

Uncovering Hidden History on the Road to Clanton

Documentary filmmaker Lance Warren interrogates the silence around lynching in the American South.



Photo by Lance Warren. In Brighton, Alabama, a rare marker — installed by the Equal Justice Initiative — notes a lynching that took place in 1908. Of the more than 4,000 lynchings on record, only about a dozen have been memorialized with public markers.

Lance Warren | Longreads | October 2017 | 10 minutes (2,650 words)

We turned left at Maplesville and headed for Clanton, drawn by word of a Confederate flag and rumor of a lynching. Ida B. Wells wrote about the killing 125 years earlier. Now, we'd **read** in the paper, stars and bars flew nearby, well in view of drivers on Interstate 65 near the geographic center of Alabama. The flag adorns the Confederate Memorial Park and Museum in nearby Marbury. The lynching is all but forgotten.

One month earlier, the park grounds **had seen** cannon fire. Re-enactors presented a "skirmish" displaying military maneuvers that never took place in Marbury, the site of no battles. The park's director, a man named Rambo, explained that the event offered the public an opportunity to see how Confederate forces engaged the enemy. "All of the people are trained living historians," he beamed, reflecting on the re-enactors, "and they love to spread the knowledge. Unfortunately, a lot of people learn of history through Hollywood."

We were there to make a film — *An Outrage* — a documentary about the history of lynching in the American South, and the legacy of this orphaned past. Good people in Clanton, Marbury, and beyond hadn't learned about history that wasn't taught. Others had succeeded in muffling open secrets that had fallen out of fashion. My wife, Hannah Ayers, and I had driven 723 miles from our home in Richmond, Virginia, to find killing fields across the region. We wanted to see how these places looked today. We wanted to explore memory, interrogate history, and ask what happens when the two do not agree.

Hard rain darkened the sky. It squeezed the spindly Route 22 to Clanton. The trees were tall, lining the way on both sides. They formed a silent swaying wall. We knew they held secrets, secrets herded into shadows, secrets long hushed.

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What we think about killing has a lot to do with who was killed. This is an often difficult human reality; it's also an American tradition. For generations, the widespread, socially-sanctioned murder of African American boys and girls, women and men, young and old, hasn't figured deeply into mainstream narratives of American history. Lynching isn't commonly considered integral to the American story. Yet these horrors took place over a period of roughly 85 years — the middle third of the country's existence, from the end of the Civil War to the middle of the twentieth century — and for the thousands who perished, as well as for their descendants, lynching was the most powerful expression of America that they ever knew: the unreconciled filth of American ideas about race made manifest in nooses, flames, fear, and barbarity.

In the years since, forced forgetfulness has separated lynching from American memory. Descendants of victims often held these stories close, not wanting to burden their own children, or recall the trauma that remained with them until their final days. Among the families and friends of those who did the killing, the community pride of these crimes faded as local, state, and national law enforcement began shedding bias, enforcing public safety for black Americans as well as for white Americans, and even in some cases prosecuting such violence as “hate crimes,” an especially rigorous category of laws with high standards of evidence but also high degrees of penalty. Of course, the state didn’t only crack down on racial violence, it also committed it with impunity, through death penalties, police shootings of unarmed black people, and other unchecked harassment and abuse. This made extralegal violence less necessary for those who hate, for in many cases, the law had their backs.

Lynching, in its late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century forms, rarely happens in the United States today. And yet. The twenty-first century movement for black lives reminds us what matters: To be a black American is to be marked, endangered, tried and convicted by the color of skin, always at risk of destruction.

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Later that summer, as we carved the film from scenes captured in a half-dozen Clantons, a presidential candidate **appealed** to African American voters. Many were dubious of the real estate developer once sued by Richard Nixon’s Justice Department for housing discrimination. But as he saw it, the “disaster” of “the way African Americans are living, in many cases,” rife with “crime — all of the problems,” left them with nowhere to go but up. He asked, he insisted: “What the hell do you have to lose?”

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The left pounced. Rightly, if generically dismissive of such ignorance, the opposing campaign found its foe “doubling down on insults, fear and stereotypes that set our community back and further divide our country.” The *Washington Post* **rebutted**, in part, with statistics reporting a rise in African American happiness over the preceding four decades. The *Harvard Crimson* **panned** the candidate’s “gain-loss asymmetry framework.” I wondered: Do they resist the ideas or just the man?

