparel into the open air. Two men stood with cocked revolvers pointed in the husband’s face, two others held Ruth’s arms locked around a tree, while two others, one on each side of the unfortunate woman, proceeded to lash her with buggy whips. They turned her night clothes over her head, commenced at her feet and took lash about, until they had whipped her from foot to head. The poor woman in the clutches of the heartless band of hellish demons, said: “ Let me down till I die.” They let her go and she fell to the ground in a swoon. Thinking she was dead they carried her into the house, and laying her on the bed, stayed with her until she regained consciousness.³⁵

³⁴ Crozier, *The White Caps* 87.

³⁵ Crozier, *The White Caps*, 87-88.

This was one of the more brutal whippings reported by Crozier and an example of what those who violated the social and moral norms faced at the hands of the Sevier County group. Just as in the case of Southern Indiana, once word got around, a warning was all that was needed to keep the White Caps view of social order in check. While researching this paper, many of the news articles focused on the more violent accounts of the group's later years, as did Crozier. However, few newspaper articles from the period that were located during this research were able to locate instances related to acts other than the murders committed by the White Caps. One article that I did find related to the Sevier County White Caps, relays to the reader that the group had "committed many outrages on defenseless citizens, especially women and colored people."³⁶ Targeted violence against women seems to be a recurring theme with the Tennessee White Caps. In addition, this was the first mention of African Americans being targeted by the group that I was able to uncover. This raises some questions that need to be addressed for the purpose of this research.

From the evidence uncovered during this research, like the cases in Southern Indiana, the overwhelming number of acts reportedly committed by White Caps was violence committed by whites primarily against whites. Yet from the newspaper account we just read one could surmise that there are indeed instances of White Caps attacking African Americans as well in Tennessee. In the case of Southern Indiana, the region was not called home by many African Americans or other minorities during the White Caps reign. Yet there were still some documented attacks made against African Americans who were residing in Harrison County.³⁷ However, given the status of Tennessee as a slave holding state and as a former member of the Confederate States of

³⁶ "Had a Battle with the Blue Bills: Tennessee White Caps Bent on Murder Fired, on From Ambush," *The New York Times*, October 27, 1894, 3. (ProQuest)

³⁷ Noble, "The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana," 186-188.

America, it is extremely unlikely that Sevier and surrounding counties would not have had a population of formerly enslaved peoples residing thereabouts. Due to the low social status of post-war African Americans at this time, it is likely that violence against them would not be as widely reported, or for that matter taken seriously by the authorities.

In researching the apparent lack of reporting in the press on violence towards African Americans committed by White Caps, a report out of South Carolina detailing some apparent attacks on African Americans there offers a potential clue to a reasoning why attacks on African Americans were going unreported in the southern press at the time. Appearing in the August 17, 1889 edition of *The New York Times*, the following account was given:

“TILLMEN DEFENDS NEGROES”

“South Carolina Senator Advises Constituents to Kill White Caps and Tolberts”

“the last ten days and whipping inoffensive negroes. The Senator called them white cowards, and said they were a disgrace to the county. He thought if the Tolberts, the Republican Party leaders in this section of the South were still stirring up the negroes, they ought to be severely dealt with “If you want to uproot this evil and kill the snake, go kill the Tolberts, but don’t abuse the poor, innocent black wretches,” said the Senator in an outburst. “The Yankees are watching us closely, and the eyes of the whole world are now on the race problem in the South. They will take advantage of everything of this kind to abuse the South. You are just playing into the Yankees’ hands. They are wanting to cut

down our representation in Congress because of our new election laws, but otherwise there is little bitter feeling now between the two sections. This sort of thing, if continued, will arouse bad feelings.” Senator Tillman then talked on agricultural affairs denounced the war in the Philippines, and closed with some choice invectives against newspapers.”³⁸

This one piece of evidence, it of itself, does not prove or disprove a reasoning behind the lack of reporting of violence against African Americans in the South during the period the White Caps operated. It does however offer us a glimpse into a general feeling towards African Americans in the South at the time. Senator Tillman is not suggesting that White Caps be eliminated because they are attacking African Americans. Senator Tillman is suggesting that the group be attacked as they are jeopardizing the social order in the South. The Senator touches upon this by stating that “they are wanting to cut down our representation in Congress because of our new election laws.”³⁹ Senator Tillman is alluding to election laws that are limiting the voting influence of African Americans during this period in the United States. These laws were instituted to protect the social norm of the South, in other words protection of the white hierarchy in Southern society. Were the White Caps in South Carolina attacking African Americans over voting? It is hard to make an informed argument either way from this one account, but it is a topic that bears further scrutiny.

