

The New Orleans Eleven: The Untold History of the Lynching of Italians in America

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Once again, the Oscars dominated headlines on US television networks as well for the last 86 Years. '12 Years a Slave' based on the book by Solomon Northup won the 2014 Oscar for best picture of the year tells the story of how slaves of African ancestry were treated by its white owners. Host of the Oscars Ellen DeGeneres said *"Tonight, there are so many different possibilities. Possibility number one: 12 Years a Slave wins Best Picture. Possibility number two: You're all racists! Now, for our first white presenter, Anne Hathaway!"*

That was funny, especially coming out of Hollywood. Racial politics seems to be the norm in the United States especially if you listen to the main stream media and its new propagandist, the Reverend Al Sharpton on MSNBC. An analysis by the Washington Free Beacon said that *"MSNBC host Al Sharpton mentioned race in some capacity a total of 314 times on Politics Nation in 2013."*

Race is often used by the media to divide and conquer people at least in the United States especially between black and white. But the fact remains that there were millions of Africans transported to North and South America have been tortured, murdered, raped and exploited for slave labor. African-Americans suffered a great deal because of the slave trade, and many still do today. Many cultures throughout human history have suffered the same fate. Whether black, white, indigenous, Jewish or Irish, human tragedies have taken place. Race and class wars have played a part in many of these crimes against humanity. Sometimes a tyrannical system such as fascism or extreme communism for example, under the leadership of Pol Pot in the 1960's who imposed slavery on society.

It is not just the human history of one group over another that we should acknowledge it is a systemic problem of our society. Slavery existed throughout all regions of the world. Many people were slaves including the Irish, Jews, and many others. It was and still is a system of the elite class who wish to rule humanity because of their status. Today a modern-day form of slavery exists through debt.



However, there is a piece of history not

mentioned in history books or in Hollywood movies. It was called “*Anti-Italianism*” during the early 20th Century in America. Italian immigrants were seen as the enemy in the United States especially during a time of tensions when it came to employment and the economic hard times. Anti-Italian immigrant movements developed in several areas of the United States in the 20th century. In an interesting article called “Dark Legacy” by David Pacchioli, it describes what filmmaker of *Linciati: Lynchings of Italians in America*, Heather Hartley discovered during her research:

As she proceeded, however, Hartley’s research turned up another lynching of Italians, then another. “The more I looked, the more I uncovered,” she remembers. Accounts told of lynchings in Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, Colorado, Kentucky, Illinois, Washington, and New York between the years of 1885 and 1915, some 50 killings in all

Pacchioli’s article explains why the lynching’s in the United States happened to the Italian community:

The most egregious example, in New Orleans, was precipitated by a rivalry between two groups of Italian dockworkers. When the city’s police chief was shot and killed shortly before he was to testify against one of these groups, Italian males in the city were rounded up indiscriminately. The New Orleans Times-Democrat captured the mood: “The little jail was crowded with Sicilians,” the paper reported, “whose low, receding foreheads, repulsive countenances and slovenly attire proclaimed their brutal nature”

Nine Italian men were tried and acquitted of murder. In response, a large mob led by some of the city’s leading citizens stormed the parish prison, shot nine men as they cowered in their cells, then dragged out and hanged two more. It was the largest lynching in American history, and although no one was indicted for the crime, President Benjamin Harrison subsequently paid reparations of \$25,000 to the Italian government

In ‘Guns, Goats, And Italians: The Tallulah Lynching of 1899’ by Edward F. Haas of the North Louisiana Historical Association wrote:

Six times in the 1890s Italians fell prey to American mob violence. Three of these tragedies happened in Louisiana. The most famous case resulted from the fatal shooting of New Orleans Police Superintendent, David Hennessy, in October 1890. Before he died, the chief reportedly whispered, “The dagos did it.” Authorities attributed the crime to the Mafia and soon arrested a score of Italians. After a public meeting in downtown New Orleans on March 14, 1891, an angry mob that included numerous prominent citizens descended upon the city jail, and meeting no resistance, systematically shot or clubbed to death, eleven of the Italian prisoners. When an investigation excused the mob’s actions, the Italian government severed diplomatic relations with the United States and briefly contemplated war

What is important to understand is that many different people of society were affected one way or another by a society based on racism and exploitation. It is not just a problem of one or two groups. It is a societal problem that we face as human beings. Slavery, torture and lynching hangs a dark cloud over all of humanity and understanding our past would allow us to better ourselves as a human race.

Here is an excerpt from a Documentary called “Pane Amaro (Bitter Bread)” about the lynching’s that took place involving Italian immigrants:

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