After all, as many critics at least dimly knew, the South was made desolate, in large part, by the flight of six million African American people in the early decades of the twentieth century. Pulled by jobs and pushed by poverty and violence, they sought futures that would keep children safe, keep food on the table, keep alive the fragile dream of freedom from white supremacy. This is true. But often, we go farther. Our narrative of the Jim Crow South carries the tone if not the message that the candidate spewed: Of course they left — what did they have to lose?

Home. History. The land that was theirs by virtue of their sweat, their sacrifice, the untold fortunes made for the white families who held them in bondage. The roots of their deepest memories. Most enduringly, love, humor, tall tales, legends, grandmothers’ “famous” rolls, first kisses, voices that rang with joy. The only places anywhere that meant anything at all.

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African American families had been destroyed in town squares and thickets like those we rushed past. Leaving, all too often, was all that made sense. Yet their many departures reflect not a worthless South but a tragically stolen homeland. We should see these open spaces and encroaching forests as the tombs of the hope that finally fled. We should respect what they had to lose. We should shout about what they lost.

These reflections came later, long after the day when the rain began to pool and slosh under the struggling wipers. The sky was now a definitive dark gray. The radio produced no guidance, only static. We wondered where we might safely stop.

These empty forests speak fiction: nothing to see here. This echoes on the unmarked courthouse steps, aging bridges, and bends in the roads where so many southern lynchings took place. All but a handful lack even a perfunctory plaque acknowledging lost parents, children, siblings, best friends. Each missing marker could spark even greater work; official recognition could model the language and disposition necessary to honestly face the past and conclude what we must: No matter the tribes we choose, the morally-minded decry the killing of innocent people. This is not a high bar for unity; it is possibly the most fundamental point of view that members of a community can share. But until the markers appear, in Clantons by the thousands, the visible past will remain merely based on a true story.

There is some truth-telling on the unmarked ground, and one truth rings loudest of all: Nineteenth-century white southerners lost their cause of slavery, but they won supremacy. Ex-Confederates signed loyalty oaths to the United States with smirks. Rewritten state constitutions checked boxes of emancipation not followed by investments in equality. Freedmen's Bureau agents were sometimes warned and notified of unchecked violence against black people. But the federal army left, and the federal government grew tired of securing the civil rights that Civil War victory had put within reach. What happened next was neither surprising nor coincidental.

In September, days after we wrapped, "Assassination by Proxy," an essay by the artist Kara Walker, **expressed** her "fear that Michael Brown and Tamir Rice and all the rest were proxies for the Black President." Every Clanton had been a proxy for black freedom.

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No matter who we are, we leave crannies or caverns of our lives unexamined. We act without always knowing why. We neglect to act even when we wouldn't oppose the action. We get by; we do not necessarily cohere.

James Baldwin **wrote**: "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them." The writer Teju Cole **quotes** this, and then replies: "But it is also true that the little pieces of history move around with tremendous speed, settling with a not-always-clear logic, and rarely settling for long." Baldwin and Cole wrote these lines in essays about Leukerbad, Switzerland. We were on the road to Clanton: there is doubt in the comparison. Still, I wondered. Did the unmarked ground reflect a clear logic? Or was it unexamined? Was the void a monument not so much to ugliness, but to inertia? Did the ground echo the ugly past, or did it only languish? After all, I tried to remind myself, it's easy to travel south with trouble in mind and find indictments at every turn.

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For many years before the trip to Clanton, I had traveled North. Raised in the rural South, I had a peripatetic childhood, my family moving regularly from one dot on the map to another, our identity summed up in a memorable phrase: “You’re not from *around* here.” Perhaps this understanding of exclusion, of impossible assimilation, is what made me wary of parishioners at a church supper who would lower voices mid-story, look sideways, explain that the person they were describing was “colored.” Maybe it’s why the racist locker room jokes spoken by surly boys at once defined for me what it meant to embrace whiteness and masculinity in a way that made me recoil from both. The urban North, my child mind theorized, would clear this up, present me daily with enlightened egalitarians. But when I arrived on an upstate New York campus and found that a dorm-mate from Seattle liked to titillate guys from the Midwest who would listen with racist jokes whispered in the corner of the hall lounge, the fantasy started to fade.

