

Source Selection and Teaching Guide by Greta de Jong, Foundation Professor of History, University of Nevada, Reno

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| <p>Historical Era</p> <p>THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND WORLD WAR II (1929-1945)</p> <p>Document 8.5</p> | <p>Document Title: THE MURDER OF FRANK HANES, 1939</p> <p>Document Type: Letters</p> <p>BRIEF DESCRIPTION:</p> <p>These three letters describe the murder of an African American farm worker named Frank Hanes by Mississippi plantation owner Tom Alexander. Bernice Wims wrote to the U.S. attorney general to request an investigation, but the federal government refused to act.</p> |
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| Jump to Section Headings | Sourcing the Source | Understanding the Source | Glossary |
| Questions | Full Citation | Additional Resources | Curricular Standards |

SOURCING THE SOURCE

According to census records, Bernice Wims was a 55-year-old white woman, originally from California, who lived in Bossier City, Louisiana, with her husband Martin Wims in 1939. Her relationship to the African American men on whose behalf she appealed for justice is unknown. Shreveport and Bossier City are adjacent to each other and she lived within two miles of Tom Elliot's address, so it is possible that he or one of the other men knew her and thought she might be able to help them. O. John Rogge served as the assistant attorney general in the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice from 1939–1940. This exchange of letters occurred during the Jim Crow era, when the Constitutional rights of African Americans in the South were rarely enforced by local, state, or federal authorities. Although federal officials were seeking to combat peonage in the early twentieth century, they focused narrowly on cases that involved both involuntary servitude and debt. Consequently, the Department of Justice took no action on many reports of workers being held and forced to labor against their will. The department did not investigate lynchings or other violence against African Americans because these were considered the responsibility of state law enforcement agencies, not the federal government.

Intended Audience: Wims' initial letter was addressed to U.S. Attorney General Frank Murphy, the nation's chief legal officer and head of the Department of Justice. Before his appointment as a judge in the 1920s and as governor of Michigan from 1937–1938, Murphy had shown strong support for racial justice and workers' rights. Wims knew that violence against African Americans was rarely punished in the southern states, where law enforcement agencies served as institutions for maintaining white supremacy rather than ensuring justice. She may have expected that her detailed account of the murder of Frank Hanes and inclusion of names and addresses of witnesses would lead to a federal investigation of the incident and punishment for the murderers, particularly given Murphy's liberal political record. Instead, she received a brief reply from an assistant attorney general. O. John Rogge's letter to Wims was directed at a citizen who requested help from his agency that it was unable provide. Rogge's response rationalized the federal government's inaction and directed Wims to the state officials that were supposed to investigate such crimes.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE

□ **Historical Context:**

These letters can be used to enhance students' understanding of African American history, labor history, and the challenges that Americans seeking racial and economic justice faced during the Jim Crow era.

Since colonial times, African Americans have been a central part of the American working class. Enslaved black workers provided the labor, knowledge, and skills that enabled southern white plantation owners and northern manufacturers to prosper, helping to generate the huge amounts of wealth that turned the United States into an economic powerhouse in the nineteenth century. After slavery was abolished in 1865, African Americans experienced a brief period of political and economic empowerment with the addition of new amendments to the Constitution and other federal legislation establishing their right to equality under the law. During Reconstruction, federal troops enforced these rights in the South, enabling freed people to enjoy many of the same opportunities for education, employment, and political participation that white people had. Those gains were reversed in the late nineteenth century by an organized campaign of violence and intimidation designed to discourage black and poor white southerners from voting or forming interracial organizations that challenged the power of plantation owners and other wealthy white elites.

At the turn of the twentieth century, state legislatures in the South constructed the Jim Crow system, enacting laws that effectively stripped black southerners of their rights as American citizens. Segregation laws forced African Americans to use separate and inferior schools, hospitals, railroad cars, drinking fountains, and other public facilities. Restrictive labor laws confined most black workers to agricultural labor or domestic service. White supremacists monopolized the political and legal systems, denying access to African Americans and using these levers of power to maintain their own dominance. Plantation owners and other employers routinely used violence to control black workers, terrorize black communities, and discourage challenges to the system. By the 1930s, most black southerners were employed as sharecroppers, laboring under conditions that were little better than slavery. Landlords could force them to live in substandard housing, make them work from dawn till dusk, require them to pay exorbitant prices for rations purchased from plantation stores, and cheat them out of their earnings year after year.

