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Media Erasure: A 1904 Lynching in St. Charles, Arkansas

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Media Erasure: A 1904 Lynching in St. Charles, Arkansas

A Master's thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

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Abstract

As Americans grew increasingly interested in historic racial violence following the Black Lives Matter movement in 2021, select news publications chose to publish apologetic editorials and articles that addressed their failure of inclusive reporting for the last century (Lancaster, 2021; Fannin, 2020). In the theme of acknowledging past mistakes, the *Printing Hate* project emerged to investigate the power white-owned papers had in influencing lynching incidents in the county (Capital News Service, 2021). The present study examines one Arkansas lynching in 1904 St. Charles. The incident includes the death of 13 Black men. Findings from a content analysis of 70 original newspaper articles suggest media erasure – omission and inaccuracies – as reported by the initial journalists. Analysis shows that this has largely resulted in a forgotten history. Furthermore, interviews with prominent state officials, historians and the victims’ descendants showed an overall lack of knowledge of the lynching, which one historian, Vince Vinikas, wrote may be the “single deadliest lynching in American history” (Vinikas, 1999). Descendants provided new details of the events that occurred nearly 120 years ago, and for the first time, the voice of African Americans led the narrative of their ancestors’ deaths. Findings also suggest the large absence in St. Charles and Southeast Arkansas concerning the event – from a decreasing African-American population, to the removal of prominent Black gathering places and a lack of memorial to the lynching – has also contributed to the erasure.

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Introduction

Lynching coverage in the media, specifically in early 1900s southern newspapers, was poorly reported, often left out crucial details, or allowed time to further racial violence (Lancaster, 2018). Because of their commonality, newspapers often omitted the events from publication, or provided lackluster reports, ones that omitted African-American interviews (Vinikas, 1999). However, while the historical media content cannot be described to be as intensely reported as some of today's journalism, lynching reports were still prominent (Capital News Service, 2021). They were published both wide across the front page and hidden under vague headlines that suggested everyday occurrences ("Lynching in America", 2017). Interviews with law enforcement and well-respected officials in reports also commonly supported the violent acts. But as most of the newspapers were powered by the white residents, stories became skewed, and often did not include the voice of African Americans (Borysovyh, Chaiuk & Karpova, 2020). Culturally, Black history is spread orally, which has gone mostly undocumented, leaving the white people in a position of power to tell all sides of the story. More than a century of American history and lynching has been largely ignored by journalists. Without Black newspapers and Ida B. Wells's great endeavor to diligently track hundreds of lynching victims, an even larger portion of the country's history may be forgotten.

An investigation into America's structural racism increased during the latter half of 2020, during the Black Lives Matter movement, which evoked protests nationwide to fight for the justice of African Americans who were unlawfully killed (Borysovyh, Chaiuk & Karpova, 2020). Fighting the current injustice spiked an interest in information on America's history (Lancaster, 2021). Award-winning journalistic undertakings such as the 1619 Project emerged to "reframe the the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions

of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative” (Hannah-Jones et. al, 2019). To acknowledge decades’ worth of poor racial reporting, editors of publications including the *Kansas City Star* and *Los Angeles Times* published lengthy apologies to their communities (Fannin, 2020). The Star cited their problematic coverage as robbing “an entire community of opportunity, dignity, justice and recognition” (Fannin, 2020).

However, while various publications have taken accountability, there is still unfair and biased – sometimes racist – reporting that has been forgotten, lost or gone untold for more than a century. But it is not as simple as historical inaccuracies; inequalities with societal leadership shape the historical record (McKemmish et al., 2005). The overarching power that exists within history keeping has led to a lack of content, specifically concerning the African American population. With such examples as the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and Arkansas’s Elaine Massacre of 1919 still being investigated after years of efforts, there are likely hundreds of untold stories – and with that, hundreds of individuals who do not know their own history (Lancaster, 2021). In some cases, newspapers also predicted the lynching of Black individuals, causing a large mob to gather. A study of the gatekeeping theory, which assesses the power structure that exists within news media – for purposes of this research, “media” references print, broadcast and digital works, but will be referred to as one entity – will explore how journalists have set a reality that certain stories do not exist (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In addition to the lack of known lynching incidents via newspaper reports, communities have also aided in erasure through a failure to teach their history, place historical markers or acknowledge the incident entirely. In specific cases, competing memorials – such as Civil War and Confederate monuments – have been constructed near, or at the same place, as lynching incidents (Capital News Service, 2021). Through a past that is “distinguished by its volume of this type of

brutality,” Arkansas ranks highly in terms of lynching events (Vinikas, 1999). But as the count of lynching records relies heavily on newspaper archives for occurrences, the combination of media erasure and omission, local ignorance and silence has led to an untold history (Vinikas, 1999). According to a 2017 report from the Equal Justice Initiative, an organization that was founded in 1989 and is committed to changing the narrative about race in America, Arkansas totaled 492 victims from 1877 to 1950 (“Lynching in America”, 2017).

