

A Lynching in Marion. Produced by Wisconsin Public Television, 1995. 30 minutes. (PBS Video, 1320 Braddock Place, Alexandria, Vir. 22314. Telephone 1-800-344-3337. \$39.95, plus \$6.00 shipping.)

This thirty-minute documentary is one man's story of one of the most tragic events in Indiana's history. On August 7, 1930, a mob of angry whites broke three black teenagers out of the Grant County jail. The mob believed that James Cameron and his two young friends, Abe Smith and Tom Shipp, had murdered Claude Deeter and raped Mary Ball as the couple were parked in the lovers' lane along the Mississinewa River south of Marion. The vengeance-seekers brutally beat Shipp and Smith and lynched them from a tree on the courthouse square. Dragged to the same lynching tree, James Cameron, aged sixteen, miraculously survived, spared at the last minute, he says, because "a voice from heaven" rang out and stopped the violence. Cameron served a prison sentence and has lived an exemplary life since. He has spent much of his time in recent years telling the story of the Marion lynching, first in book form (*A Time of Terror*, 1980, revised edition, 1994) and now in this public television documentary.

Cameron is a powerful storyteller, and the documentary filmmakers use his talents skillfully. An old man now, he speaks on camera with precise detail and with regret, humility, emotion, and tears. The camera follows him through the corridors of the now deserted Grant County jail. He points to the cell that held him and to the rusted bars that only briefly kept the mob out. At several points, the screen fills with the gruesome Lawrence Bietler photograph of the bodies of Smith and Shipp hanging from the tree and the crowd milling about below, a photograph that may be the most powerful and famous lynching photograph in American history. The viewer cannot but be moved and angered by the story Cameron tells.

A Lynching in Marion describes the events of August 7, 1930, in a compelling manner. The historian can quibble about some details presented, but the problems are far more serious than who fired the gun that killed Deeter or how many citizens were in the mob. As moving as the story is, this film fails miserably in explaining the contexts, causes, and meaning of the lynching. It is utterly ignorant of the time and place in which this tragedy occurred, and it falls into the trap of dumping blame on the Ku Klux Klan—and thereby avoiding the real issues of race in Indiana. Viewers gain the impression that Indiana equaled the Klan in the 1920s and that the Indiana Klan equaled lynchings. There is no acknowledgement that the organized Klan was dead by August 7, 1930. There is no recognition that no evidence exists to connect the Klan to any lynching at any time in Indiana. Rather than the broad and deep understanding of the Indiana Klan provided in Leonard Moore's book, *Citizen Klansmen*

(1991), the viewer gets only simplistic sound bites of a supposed Klan lynching.

Nor does the film sort out the significance of place. Viewers are told of thousands of lynchings in America. But they are not told that after a lynching in Indiana in 1903 the next one, in Marion in 1930, was also the last one in the state. That there were indeed hundreds of lynchings elsewhere in twentieth-century America is an important story but one that needs to be set more precisely in time and place. Nowhere does the film suggest the important point that the Marion lynching was so unusual because it was so late in time and so far north.

Contexts of time and place are essential to begin to understand the larger tragedy of the Marion lynching, more tragic than this film suggests. Rather than simple answers that blame the Klan we need to understand the more complex matter of race and the color line—that fluid, sometimes subtle, sometimes soft, sometimes angry line that white Hoosiers drew to deny black Hoosiers full participation in so many aspects of life. We need to understand the simplicity and the mystery of white fear and hatred. We need to understand, too, how some black Hoosiers and some white Hoosiers in Grant County and elsewhere fought against the racism represented in this lynching and against racism in its more pervasive and subtler forms. The Marion lynching can help us understand those central issues of race, but not as told in this superficial, ahistorical documentary film.

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