Yet even without a large sampling of violence perpetrated against African Americans by White Caps, we can still understand from the reported acts that the White Caps were motivated

³⁸ “Tillman Defends Negroes: South Carolina Senator Advises Constituents to Kill White Caps and Tolberts,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 1899, 3. (ProQuest)

³⁹ “Tillman Defends Negroes,” 3.

by their need to protect the social and moral standards of their community. In 1897 in South Carolina, a group of White Caps who reportedly attacked a Mormon community in the area was having been “charged with burning churches and whipping Mormons.”⁴⁰ Attacks on Mormons are a common theme with other groups of White Caps. The Southern Indiana White Caps, according to Madeline Noble’s research, listed an attack on Mormon missionaries at the Perry/Crawford County line occurring July of 1888.⁴¹ According to the July 30, 1888 edition of *The Indianapolis Journal*, after their “influence induced to two young women to enlist in their cause,” the group was warned by “a bundle of switches and a note of warning.”⁴² It was the intent of White Caps to stop the Mormon missionaries from spreading their version of the Gospel in the community. Not heeding the warning, the group of missionaries was caught and all four whipped, with the men “flogged into insensibility, one having an eye torn out from the lash of a whip.”⁴³ In South Carolina, Indiana, and elsewhere, groups of White Caps viciously and without mercy attacked those who would challenge the religious norms of their community.

In an issue unique to the South, and an example of White Caps turning to violence to protect their community interest, was violence stemming from the price of cotton. It appears that the White Caps were concerned with the price of cotton and those selling cotton for less profitable terms. One account in 1893 notes that White Caps from “Eastern Mississippi and Western Alabama have posted notices on the doors of every gin house that if a bale of cotton is ginned before the price shall have reached 10 cents the ginners will so at the peril of having their property burned.”⁴⁴ The same events occurred in Louisiana in 1893, with cotton ginners

⁴⁰ “Anti- Morman White Caps on Trial,” *The New York Times*, September 23, 1897,1. (ProQuest)

⁴¹ Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 181.

⁴² “Perry County White Caps Inflict Punishment on Two Mormon Missionaries,” *The Indianapolis Journal*, July 30,1888,2. (loc.gov)

⁴³ “Perry County White Caps,” 2.

⁴⁴ “Cotton Ginners Threatened by White Caps,” *The New York Times*, September 24, 1893,5. (ProQuest)

threatened with similar action of their property being burned.⁴⁵ The same day that the *Boston Daily Globe* reported on the events in Louisiana; appearing right below that article was another reporting that an African American farmer was killed on a cotton plantation “because he had ignored the mandates of the outlaws.”⁴⁶

Were the White Caps attempting to protect the community by ensuring a favorable price for southern farmers still trying to recover economically from the Civil War? Or given that the most prominent citizens of a community were often members of these groups of White Caps, were they out to protect their own interests given the state of cotton plantations in the post-war South? Either explanation is plausible under these circumstances, especially when factoring in the economic depression that was sweeping the United States during 1893.⁴⁷ Early in his career, the noted historian Stephen E. Ambrose wrote in *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* that an investigation by the United States Senate had “concluded that it cost the Southern farmer seven cents to raise a pound of cotton,” and that “historians have maintained that insofar as cotton was, by 1892, selling for less than seven cents, the farmers must have lost money.”⁴⁸ Considering this information, again one has to wonder if the White Caps were trying to protect their communities through the threat of violence in an attempt to ensure that cotton, the staple cash crop of the South, brought a profitable price on the open market, thereby ensuring community prosperity.