The present study investigates the 1904 reporting of a St. Charles, Arkansas, lynching incident in which a week-long massacre killed 13 Black men (Vinikas, 1999). Although reported on the front page of various newspapers nationwide, including the state’s own *Arkansas Gazette*, – which would later become the present-day *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* – the lynching has remained widely unknown, which may be because of the original publications were “riddled with inaccuracy, inconsistency, omission, and contradiction” (Vinikas, 1999) Furthermore, the 1904 history has lacked overall historical and journalistic publication concerning its events in the last 120 years. An investigation through original newspaper articles should give a better understanding of the power that comes with having the ability to share history, and the gatekeeping that may have shut out stories. By talking with descendants of victims of the massacre, the Black narrative can be told in a way that was ignored by the original media reports. A physical visit to the town of St. Charles can shed light on what holds tangible, historical importance and what is absent. This project was published as part of the Howard Center for Investigative Reporting project, *Printing Hate*, a series with the goal to hold newspapers accountable for racist reporting. On the case level, the St. Charles lynching was chosen because of the overall lack of comprehensive publication on the subject; this study aimed to build the narrative, specifically the African-American narrative, of the history.

Lit Review

In its definition, to lynch varies across publications. The Equal Justice Initiative, an organization committed to changing the narrative of race in America, set forth to create a conversation about the injustice, inequality and suffering of African Americans through lynching. One Equal Justice Initiative report, “Lynching in America,” defined lynching as “violent and public acts of torture that traumatized Black people...[that] were largely tolerated by state and federal officials (“Lynching in America”, 2017). However, one Arkansas historian, Vince Vinikas, found more flaw with the concept of lynching, and states perhaps it “serves a linguistic function but fails to convey full meaning,” similar to the word “war” (Vinikas, 1999). Despite a lack of clarity of this difficult concept, history of lynching has moved to the forefront of some organizations, in which efforts to commemorate years of lynching have begun. An investigation through the Equal Justice Initiative reported on the twelve most active lynching states. Arkansas is included. One trend that existed throughout the states studied was the large absence of effort to acknowledge the lynching incidents (“Lynching in America”, 2017). This was, in part, likely because of the volume of lynching cases that occurred that were not deemed as newsworthy, thus they were not reported and included in public record (Vinikas, 1999). Given the social structure and harsh racism in the South in the early 1900s, it is likely lynching coverage went unreported, thus unnewsworthy, because of the views held by journalists of the time.

At the height of lynching in America, between the late 1800s and mid 1900s, Ida B. Wells became one of the nation’s first investigative and data journalists, and in her work, compiled a vast collection of lynching reports. While writing with the Memphis *Free Speech* in the 1890s, the trajectory of her work began to change. In her autobiography, she wrote of the

lynching of three Black men – her friends – “which changed the whole course of my life” (Wells-Barnett, 2020). Wells actively fought lynching, especially through her journalistic work as she sought to investigate every lynching and challenged the often false criminal allegations to Black members. As one of the prominent advocates to antilynching, Wells wrote articles that demanded accountability for lynch mobs – as most reports did not include names of individuals involved in the lynch mobs, this piece of history has been nearly impossible to trace, leaving many cases of injustice unfulfilled (“Lynching in America”, 2017). She also investigated reports that included quotes from law enforcement and well-respected, elected officials who often were in support of the violence. Covering lynching events across the country, Wells’s established work has been built upon and referenced for decades since her death. “I had felt that one better die fighting injustice than to die like a dog or a rat in a trap” (Wells-Barnett, 2020). As a result of her meticulous efforts to document instances of lynching, her work was awarded with a Pulitzer Prize in 2020.

