

PATHFINDER

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Lynching No. 3

Americans with a special abhorrence of lynching have high hopes for 1938 as a banner year in the crusade against this most fiendish of crimes. Until last week, records of Tuskegee Institute, Negro university in Alabama which keeps yearly count of mob murders, showed only two lynchings in the United States this year—one in Georgia and one in Mississippi. The two best previous years have been 1932 and 1937, with eight lynchings apiece.

Last week, however, a third blot appeared on Tuskegee's 1938 books. Outside the little town of Ruston, La., one dark night, a Negro dragged a white man from a parked car and clubbed him to death with a baseball bat. When the victim's woman companion tried to flee, the assailant slugged her on the head with the same weapon.

Police suspected a 19-year-old Negro named R. C. Williams and sent out a posse equipped with baying bloodhounds. As they searched, three young boys spied Williams running across a field, nabbed him and marched him to the search party. Learning of the capture, Sheriff Bryan Thigpen hurried to the scene and found a mob of several hundred marching the Negro through some woods.

When he pleaded for the prisoner's custody, the Sheriff reported later, a mob leader pointed a shotgun at Williams and threatened to blast him to death if the Sheriff used force. Finally, said Thigpen, he agreed to let the crowd march the Negro through the trees on the promise that they would hand him over on the other side.

As Thigpen waited, the mob roped the suspect's neck and yanked him, shrieking and kicking, over the branch of a pine tree. Then they poured shotgun slugs and rifle bullets into his jerking body. Some of the mobsters tried to fire the corpse, but others beat out the flames so that Williams' fingerprints could be compared to those on the murder weapon.

When the bloody scene was finished, District Judge E. L. Walker said he would call a special grand jury session to investigate. Meanwhile, statisticians added one more name to the long list of nearly 4,700 untried victims of American lynchings.