Fear of federal intervention in the South, could very well explain the lack of substantial reporting on White Caps attacking African Americans during the 1890s. There is a report from

⁴⁵ “White Caps Are Thick: They have Threatened the Planters Who Gin Their Cotton Before It Reaches 10 Cents a Pound,” *Boston Daily Globe*, October 9, 1893, 1. (ProQuest)

⁴⁶ “Cotton Ginners Warned,” *Boston Daily Globe*, October 9, 1893,1. (ProQuest)

⁴⁷ “The Depression of 1893,” Economic History Association- EH.net, David Whitten, accessed on April 3, 2021, <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/the-depression-of-1893/>.

⁴⁸ Stephen E. Ambrose, “Cotton Prices and Cost: A Suggestion” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 48, no.1(March 1964):78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40578336>.

1903, reported in the *Boston Daily Globe* of the killing of a “Negro Preacher” being attributed to White Caps.⁴⁹ While this is certainly plausible, the *modus operandi* seemingly does not fit into the practice of White Caps of the 1890s Tennessee. First, in the 1903 account, the crime occurs in Lewisburg, Tennessee, far from the violence in Sevier County, and secondly the article states that “ No cause is assigned for the killing” as well as that the group was on the lookout for another African American.⁵⁰ The research into White Caps has demonstrated that the group routinely made the purpose of their visit known. While it is possible the intention of the attack was lost during reporting, it is more than likely that this attack, while attributed to White Caps, was an attack by white supremacists concerned only with attacking African Americans rather than an attack to uphold the morals of the community. Yet, we can also conclude that upholding the racial values in the community is a form of “social policing.” Given this analysis, the White Caps certainly would have been involved in such attacks. The lack of objective reporting on attacks against African Americans in the South makes it difficult for a concrete analysis on the racial motivations of the White Caps. However, from the evidence available, one can conclude that in the South, White Caps and white supremacy are one in the same. The subject of White Caps and the role they play in the white supremacy movement of the South, is one that I believe warrants further academic investigation in the future.

Heading West

Perhaps one of the more interesting episodes in the history of the White Caps movement is its formation in the southwestern part of the United States. This group was unique in the fact that they were made up of Hispanic Americans, and they organized into groups of White Caps to

⁴⁹ “Negro Preacher Killed: Tennessee White Caps also Wound Another and Assaulted Woman,” *Boston Daily Globe*, August 5, 1903, 10.

⁵⁰ “Negro Preacher Killed,” 10.

push back against the influx of “white emigrants” into their community, who began to upend the community and social norms of the region.⁵¹ This group of White Caps further set itself apart in that it drew on an ethnic/regional name for itself calling itself *las Gorras Blancas*, translated into “the white hats.” Given the unique nature of this group of White Caps, this paper will refer to them by their preferred name: *las Gorras Blancas*.

As previously mentioned, the white emigrants to the New Mexican region had begun to upset the normal practices and equilibrium of the community. They did this largely through the practice of fencing off land. In his study of New Mexican White Caps, Robert Larson cites that land in New Mexico had been granted to Hispanics by the recently independent Mexican government, and “by 1841 more families had migrated to the area, now an unfenced tract of land comprising 500,000 acres of woods and pastureland.”⁵² This grant of land came to be known as the “Las Vegas Community Grant, the communal holding had resources to make it an increasingly attractive agricultural and grazing area.”⁵³ These last two sentences by Larson hold key elements to the issues that I believe ultimately led to the formation of the *las Gorras Blancas* or New Mexican White Caps. First is the fact that these lands are prime agricultural lands, which as history has shown time and time again, are what American white emigrants wanted for themselves, regardless of prior ownership. The second and perhaps most crucial to understanding the events is as Larson phrases it “communal holding.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ The term “white emigrants” in this research paper is to note white Americans moving westward during the late 1800s. While white Americans moving westward are commonly referred to as settlers, this terminology is inaccurate, given the history of Native Americans and Hispanic/Spanish peoples already inhabiting in the region.

⁵² Robert W. Larson, “The White Caps of New Mexico: A Study of Ethnic Militancy in the Southwest,” *Pacific Historical Review* 44, (1975): 173, <https://proxyse.uits.iu.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxyse.uits.iu.edu/scholarly-journals/white-caps-new-mexico-study-ethnic-militancy/docview/1290856981/se-2?accountid=11654>.

⁵³ Larson, “The White Caps of New Mexico,” 173.