The work that Wells wrote in the Black publication, *Free Press*, was much like others of the time such as *The Defender* – which she did eventually write for as well. Chicago, where *The Defender* was based, was a city where African Americans enjoyed relative freedom, and police officers often fought lynching (Michaeli, 2018). Generally, *The Defender* captured this in its writing, allowing for a different narrative and perspective that seldom existed in white publications nationwide, but especially in southern publications. Because of the community and expression that existed in the Black press, journalists could report similar stories from the white publications and produce a new angle that told an entirely new perspective (Muhammad, 2020). During the early 1900s, a majority of American newspapers were white publications, and “major papers virtually ignored black America” (Muhammad, 2020). With the power of media

publication largely existing through white individuals, the stories that were chosen to be told went through the filter of a white editor.

In this instance, the gatekeeper, or the person who allows a story to pass through to the public, held storytelling power over the news – which is now today’s history (White, 1950). The idea of a gatekeeper is flexible. It can be one individual, a grouped population or an entire entity, such as a politically-motivated news outlet. Overall, gatekeeping theory is essentially the idea that public information is chosen based on importance to a gatekeeper(s), which can influence the reality of consumers (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Those placed in the power position of the gatekeeper hold a significant authority over the recordkeeping of history.

In terms of a newspaper article, several gatekeepers – editors – would be involved with the publication through reporting the initial events, choosing what is important from reporting notes, editing the story, final publication and where the story is placed physically on the page (White, 1950). Based on this theory, when lynching reports were published in early 1900s, reporters first had to decide if the event was important, and then they wrote the story with the details they found to be essential (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Reporters also chose who they would interview for stories – often law enforcement that provided initial quotes for the piece – and what voices were essential to the narrative. Later, the editor decided if the story would reach publication and where it would be placed in the paper (White, 1950). Given the non-inclusive ownership of newspapers in the early 1900s, the white-run publications and Black press had different perspectives of what details were important to a story. The two demographics also interviewed different subjects in their pieces, which portrayed a separate viewpoint as well. So, in the South, specifically Arkansas – which recorded about 12% of the 4,084 lynching events the

Equal Justice Initiative tracked through 1877 to 1950 – details of specific lynching events are lost to media erasure and inconsistency (“Lynching in America”, 2017).

RQ1: Did power within in media industry, specifically within its gatekeepers, influence the lack of African American interviews and details of the 1904 Arkansas lynching?

With an overall lack of publication in the last 120 years since the 1904 St. Charles lynching, the existing literature is primarily based on original newspaper reports. The reports, which the *Arkansas Gazette* first published, were picked up on a wire service and distributed to several other state newspapers. Initially, Arkansas reports lacked detail on the conflict – a gambling brawl on the White River between one white man and two Black – which was referred to as “trouble” and even stated that “details of the affray which resulted in the death of the negroes today are not known here” (“3 Negroes Killed”, 1904). However, rather than supplementing later reports with the missing details of the conflict, they continued to be written with omission (Vinikas, 1999). The first *Arkansas Gazette* article was published March 24, 1904. In its entirety, it reads as follows:

3 NEGROES KILLED AT ST. CHARLES

Clash Between Race in Arkansas County.

NEGROES FIRED ON WHITES

Whites Returned the Fire and Three of Crowd of Negroes, Who Were in Ambush, Were Killed.

Special to the Gazette.

DeWitt, March 23. – As a result of a difficulty which occurred yesterday at St. Charles between two white men and two negroes, three negroes were killed today in a brush between a band of negroes and a posse of white men.

The dead:

Garrett Flood.

Will Maddison.

Will Baldwin.

Details of the affray which resulted in the death of the negroes today are not known here, but it is known that two white men were knocked down and beaten yesterday by two negroes. Today a posse of white men attempted to arrest the negroes who knocked the white men down and they were fired on by a band of negroes, who were hidden in the brush. The posse returned the fire, and the negroes named in the foregoing were killed.

St. Charles is in this county, and when a report of the trouble reached here a posse of white men immediately left for St. Charles to prevent further trouble.

Headlines of the lynching in the *Arkansas Gazette* were limited as well. They expressed a matter-of-fact tone in instances such as “Eleven Negroes Victim of Mob” and “Town of St. Charles is Quiet Again” (“Eleven Negroes Victim”, 1904). This terse reporting was customary to lynching reports across the country in the early 1900s. And although it occurred almost two decades after the St. Charles lynching, the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre had some similar traits to its lynching reports, including incompleteness. The massacre, which included an attack on Greenwood Avenue – also coined Black Wall Street – killed upward of 300 African Americans and left an estimated 14,000 homeless through the burning and destruction of hundreds of businesses and homes (Brown, 2018). The *Tulsa Tribune*, which reported on the incident that initially began the days-long acts of terror – the lynching of 19-year-old Dick Rowland – published front page articles that assumed guilt to the young shoeshiner and predicted his lynching fate (“Tulsa Race Riot”, 2001). One editorial was ominously headlined “To Lynch Negro Tonight” (Brown, 2018).