For the most part, the federal government did nothing to protect African Americans from exploitation and violence after Reconstruction ended in 1877. Attempts by the Department of Justice to investigate and punish cases of peonage in the early twentieth century were stymied by the absolute power that plantation owners held over people in their communities. Wealthy white southerners controlled access to land, credit, employment opportunities, and political offices. State and local law enforcement agencies acted to protect landlords and business interests rather than administering justice in an equitable manner. In rare cases when employers who cheated or abused their workers were brought to trial, all-white juries and judges (often friends or relatives of the accused) generally refused to convict them. Southern Democrats in Congress successfully blocked national legislation that threatened to interfere with these fiefdoms by citing the doctrine of states' rights and Constitutional limits on the federal government's power. Between 1900 and 1934, three different attempts to make lynching a federal crime failed to gain enough support from legislators to become law.

The economic crisis generated by the Great Depression in the 1930s caused many Americans to change their views of the government's proper role. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs extended federal power into the South in unprecedented ways through programs that aimed to stabilize agricultural production and prices, provide assistance to unemployed people, and empower workers to form labor unions. Although these reforms improved the lives of working-class people, including some African Americans, reliance on local officials to implement New Deal programs meant that white supremacist systems remained

intact. Millions of southern sharecroppers were displaced and left without jobs or income when plantation owners cut back crop acreages under the government's agricultural subsidy programs, and unemployed African Americans faced discrimination when they tried to secure places on public works projects, such as the CCC and WPA, or qualify for other forms of relief. Roosevelt was reluctant to do anything that might alienate white southerners within the Democratic Party, including speaking in favor of federal anti-lynching legislation.

Throughout the 1930s, social justice activists pressured the federal government to go further in providing economic assistance and protecting the rights of all citizens. The Congress of Industrial Organizations encouraged workers to form interracial labor unions that secured higher pay and benefits for their members and formed a powerful base of support for liberal policies. In the plantation regions of the Deep South, organizers of the Share Croppers' Union, the Louisiana Farmers' Union, and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union risked their lives in efforts to improve conditions for rural poor people. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) continued its fight for racial equality throughout this decade and supported the labor movement's interracial organizing. Members of the NAACP's Shreveport branch, founded in 1914, could not openly protest oppressive conditions without fear of reprisals, but they kept the national office informed of the economic exploitation and violence that afflicted African Americans in their local community. In the same file containing the exchange of letters between Bernice Wims and O. John Rogge, there are dozens of letters from the NAACP, labor organizations, and individual citizens calling on the Department of Justice to do more to combat peonage and lynching. In December 1942, the department ordered its attorneys to disregard whether indebtedness was a factor in determining which cases met the standard for peonage and to focus on the existence of involuntary servitude, allowing more leeway for the federal government to act.

□ **Meaning and Significance of the Source**

These letters exchanged between a citizen seeking justice and a federal official reveal several key aspects of racism and its impact on working people in the United States.

First, the murder of Frank Hanes demonstrates how the Jim Crow system operated as a form of labor control designed to generate material advantages for white southerners. Frank Hanes was not trying to vote, or protesting segregation, or eying a white woman, or doing any of the other things that are well known examples of what could get a black person killed in the Jim Crow South. He simply asked to be paid. Hanes "made a protest" when he and his co-workers were "paid exactly two dollars, no more" instead of the promised "free transportation and one dollar a hundred to pick cotton." That Tom Alexander viewed this as a reason to beat Hanes to death demonstrates the economic motives of those who constructed and maintained the system. Denying black southerners education, economic opportunities, political power, and legal protection served to create a cheap and easily exploited labor force that enriched plantation owners and other white southerners. Employers' rigid control" over their workers is further evidenced by the locked chain on Frank Myer's truck that prevented the men from simply quitting and driving away, by the posse that chased down five men who tried to escape the plantation after Hanes' murder, and by Alexander's demand that his workers "report an escape" by a fellow worker or face a beating if they did not.

Second, the documents show that federal inaction and adherence to the doctrine of states' rights allowed white supremacists to cheat, beat, maim, and kill African Americans with impunity during the Jim Crow era. Tom Alexander could seize Frank Meyer's truck, refuse to pay workers what he had promised them, force them to spend what little he did give them at his plantation store, and murder the one man who dared to complain without any fear of being punished for his crimes. Officials in the Department of Justice declined to investigate even though Wims provided contact information for a witness, Tom Elliot, who was "ready to

be of any possible service.” As Rogge stated in his reply to Wims, “nowhere is disclosed a violation of a Federal statute to permit the intervention of this Department.” Wims’ reply to Rogge’s suggestion that she bring these matters to the attention of officials in Louisiana or Mississippi accurately described the status of African Americans in the early twentieth century: “Negroes are not American citizens in the states of the far South.”

Third, the letters show that, despite these obstacles, African Americans and white allies resisted racism in the decades before the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century placed ending racial discrimination on the national agenda. That era was only one part of a broader struggle for racial and economic justice that began with the enslavement of African Americans and continues today. Before the rise of Martin Luther King Jr. during the Montgomery bus boycott in the 1950s, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, and the protests in Selma that helped secure passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, Americans such as Frank Hanes, Tom Elliot, and Bernice Wims sought to secure justice and restore the protections of citizenship to black southerners. Their efforts, as in this case, frequently led to death or disappointment. Regardless of their individual successes or failures, though, their commitment to freedom and equality and their willingness to risk their lives to achieve these goals contributed to the collective achievements of the civil rights movement and other struggles for justice in the twentieth century.