⁵⁴ Larson, “The White Caps of New Mexico,” 173.

Since at least the mid-1800s, the Hispanic community in the region had been living and working in a communal system. Those ranchers/farmers native to the region shared the land and its abundant resources equally with each other. It appears from the evidence at hand that there was a general harmony among the Hispanic community residing there. It is communal, it is everyone working together for the betterment of their community. As Amanda Taylor- Montoya surmised in a 2009 dissertation, this premise was “the most common form of land holding,” which “blended private ownership of agricultural parcels with individual usufruct rights to communally owned forest, grasslands, and water sources.”⁵⁵ Enter the white emigrants, who have a different approach to agriculture and did not take kindly to community ownership.

I would argue that communal ownership of land is a foreign concept in the history of the United States. Its idea is something that has historically been alien and troublesome for the white emigrants as they spread throughout North America. The efforts by the white emigrants to quash communal land holdings of the Native Americans and Hispanics has overwhelmingly had negative effects on the communities the whites seek to control. The practice of communal lands was shunned and rejected as the United States government seized Native American lands in its push Westward. The idea of communal ownership of land is against the very principles of capitalism, which America is founded on. White Americans, in general, have always been concerned with their individual piece of the pie, and when it came moving into the region of New Mexico, it was not different.

The practice of fencing had long served to identify ownership of land. In Europe and the early colonies, it was achieved using rocks, wooden fence posts, and even planted vegetation to

⁵⁵ Amanda Taylor-Montoya, “Under the Same Glorious Flag : Land, Race, and Legitimacy in Territorial New Mexico”(PhD diss., University of Oklahoma Graduate College,2009),93. (ProQuest)

serve as a natural barrier between two individuals' assets. Yet, the American Southwest and Plains were so vast that fencing a large tract of land was not practical or financially feasible. That is until the 1870s and the invention of barbed wire fencing.

The invention of barbed wire fencing finally made it practical and cost effective to fence large tracts of land. The white settlers who had been emigrating into the Southwest seized upon the opportunity to end the communal nature of farming/ranching in the region by fencing off large swaths of land. The practice of fencing upended the social dynamic of the region. Whereas before land and its abundant resources had been communal and open to all to use equally, it was now off limits, as white emigrants fenced off large tracts of lands. The Hispanic residents lost access to the water and grazing land that they had utilized for generations. As throughout history, the indigenous residents land claims were cast aside as having no recognized legal basis. The communal rights of the community were cast aside in favor of the rich white ranchers. In an August 2016 thesis for Northern Arizona University, Joseph A. Ukockis writes that the people had been “dispossessed from traditional community holdings and that many of the white settlers has made claims to sections of land “without the shadow of a title” and “those with titles fencing off lands ten times the size of their actual property.”⁵⁶ The intent it would seem was to garner the best land and resources for themselves. To this extent, the white emigrant ranchers “built fences to separate their beeves from the flocks of sheep belonging to the native inhabitants.”⁵⁷ Larson

⁵⁶ Joseph A. Ukockis, “Bound by Barbed Wire: The People’s Movement of San Miguel County, 1887-1892” (PhD diss., Northern Arizona University, 2016), 36. <https://proxyse.uits.iu.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxyse.uits.iu.edu/dissertations-theses/bound-barbed-wire-peoples-movement-san-miguel/docview/1868361454/se-2?accountid=11654>.

⁵⁷ Larson, “The White Caps of New Mexico,” 173. Beeves is another term used for cattle.

makes mention in his thesis that “a similar enclosure movement in Texas forced most Hispanos off the land and into the ranks of wage labor by 1900.”⁵⁸

As this “fence and exclude” movement progressed in the New Mexican region, some of the inhabitants decided to take matters into their own hands. Both Larson and Ukockis point to the formation of the New Mexican White Caps by Juan José Herrera and his brothers Pablo and Nicanor.⁵⁹ Larson notes that Juan José Herrera became angry when he found that an “Anglo owner had fenced off so much land that there was no room for others to graze their stock.”⁶⁰ The communal lands that the community had relied upon for generations for survival were being eliminated by the fencing efforts of the white emigrants. Just as with the previously discussed areas of the country that these movements of White Caps formed, the las Gorras Blancas seemed motivated initially out of a sense to protect the community and its social norms. The white emigrants and the large ranches they were establishing were threatening that normalcy and in the view of the Herrera brothers it would appear must be stopped. The las Gorras Blancas, like their Southern Indiana and Tennessee counterparts, utilized secrecy, and “those recruited were promptly placed under a solemn oath not to divulge any information about the new organization on pain of death.”⁶¹