Although Tulsa’s history has been investigated further than that of St. Charles, there is still much unknown about the event. The *Tribune* ultimately set the fate of Rowland as it is still unknown if the accusation of assault against the young man, which led to his lynching, was true (“Tulsa Race Riot”, 2001). Even with an increase of general knowledge surrounding the 1921 event, the history has still become lost in the last century as speaking of such a thing was taboo.

In interviews with *The Washington Post*, Tulsa residents said it was not taught in schools during their youth, and only recently has the investigation to mass grave sites aided in the healing process (Brown, 2018). The general structure of the Tulsa reporting mirrors that of St. Charles with minimally-detailed articles that forebode the lynching of individuals. A century of confusion followed the Tulsa massacre, as it did in St. Charles, and interviews with Tulsa descendants show likely comparative testimonies to the ones in Arkansas.

As the *Arkansas Gazette*'s St. Charles reports were published across state lines, articles began to shorten in length, and although the news even made publication in *The New York Times*, it garnered a seven-line piece that claimed the massacre killed nine men, rather than the total 13 (Vinikas, 1999). These inconsistencies challenged an accurate counting of the lynching incident, and if record keeping was based through *The New York Times* article, the count of murders would have been diminished (Vinikas, 1999). Incorrect information about the death count and location were found in other articles such as one paper in South Carolina that headlined "Fifteen Negroes Killed" ("Fifteen Negroes Killed", 1904). Of the newspaper coverage in Arkansas, which included at least six articles from three different publications – the last of which referred to the massacre as a "wholesale killing" – not one African-American resident was interviewed ("Thirteen Negroes Were Slain", 1904). Likewise, the content that appeared in other state's newspapers concerning the St. Charles lynching did not include African-American interviews.

Although Historian Vince Vinikas claims St. Charles to be one of the "deadliest lynchings in America," existing evidence in the form of physical artifacts and buildings cease to exist, which compounded with the minimal coverage, complicates a reconstruction of events (Lancaster, 2021). Furthermore, original coverage of events did not name members of the mob, making it nearly impossible to find any individuals to hold accountable. The lack of effort to

accurately report the lynching in St. Charles began the process of silencing the event at the moment of fact creation, or the making of sources (Trouillot & Carby, 2015). The steps that would follow in the next century, such as fact assembly and retrieval, and the moment of retrospective significance, would become complete through decades of oppression (Trouillot & Carby, 2015). “Participants buried this episode in their unrecounted past and thereby guaranteed that it would remain there” (Vinikas, 1999). So, although the 1904 lynching was published both locally and nationally, the content of the reports lacked crucial details that has complicated the tracing of the event’s history. Because of the initial erasure of accurately covering the event and ignoring African-American interviews, the telling of the history at St. Charles has remained minimal in the last century.

RQ2: Did the lack of detail in original reports and local recognition of the 1904 Arkansas lynching lead state residents to know less about it?

St. Charles, Arkansas, is located in the southeastern part of the state, also called the Delta region (Shrum, 2022). The town was built along the White River, a tributary to the Mississippi, and the rural area depends on rice, soybean and cotton agriculture for much of its economy (Rogers, 2022). The population of St. Charles is small, about 230 according to the 2010 United States Census (Mosenthin, 2022), and of the entire Arkansas County that includes St. Charles, the demographics are a majority 71% white and 25% African American (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

As a town with its historical foundation in the Civil War – the town had its own battle in 1862 – one memorial stands along the main road of St. Charles that commemorates all soldiers

who died in the battle (Mosenthin, 2022). However, as a town that may also have the “deadliest lynching in American history,” acknowledgement of this event does not exist, except for one short story in a pamphlet at the St. Charles Museum (Vinikas, 1999). In fact, the pamphlet includes minor differences between the original *Arkansas Gazette* reports, which continues to make the history of the massacre untraceable (Henderson, n.d.). This, too, is an example of power within history keeping, as the residents and officials of the town have chosen to commemorate a Civil War battle in their town, but ignore their racial past.