GLOSSARY

Academic - Wims appears to use this word in the sense of being a neutral party, acting on behalf of others and with no personal stake in the events she describes, and perhaps to indicate that she is not African American herself.

Commissary - A store on the plantation where workers could purchase goods. Many plantation owners operated these as lucrative businesses that provided additional ways to cheat workers out of their earnings. Prices were often higher than were charged elsewhere, as were interest rates that were added to the cost of goods purchased on credit.

Congress of Industrial Organizations - A labor organization formed in the 1930s when a group of industrial unions broke away from the American Federation of Labor and began encouraging previously neglected constituencies of unskilled workers (frequently African Americans, women, and immigrants) to join the labor movement.

One dollar a hundred - One dollar per one hundred pounds of cotton picked. Workers could generally pick between one hundred and two hundred pounds of cotton per day. For a week’s work, Tom Alexander owed the men far more than the two dollars each that he paid them.

Peace officer - A law enforcement official (e.g., sheriff, police officer).

Rations - A term that, in this context, was carried over from slavery, referring to food and other necessities that plantation owners provided to their workers.

QUESTIONS -- DISCUSSION POINTS

Source Specific

- What do the actions of Tom Alexander and his white neighbors tell us about the extent of freedom for black workers in the Jim Crow era? How did southern labor systems in the early twentieth century replicate elements of nineteenth century racial slavery?
- How did the other men who traveled to Mississippi with Hanes respond to the murder? What risks did they take in doing so?
- What reasons did Assistant Attorney General Rogge give for taking no action in response to Wims' report of the murder?
- Why was it unlikely that state or local officials in Mississippi would investigate the incident or bring the murderers to justice?
- How would you describe Wims' reaction to the letter she received from Rogge saying there was nothing the federal government could do?

Historical Era

- During this time when federal power was being extended into many areas of the economy and society, why do you think government officials remained hesitant to act against racial injustice in the South?
- Was the federal government really powerless? Are there examples of the federal government acting to protect workers in other places during the 1930s?

Labor & Working Class History

- How do the letters enhance our understanding of working-class people's experiences during the Great Depression?
- How do the letters reveal connections between the struggles for racial and economic justice?

CITATION

Bernice Wims to Attorney General Murphy, 25 October 1939, frames 0959–60, reel 9, *Peonage Files of the U.S. Department of Justice, 1901–1945* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1989), microfilm; O. John Rogge to Bernice Wims, 7 November 1939, frame 0958, *ibid.*; Bernice Wims to O. John Rogge, 18 November 1939, frame 0957, *ibid.*

Digitized versions of these documents are available through ProQuest History Vault as cited below:

Peonage Casefile Involving Agricultural Workers, 1938–1940, folder 001610-009-0890, Peonage Files of the U.S. Department of Justice, 1901–1945, Black Freedom Struggle in the 20th Century: Federal Government Records, ProQuest History Vault.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Media and Web-Based Sources

Francis, La Toya Tanisha and Rael, Patrick, "Mentha Morrison: A Story of Debt Peonage in Jim Crow Georgia." In *Black Perspectives*, African American Intellectual History Society, October 4, 2018; accessed January 4, 2021. <https://www.aaihs.org/mentha-morrison-a-story-of-debt-peonage-in-jim-crow-georgia/>

Slavery by Another Name. Documentary film directed by Sam Pollard. (tpt National Productions in association with Two Dollars & A Dream, Inc.; distributed by PBS) Video, 2012; 90 minutes.
<http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/home/>

Books and Articles

- Daniel, Pete. *The Shadow of Slavery: Peonage in the South, 1901–1969*. Illini Books ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.
- de Jong, Greta. *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900–1970*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- McMillan, Neil R. *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.
- Litwack, Leon F. *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.
- Woodruff, Nan Elizabeth. *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Next Page: Curricular Connections and Standards

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS and STANDARDS

Common Core Standards: [<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/11-12/>]

NCCHS US Era 8 Standard 2A: *Analyze the involvement of minorities and women in the New Deal and its impact upon them. Assess the importance of the individual in history.*

This exchange of letters exposes the limits of New Deal programs and promises, particularly with regard to improving the lives of working people. They reveal ways in which the Jim Crow system served to enforce white control over black labor, and efforts by some black workers to resist that control. At the same time, these letters reveal that some black and even some white southerners sought to draw the empowered New Deal state into the fight against Jim Crow.

Common Core Standards:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.1](#) Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2](#) Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3](#) Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6](#) Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7](#) Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8](#) Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9](#) Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.