The las Gorras Blancas utilization of fence cutting was not their only tactic. The reports discovered in the researching of this paper reveal that the las Gorras Blancas were not afraid to use extreme forms of violence to convey their message. A detailing of the group’s actions

⁵⁸ Larson, “The White Caps of New Mexico,” 173.

⁵⁹ Larson, “The White Caps of New Mexico,” 175; Ukockis, *Bound by Barbed Wire*, 2.

⁶⁰ Larson, “The White Caps of New Mexico,” 175.

⁶¹ Larson, “The White Caps of New Mexico,” 175.

appeared in the July 16, 1890 edition of the *Detroit Free Press*, titled “ A Lawless Mob: Outrages Committed by White Caps in New Mexico.”⁶² The article read as follows:

The Secretary of the Interior has received from a gentleman now in New Mexico circumstantial account of the outrages committed in that territory during the last few months by the White Caps. This lawless mob, the writers says, consist of several hundred Mexicans who, armed, masked and mounted, almost nightly parade though the county for thirty miles around Las Vegas, destroying crops, houses, and bridges, shooting and terrifying citizens upon the plea that the land belongs to the “The People” and that they are underpaid for their labor. The writer describes minutely twenty-five distinct acts of violence, and ask that the government take cognizance of the matter and furnish relief to the terror -stricken people. Hundreds of miles of fences have been cut and carried away, house looted and burned, haystacks fired and agricultural implements broken up and destroyed. Several people have been shot and several wounded, and a large number of railroad bridges burned and other depredation committed. The Secretary has referred the papers in the case to the Governor of Mexico for a full report. He has also asked the Governor to suggest a remedy in case he finds the

⁶² “ A Lawless Mob: Outrages Committed by White Caps in New Mexico,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 16,1890,1. (ProQuest)

situation such as to require action by the government. It is not unlikely that troops will be sent into the territory to protect lives and property of the people.”⁶³

It would seem, at least from this record that the group is not only large in scale but also well organized. If the report is accurate, the las Gorras Blancas were one largest groups of White Caps that operated in the United States. The article notes the sheer volume of fence cuts and the acts committed against the railroad. The railroad seems to have drawn the continued ire of the las Gorras Blancas. The railroad would have been seen as the ultimate expression of white emigrant expansion and a source of exploitation of Hispanic workers in the community. In August of the same year, it was reported in *The New York Times* that the railroad and its workers were continuing to be targeted as “section men and other employes [sic] have been warned to quit work, and some have done so.”⁶⁴ The article went on to say that the Governor requested the intervention of the War Department as “it would also probably stop the whole white cap business, as they have a wholesome respect for United States soldiers.”⁶⁵

Returning to the *Detroit Free Press* article of July 16, 1890, there appears to be an economic concern to the White Caps behavior. The *Detroit Free Press* stated that the White Caps (las Gorras Blancas) claimed “the land belongs to the ‘The People’ and that they are underpaid for their labor.”⁶⁶ The labor element to this is a key element to the history of the activities of the las Gorras Blancas. The las Gorras Blancas became intertwined with an early labor union known

⁶³ “ A Lawless Mob,” 1. (ProQuest)

⁶⁴ “The White Caps in New Mexico,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 1890, 2. (ProQuest)

⁶⁵ “The White Caps in New Mexico,” 2. (ProQuest) The respect mentioned in this quote is most likely referring to respecting the force of arms that the United States military could bring to counter the group, rather than respect for the institution itself.