As physical landmarks to recognize the town’s history are absent, a large percentage of the African-American population left the town following the lynching as well. “It frightened the negroes, until many good negro citizens sold what they had and went to Oklahoma” (Henderson, n.d.). In addition to lynching as a gruesome murder of people, they were “proof that black Americans existed beyond the protection of the law” (Vinikas, 1999). These events had generational impacts in terms of traumatic and psychological wounds on those involved including survivors, witnesses and family members. Ultimately, the entire African-American community is affected (“Lynching in America”, 2017). In 2018, the first prominent monument to commemorate thousands of victims of lynching and racial violence, the Equal Justice Initiative’s National Memorial for Peace and Justice, opened. Despite the national recognition, local, regional and state initiatives are crucial to address and take accountability for the existing history, rather than ignore it. “In this context, the lack of public memorials acknowledging racial terrorism is a powerful statement about our failure to value the African Americans who were killed or gravely wounded” (“Lynching in America”, 2017). The process of acknowledging the difficult racial history in America has aided with healing; conversations, monuments and

publications have the power to end the silence and begin recovery (“Lynching in America”, 2017).

RQ3: Does the absence of physical landmarks on lynching in St. Charles worsen the erasure of history?

Methods

To address the previously mentioned research questions, this project used predominantly qualitative methods of research, specifically intensive interviews. The work – published in collaboration with the University of Maryland’s Howard Center for Investigative Reporting – was a four-month investigative process that existed concurrently through an academic course driven by weekly instruction. Memos were written to provide information, such as literature reviews, content analysis and interview notes, to editors of the larger project, *Printing Hate*. Additionally, a data analysis of historical population records with the U.S. Census Bureau was completed to determine the lasting impact on the African-American community in terms of residency in Southeast Arkansas counties. A content analysis also was completed through digital investigation of original 1904 newspaper publications concerning the St. Charles lynching. Throughout the project, much of the qualitative research was completed remotely through telephone and video interviews. Field observation, such as photographs, video and audio, was used to highlight additional in-person findings.

Sampling

The primary qualitative approach to research was executed through interviews with Arkansas historians, prominent state figures, Delta residents and descendants of the massacre.

Interviews with officials were chosen based on prominence in the region and knowledge on the subject. Members at local museums and libraries were approached, as well as regional cultural centers, other lynching descendant groups and national organizations such as the Little Rock Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

When seeking descendants of the massacre, online genealogical websites were used to follow the family trees using the victims' names. Once found, the individuals shared others who were open to the interview process. Among all conversations with sources, questions were objective and unbiased as one of the primary goals of journalism is to seek the truth and report it (Foreman, 2010). These interviews had a strong focus on source storytelling, as it was crucial to the research to hear all sides of this story. Still, questions were appropriately planned to aid in the interview process. This research method also allowed for continuous flexibility to questions as the focus changed throughout the project and follow-up interviews were needed (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014).

Considering cultural differences – such as race and ethnicity, age and regional factors – between journalist and interview subject, several hours of research and preparation were completed before any interviews to ask suitable and relevant questions. Interviews mirrored regular conversations rather than rapid-fire questions in an attempt to listen to, and actively build upon, the story being told. In this case, intensive interviews were chosen to provide more accurate responses to the sensitive issue being discussed (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Because the answers descendants gave were passed through generations of family members, answers were compared with original newspaper publications and privately to other source information, but their stories also were believed to be the truth of this historical event.

This project was the first publication to compile a narrative of the 1904 lynching through a majority African-American interviews.

Most interviews lasted upward of an hour or longer, and nearly all individuals involved were contacted for more than one interview. Interviews spanned several weeks and produced the bulk of information for the project. Interviews were recorded with permission to ensure accuracy of background information, acute details and direct quotes, which were later referenced during the fact-checking process. When choosing quotes for the final piece, it was important to gather the information that was most valuable to the chronological explanation of the lynching event, which helped fill in the gaps that original reports failed to include. Quotes that had new information to the story were included and shared for the first time ever in this article. Quotes also helped to share an emotional aspect to the story, which was missing from original reports as no publication had included interviews with African Americans. During all parts of the reporting process, accuracy remained of highest concern and the research passed through a vigorous, several-day-long fact-checking process.