I reflected later on the unabashed backwardness I had fled down South, and also on the unexamined silence held by many who populated my childhood years. Inexcusably, these adults hadn’t looked squarely at their world views, hadn’t confronted history — not the cheerful memory of the past, but the actual hell that shaped the present — and discussed it openly. But also, they hadn’t laughed at those ugly jokes, hadn’t insisted on referring to one Monday in January as “Lee-Jackson-King Day.” I wondered about the towns of my youth as I would later wonder on the road to Clanton: How many locals might, if invited in referendum, vote to place a plaque, acknowledge the horror, own the past without fearing the loss of the future? In the homes we drove past, what conversations were had about Baltimore, what conclusions drawn about Ferguson? How were the children being raised — not all as monsters, right? Did not some of the parents acknowledge the moral abyss at the heart of Alabama’s history?

Could the trap of history be broken? Could Alabama start to heal? Could white residents find common purpose with their black neighbors, not through a misty-eyed southern pride or even tolerance, but through mutual respect — through love? I hoped then as I still do.

But facts have a way with hope. We learned later that Alabama's constitution once guaranteed a portion of property taxes to Confederate widows — and after the widows had passed away, the state legislature enacted a new law with the old spirit, ensuring that a percentage of levies on state property continue to fund the Confederate Memorial Park in Marbury. Alabama's constitution has been amended 892 times — nearly double the number of amendments to any other state constitution — addressing exceedingly mundane matters of civil and fiscal prudence. (Amendment 612 regulates revenue generated by bingo games in Russell County. Amendment 921 regulates the movements of golf carts in Baldwin County.) But this provision of the state code still stands.

Site director Rambo **explains** the risk without the force of law: "If it wasn't for the way we're funded, this story wouldn't be told. ... The kids in school are only getting one side — the winner's side." Funds for most Alabama state parks have been diverted in recent years to cover budget shortfalls. But legal protection of Confederate memory keeps the battle flag flying high. Rambo considers his state colleagues and knows he holds a strong hand: "Everyone is jealous of us."

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Against hope, history resounds — and the injuries of history persist. Too few Alabama voters have declared the past in need of reconciliation, their neighbors in need of love. The lynching site in Clanton is unmarked, and that is no accident.

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We drove 6,000 miles last year to meet descendants of lynching victims, activists working to preserve memory of this past, and scholars with personal connections to America's era of racial terror. We encountered history at a human scale. From

Richmond to Clanton to Marbury and beyond, we took our cameras to places that are hard to see. We visited the unmarked sites that define, through silence and void, the region's — the nation's — enduring danger to black Americans. We pursued a forgotten past and found ourselves explaining the roots of our present. One man told us: "Being forgetful, truly forgetful, is a luxury, that whites could afford, but blacks couldn't. It's a luxury — to not have to remember painful acts." And it's a privilege, he made clear, with great consequence. "If you have that luxury, a system can keep repeating itself, because no one remembers to say, 'Wait a second: We're doing the same things all over again.'"

Since premiering the film in March, we've hit the road again. We're bringing the film to audiences who are using it as a hub for action, fuel for existing efforts fostering honest dialogue, and a tool for activists looking to identify areas of common ground.

But we've also seen that lynching remains a mysterious wedge. Perhaps because the history hasn't settled, lynching isn't tightly threaded into narratives of the American past. A few audience members have worried that sharing the film with schoolchildren could put parents in a tough spot. (*I ask: Isn't parenting, by its nature, the toughest of spots? And as with so many junctures in raising children, do not our answers to them helpfully reveal us to ourselves?*) Another found political rather than historical a moment where we put a fine point on lynching's modern resonance. (*Exactly where should one draw a line between past and present?*) We've been praised and challenged, and we've tried to take heart that even those unwilling to join us on the barricades nevertheless have chosen to spend a half-hour thinking about black lives.

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The history of lynching is profoundly disturbing, but not controversial: there are no legitimately conflicting points of view about the awfulness of these crimes. We say as much if we find it too troubling to teach, or too ugly for polite conversation. We perpetuate forgetfulness when we refuse to remember.

How could we refuse? How could we forget?

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On the road to Clanton, at the moment we felt certain it was no longer wise to keep driving, we found ourselves facing the security fence of a rural estate. Perched above the threshold were welded steel figures of carriages and horses frozen in mid-journey. Of all the places we might have stopped, we wound up on the edge of a plantation fantasy.

We nudged our car toward the entrance and, in an effort to convey innocence, steered back toward the road. The rain turned to sheets as the sky continued to dim. We sat in silence, our backs to the gates, our eyes on the storm, waiting to tell the story.

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Editor: *Sari Botton*



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