⁶⁶ “ A Lawless Mob,” 1. (ProQuest)

as the Knights of Labor. Juan José Herrera, who was just mentioned as a member of the las Gorras Blancas, was “one of the union’s organizers in New Mexico.”⁶⁷ The Knights of Labor was out to fight equal working rights to all its members and the encroachment of the white emigrants fell into their privy. The las Gorras Blancas, it appears added the protection of worker rights to their list of social causes to defend in the community. In Larson’s article, appearing in *Pacific Historical Review*, he writes that “on April 3, 1890, White Caps put posters in public places throughout Las Vegas in which they arbitrarily announced rates to be charged by workers for the cutting and hauling of railroad ties.”⁶⁸ The group made good on their threats as well. Larson goes on to state that while “political activity was to replace almost completely the early aggressiveness of the White Caps” in the end the “the publicized night raids of the las Gorras Blancas had a greater impact of the struggle.”⁶⁹ The las Gorras Blancas had pushed back against the white emigrants and the capitalistic practices that they viewed as harming the social order of the community. In essence, they viewed their cause an early form of what we would call today social justice. The treatment that the Hispanic community was received was inequal and unjust in their eyes. By turning to the so called “White Capism” the las Gorras Blancas were able to call attention to the issues their communities were facing and from the evidence and other scholars it appears to have been somewhat successful.⁷⁰ Unlike White Caps in other parts of the United States, the las Gorras Blancas , were in the end able to rise above the violence and enter the political arena, in large part to their labor activism.

⁶⁷ Taylor-Montoya, “Under the Same Glorious Flag,” 194.

⁶⁸ Larson, “The White Caps of New Mexico,” 179. This research was not able to locate the primary sources that Larson listed as the source of his materials. Larson list the following sources in the footnotes to this information *La Voz del Pueblo*, April 5, 1890 and *Las Vegas Daily Optic*, March 7, 1890, as cited in Schlesinger, “Las Gorras Blancas,” 101,109.

⁶⁹ Larson, “The White Caps of New Mexico,” 183-184.

⁷⁰ Larson, “The White Caps of New Mexico,”171. Larson uses the term “White Capism” to describe the general violent acts committed by White Caps. Larson was not the first to use this term to describe the violence.

The End of a Movement

This preceding is just a minute sampling of the major regional activities of White Caps in the United States in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. It is quite clear from newspaper accounts and other testimonials that in the early years of the twentieth century, that acts of violence were still being attributed to White Caps across America. While these activities may have been last ditch efforts by former cells, most major actions ended with the turn of the new century.

Indiana enacted lynching laws in 1889 and again in 1901 that allowed for anyone “assisting in a lynching murder, and being present and looking on a crime punishable by imprisonment in the State prison not less than two nor more than 21 years, and placed the power of prosecution in the hands of the attorney general.”⁷¹ Depending which source you read, these new laws seem to have been effective in diminishing raids committed by White Caps in parts of Indiana. Yet, many of the reported activities in the community by this time were more of a vigilante response to criminal acts, rather than enforcement of social and moral standards as the movement had started out as. Perhaps public opinion had the most effect on the decline of the groups across the country. Whereas in Southern Indiana the groups may have been seen in many corners as warriors for social and moral justice early on, they were increasingly being looked upon with contempt as the years drug on, especially as the encounters grew even more violent and were less about protecting a way of life. A good case study of this would be the Conrad affair in Harrison County, Indiana.⁷²

⁷¹ “The Sullivan County Lynching,” *The Indianapolis Journal*, November 2, 1902, 4. (loc.gov)

⁷² Noble, “The White Caps of Harrison and Crawford County Indiana,” 126-136.

The same could be said for groups in the southern part of the United States. The White Caps in Sevier County, Tennessee, were initially met with praise in some or many circles for their actions, but that praise diminished as the group was taken over by the more violent element in the community. Raids that may have been once seen by some or many as morally just had now descended into a murderous rampage across the region. According to Crozier, the White Caps became notorious after the murder of Laura and William Whaley “north of Sevierville on the night of on December 28th, 1896.”⁷³

The Whaleys were murdered in part because of a civil feud with a prominent member of the Sevier County White Caps but more so for violating the secrecy of the group, having told others that she had been forced at gun point to write a note threatening another individual for the group.⁷⁴ The killing of this young husband and wife in front of their child was the last straw for the community and those responsible were brought to trial. At the time of publication, Crozier recounted that “Pleas Wynn and Catlett Tipton are to pay the penalty at the gallows, and Bob Catlett and Bob Wade have yet to be tried as accessories before the fact.”⁷⁵ The group had crossed the line in the eyes of the public and it appears by the turn of the twentieth century, the White Caps, in Sevier County, Tennessee at least, were no more.