Remaining Ethical

Along with this new information, the safety of the sources sharing vulnerable information was of high importance. According to the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics, journalists should minimize harm to those involved. During the entire reporting process, all statements from the Code of Ethics; the most prominent codes being seek the truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently and be accountable and transparent. A description of the project was explained to sources sharing sensitive content before each interview, as well as the level of commitment needed for the story (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Throughout the interview process, sources were urged to share what they were comfortable with. Safety concerns

also were welcomed into the conversation and were taken with seriousness (Foreman, 2010). Off-the-record information was kept private and not published or shared among reporting partners or editors. Accommodations to conversations also were accounted for, which sometimes included an additional member who had a close relationship to the source for comfort in sharing a sensitive history.

The interviews also were conducted in a compassionate manner as the concern of the reporting extended past a news element to how the reporting would affect those involved (Foreman, 2010). Interview details were not shared throughout the process with other members of the community. Outside of the academic memos that were read by editors to the project and one other reporter, no other being had access to the content being produced. One reporter conducted all interviews, completed all aspects of the content and data analysis, created data visualizations and obtained supplemental materials to the report.

Measures

Although completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, an in-person visit to St. Charles, Arkansas, was made to meet with sources and collect audio, video and photographs. Although a physical visit to the town was complicated because of the pandemic, the immersive element to the story was crucial when describing the environment. This field observation, which was mostly led by one major source to the story, included a tour of the entire town and trips to two regional museums. In this study, external validity was not of high concern as it was focused solely on the experience in St. Charles, Arkansas (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). The photographs captured during field observations accompanied the article to give readers a better sense of the rural area. An intensive audio documentary was produced to add another element of the story that supplemented the reading. This piece, along with an interview detailing the reporting process

was broadcasted on KUAF-FM, the Northwest Arkansas affiliate to National Public Radio. In addition, a guest appearance on the station's podcast, *Undisciplined*, which focuses on how the objectives of African and African American studies can be found in everyday life, also aired after publication.

A data analysis of the St. Charles African-American population was completed through the historical U.S. Census data. Of the 13 victims, more detailed information, which allowed investigation into their literacy and rent or ownership of their home and land, was found. Family members and their ages also were found through Census records, which allowed for more personalization to the victims rather than 13 names on a page. This quantitative angle for the research was vital to the credibility of the story as it showed empirical impacts of the massacre. Interactive graphics were produced using Flourish, an online visualization tool, to pair with the reading. Using multiple methods in the research ensured information that could have been missed in one area was found with other techniques (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014).

Furthermore, to pair with the several interviews that led the publication and the data analysis, a content analysis of original newspaper publications from 1904 also was completed. Using an online database of searchable, scanned papers, 70 articles were found nationwide concerning the St. Charles lynching between the dates March 24, 1904, and April 8, 1904. The phrase "Griffin brothers" was used to limit search results, as the reported start of the conflict was caused by Henry and Walker Griffin, and they were commonly referred to in the media together as the "Griffin brothers." All stories were read in full, although several were republished wire articles. Notes were made to depict varying headlines, word count, page publication and any article-unique jargon. Placement of the articles was noted to assess the importance of the article to the publication and how the tone of surrounding articles fit to the lynching report.

Analysis of Results

Media Erasure

This project started with the basis to examine how media influenced lynching in America during the height of the racial terror from around 1870 to 1950. As part of the Howard Center for Investigative Reporting project, *Printing Hate*, the reporting sought to hold newspapers accountable for racist coverage. Through one specific study of a 1904 lynching in St. Charles, Arkansas – which historian Vince Vinikas has deemed to be the deadliest lynching in the country’s history – the impacts of the media quickly arose. An in-depth look on original newspaper reports, Census records and interviews with descendants to the lynching showed the impacts that media erasure had on the small, rural town. Additionally, the interviews showed how the omission silenced generations of people, leaving an incident that is still rarely discussed a century later. Overall, the project showed that full reliance of the archive of white newspapers was flawed in its record of history.

Content analysis of the original 1904 *Arkansas Gazette* reports showed a lack of details that chronologically explained the events of conflict, the search for the initiators and their deaths, including where they were placed afterward. Oral accounts provided new information, specifically about how the men were killed, to the story of the St. Charles lynching. Today, the burial place, and other location-based details, remain untold. In interviews, some family members, Delta residents and historians said they believed that the newspaper published its reports strategically, allowing time for rumor to spread about the initial conflict – a gambling brawl between two Black men and one white along the White River – and white mob members from surrounding counties to gather. State historians also indicated that reporters during the time

of the lynching simply failed to report the event fully and that they purposefully omitted details from the beginning.