The situation in the Southwest was far more complex with the las Gorras Blancas in New Mexico. While there undoubtedly was violence and extreme acts committed by the las Gorras Blancas, the evolution of the group took a far different turn than those taken by other groups of White Caps in the United States. Unlike those groups in Southern Indiana and the South, where White Caps devolved into ever increasing amounts of violence, the las Garros Blancas, on the

⁷³ Crozier, *The White Caps*, 118.

⁷⁴ Crozier, *The White Caps*, 120,121,123,129.

⁷⁵ Crozier, *The White Caps*, 118.

other hand evolved into a grassroots political movement. Members of the las Gorras Blancas were also members of the Knights of Labor organization and from at least one account it seems that some members of the Republican Party in New Mexico were attempting to court them.⁷⁶ Judging from the article appearing in the *Detroit Free Press* in August of 1890, some politicians were willing to embrace the group, while some were fearful that the group would “be used as a political machine,” as the group reportedly had “ a membership of 1,500.”⁷⁷ In the end the group would be an early contributor to the Knights of Labor in the New Mexico region, and would be involved in politics of the region. As members of the los Gorras Blancas became invested in labor and politics, even gaining prominent positions in both, the raids by the group cease to take place and fade into memory.

Conclusion

It is inevitable that times change. As the twentieth century dawned, the United States was ushering in, for better or worse, a modern industrial society. Some of the social and moral traditions that White Caps sought to maintain are still with us, while others have changed for the betterment of humankind. The White Caps, from the evidence at hand, appeared to be finished as regional movements within the first decade of the twentieth century. The memory of their raids caused some to attribute acts of violence committed to them in the coming years. This is especially true in the South, as White Caps were replaced with a re-emergence of the white supremacist group, the Ku Klux Klan. Undoubtedly the Klan would have attracted former members of White Caps across the country. This very well may explain the continued use of many of the

⁷⁶“ New Mexico White Caps: One Faction of the Republican Party Will Use Them as a Political Machine,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 4, 1890, 1. (ProQuest)

⁷⁷ “ New Mexico White Caps,” 1.

White Cap tactics by the Ku Klux Klan, such as leaving a bundle of switches on the doorsteps as a warning to those the group targeted, and White Caps being blamed for early Klan activity.

In the end, the White Caps were unable to oppose a changing society. Evolution, whether biological or social, cannot be stopped. As previously mentioned, White Caps were never a cohesive, nationally organized movement. They were regional and concerned it seems only with their little corner of America. From the evidence, White Caps in Crawford County, Indiana, were not concerned with social and moral matters occurring in New York City during the period. I would surmise that while the group probably saw the city as immoral and wicked, there is no evidence that the group aspired to impose their social views and morality upon the masses in general. Unlike other forms of extremism such as white supremacy, there appears not to have been a grand design to the movement. The White Caps, for the most part, sought only to control what directly affected their community.

In the case of Southern Indiana, in the beginning, the White Caps targeted those who challenged the traditional norms of the community. They attacked those who abused family members and those who challenged the religious morality of the period. From the evidence available, I would argue that this social policing was by and large accepted by the community. It is not until later, when the group began to devolve into more extreme forms of vigilantism, that the group lost community support and efforts to root out the group became effective.

The same can be said for the activities in the South, especially in the case of Sevier County, Tennessee. The White Caps' actions were favorably received until the groups descended into outright lawlessness, murdering innocents that dared to oppose them. The issue with the lack of evidence concerning attacks on African Americans makes it difficult to assert whether those attacks were a result of trying to maintain the social order of the post-war South or whether the

attacks are out of a violation of morality. Given the region's long history of racial violence and injustice, it makes it hard to discern just how much of a racial component played into the attacks. In some of the cases, if all racial factors are removed, we are left with only the protection of the social order. This is particularly true in the instances of recorded violence over the economics of cotton. Yet, we cannot dismiss race as playing a key factor in the attacks. The lack of reporting about attacks on African American's has the appearance of being racially motivated, whether by prejudice by race, out of fear of further federal intervention into the South, or both. If newspaper reporting is motivated by race, then one can only conclude that the attacks by the White Caps themselves is also based on race. Especially when you think of it in terms of preserving the white dominated social system of the South. How far did the White Caps involvement with white supremacy in the South go is a topic that bears further scrutiny in the future, if we are to truly understand the groups intentions in the region.