Still, the lynching that killed 13 Black men in St. Charles proved to have a national reach. Reports concerning the event spanned at least 20 states. Some were neighbors to Arkansas such as Tennessee and Missouri. Others reached thousands of miles away to Washington state and Connecticut. States in both the North and South republished the story, but as publications were put into other papers through a wire service – one that would resemble something of today’s Associated Press – the headlines became monotonous and were simplified. Instead of explicitly stating a lynching was happening in Arkansas, headlines read “Two More Slain” and “A Race War” (“Two More Slain”, 1904; “A Race War”, 1904). Of the 70 articles collected for the content analysis, 24, or more than one-third, were published on the front page. However, the reproduced articles ultimately shortened in length from the original Arkansas reports. The shortest found in the analysis, 54 words, was published in Uniontown, Alabama’s *Canebrake Herald*.

The overall media erasure proved to have profoundly impacted how individuals understand this Arkansas history. Without the details in the newspapers, the event has largely gone unaddressed. Publications concerning the St. Charles lynching are rare, and the ones that do exist are limited to the original insubstantial reports. Because of the lack of original reporting, and reports within the last century, the information goes unknown. The St. Charles Museum does not have content to display. The county’s library does not hold the history on file. In the nearby town of DeWitt, Arkansas, the superintendent of the school said teachers do not teach it in their curriculum. This event, which started with erasure, has only become less known in the state as years pass.

Nevertheless, as technology has advanced in the last few decades, the ability to find additional coverage of the event emerged. In conversation with Vince Vinikas, the state historian who wrote the original 1999 piece concerning the lynching, he expressed surprise that the current study had found more examples of coverage than his original work. However, as the new findings were mainly wire service publications, few additional conclusions were made to the details of the event. However, the general reach of the report was crucial to national newsworthiness in 1904, and changes within reports were significant.

Hearing from Descendants

The ideal situation from the beginning of the project was to fulfill what was ignored in 1904 and reach out to descendants of the massacre that happened nearly 120 years ago – a large feat for a lynching that was inaccurately and insufficiently covered. However, using online genealogical resources that could trace family trees, some family members to the victims were found. Interviews with six descendants, and one individual whose grandfather lived through the lynching, were completed during the reporting process. These individuals were the most important aspect to retelling the story of St. Charles. By providing an oral history that was passed through their family for generations, new information on the lynching arose.

However, sharing did not come easy for all. Some voiced worries about breaking the silence on the lynching. Others were fearful for repercussions to their family members that still lived in the area. Trauma proved to be a major factor in whether information was shared. Through long explanations about the importance of the project, all descendants chose to tell their story without anonymity. Through interviews, many individuals expressed finding their family history on their own with their own resources, rather than being told by their own blood. Generational silence, compounded with the overall lack of knowledge on the St. Charles

lynching in the state made it difficult for descendants to learn of the information. Even while living in the area during their youth, descendants said the event was not talked about and they did not know of their family history until several decades later. In one case, a descendant was told not to look into the lynching by her family for fear she would reveal skeletons about their history.

Still, the descendants that spoke for this story spoke through their truth. The few whose families did inform them of their history were able to provide crucial, and sometimes gruesome, details about their ancestors that had not been published before. As emotions arose, it showed that although the event was a century old, the pain of the lynching still existed. Those who were told of the lynching later in their life were still gravely impacted by the reality that they had kin who were unlawfully killed.

The interviews with descendants also opened a history of relationships among the 13 victims. Sources shared sentiments about the once close-knit community of African Americans in and around St. Charles. During the in-person field observations of the town with one individual whose grandfather lived through the lynching, previously significant landmarks were identified. Today, places where soybean and rice crops rule the landscape were once occupied by African-American settlements. Backroads led to the former school for Black people in the county and the location of the old church, which served as a safe environment and learning space for the community. The current condition of these locations – the school no longer maintained and abandoned, and the church torn down to a cement slab with a few surrounding gravestones – expressed the existing importance of these places to the current residents of St. Charles.

Absences

The field observation in St. Charles found a lack of memorial to the 1904 lynching. In addition to the historical, and important, buildings that once existed for Black residents, there is no landmark to commemorate the atrocity. Rather, one large Civil War memorial stands nearly 20-feet tall in the middle of the town's main street. Inside the St. Charles Museum, just one nod to the lynching history exists in an article in a short pamphlet titled "Brief Stories of St. Charles in Romance & Tragedy" near the back of the building. As the original newspapers were incomplete, no one knows where specific events of the lynching occurred. There are no relics or historical buildings that exist to point to answers in the town. Additionally, the construction of new highways and roadways around Arkansas County and through St. Charles has further complicated the ability to tell the 1904 story accurately.

Also while in town and through several remote phone calls, no local officials chose to discuss the history for an interview – or they expressed they did not know the incident. The only regional commemorations to the lynching are about 40 miles away in the Delta Cultural Center. There, a large multi-medium art piece was commissioned to be on display in 2019, but since then, it has been stored away. One additional newspaper piece on the lynching stays on display in a more permanent location at the Center. Furthermore, the 1904 lynching victims do have their names included under the Arkansas County display at The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. While these locations have chosen to observe the history in St. Charles, the town has not taken these steps.

A data analysis of historical Census data for this project showed a decrease in the African-American population in the county after the 1904 lynching. Also a form of absence in the county, descendants of the victims theorized that the fear brought by the lynching urged

many to leave the area. In 1900, Arkansas County had an African-American population of 31%, but by 1910, that percentage decreased to 27% – this resulted in about a 13% decrease of their population in one decade. It is important to note that at this same time, the statewide percentage of the African-American population remained the same.

Through this project, an interview also was completed with Walter Hussman Jr., the publisher of the now *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. As a way to place some accountability on the journalists that did the original reporting in the *Arkansas Gazette*, this interview was meant to highlight the progress that has been made in the century since the incident. However, Hussman said he could not comment on reporting that was done before his family's ownership, which started in the 1970s. He did state that the newspaper has worked to provide inclusive content in the last several decades. The diversity does not span into the newsroom, however, and the demographics at the Little Rock and Northwest Arkansas offices both have remained a majority white staff.

Limitations

Perhaps the biggest limitation for this project was time. As part of a 16-week academic course, there was no way to extend the reporting timeline. If allotted, an intensive review of the racial reporting done by the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* also would have been completed. An extended interview period would have allowed a longer time to build trust with sources, which could have brought forth more new details. Furthermore, descendants of all 13 victims were not represented in the article. This report speaks to the experience of the seven individuals who were interviewed directly about the St. Charles lynching and does not intend to generalize the emotions of others who may have had a similar history.

Alongside this, as a collaborative piece during the COVID-19 pandemic, the work was largely completed in a remote manner. From phone and Zoom interviews, to conversations between reporters and editors, all the way to university entities, work was completed mainly without physical presence. This had the ability to affect trust in several capacities. The most prominent was sharing personal information about a sensitive history to someone without meeting them first. If in-person reporting had been more available for this project, a more immersive report may have been produced.

Finally, the article went through several edits where various people with different ideologies chose the important content. Although all individuals involved had a journalistic background and vowed to think objectively, it is possible that personal biases subconsciously slipped into various phases of the reporting. Acknowledging differences between demographics in terms of race and ethnicity, as well as regional and age, may have influenced reporting as well.

Conclusion

To summarize, this research showed that the media did exhibit some influence in the 1904 St. Charles lynching through a blatant absence in effort to get the story in the first place. Reports were inaccurate and ignored the entire African-American population for interviews. Based on the gatekeeping theory and the social environment in the South during the early 20th century, it is likely that original reporters of the incident chose to omit details of the event. This would have caused an interference with newspaper readers' social reality, and ultimately, the history of the lynching. This media erasure has spread into the longform storytelling of the history in St. Charles and has created that of an archival silence. Such consequences can be seen in other examples such as the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. The lack of publications concerning

what may be the deadliest single lynching in America, as well as the lack of knowledge among prominent state figures and officials, shows that the incident has remained widely unknown for over a century.

Compounded with the fear that came with such a lynching, generational silence aided in the lack of awareness of the event. Without conversation among families, the lynching became known through accident while leisurely using genealogical websites. As no physical landmark has existed in St. Charles, nor more than one article tucked away in the St. Charles Museum, the town has made little effort to acknowledge its history. Instead, Civil War memorials and memorabilia take up space in the town, leaving a stark absence of the opposing past.

Despite the limitations of time and resources, as well as the pandemic-related challenges that may have existed, this research has added to the history of the 1904 St. Charles lynching in a way that has never been done before. This journalism currently stands as the only compilation of the narrative told through a majority African-American interviews. It attempts to fulfill what was once forgotten, and while it cannot generalize the emotions of all who discover a sensitive family past, it sheds light to one specific case.

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