In the case of the las Gorras Blancas, the members were seeking to stop the violation of the communities' social order at the hands of these white emigrant land holders. The attacks stemmed from what they viewed as an attack on their communal ways of life. When speaking to the political motives of las Gorras Blancas, Amanda Taylor-Montoya states the group "did not challenge the legitimacy of the federal government or the American political system," but "instead, they asserted their place in that system and demanded their rights be respected."⁷⁸ The las Gorras Blancas never looked to upend the approaching system, only asked that their rights and customs be respected. Their traditional practices in their society were being threatened by

⁷⁸ Taylor-Montoya, "Under the Same Glorious Flag," 185.

the white emigrants, who had little to no intention of respecting their communal ways of doing things.

The las Gorras Blancas formed out of the need to protect themselves and their community. Violence and civil disobedience, for lack of a better term, were the only means available to get the attention of those who were upending society in their view. The las Gorras Blancas were Hispanic, and the focus of their rage were white emigrants. Yet, from the primary and secondary sources, one cannot discern any racial motives behind the group's actions; rather, they were driven by economic motivators and a determination to protect their way of life. In fact, Amanda Taylor-Montoya wrote that one of more prominent , if not the actual leader of the las Gorras Blancas, Juan José Herrera is quoted as saying that the Knights of Labors "ultimate goal" was in fact "harmony among men."⁷⁹ One could make the argument that the early raids by the los Gorras Blancas was an early form of social activism and the violence they perpetrated served a purpose. It drew attention to the plight of the Hispanics in the region and to the aggressive encroachment and policies of the white emigrants to the region. Once this is achieved, the los Gorras Blancas, turn to membership in labor movements and politics as a more effective means of achieving results, having no further need for violence.

Why is the subject of White Caps and other forms of violent extremism important to study? Why study a movement/ ideology that ended over a century ago? The answer is that much of the same circumstances that allowed the White Caps to emerge in the nineteenth century are still with us today in the twenty-first century. The White Caps have been replaced by new forms

⁷⁹ Taylor-Montoya, "Under the Same Glorious Flag," 195. As noted in Taylor- Montoya's papers footnotes on page 195, these quotes that are attributed to Herrera's writings. These writings appeared in an Albuquerque newspaper, *El Defensor del Pueblo*, that he himself purchased in June/July of 1891. During research for this paper, I was unable to locate the primary source document in which the original writing appeared.

of extremist groups on both ends of the political spectrum. The White Caps and their activities are a forgotten piece of American history that some feel is best forgotten. In doing this research it became apparent that many today viewed the White Caps as nothing more than a white supremacist group, an early experiment that evolved into the Ku Klux Klan. While it is true that white supremacists were among their numbers, and there was indeed a racial motivation with the group in the South, it would be incorrect to label “all” the White Caps as white supremacist and move on. This paper has showed that the group was much more than that. It was a group that was trying to hold on the social and moral norms of its community in the only way that it knew how, through acts of violence and terror. The United States during the era of the White Caps was on the precipice of great social change and arguably America is again standing on that precipice.

In the last decade, the United States has seen many changes in its society. The subjects of social justice and racial equality/equity are more important than ever in this country. The civil unrest of 2020 is an important reminder that this country still has a long way to go. In some ways the civil unrest that has taken place in major cities across United States has placed groups interested in real change in the same category as the White Caps. Certain acts of violence committed by members of a group do not make the whole group responsible for the actions of the few. Modern media labels a group according to what best suits their narrative, and in doing so we lose part of the picture. What made these people act in the manner that they did? A better question to ask is what social factors drove these people to their actions. By studying groups and movements such as the White Caps, we can better understand the issues that we ourselves are facing today. Our shared history has something to teach us about ourselves; we just need to be willing to listen to the truth.

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