

Report: Orange County ranks 6th in lynchings from 1877-1950



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Orange County ranked sixth in lynchings, report says

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On the morning of Nov. 3, 1920, the body of July Perry — a black man who tried to vote in **Ocoee** — was found hanging from a light pole in Orlando, not far from the home of the judge who encouraged blacks to exercise their rights.

The day before, Perry and another man were turned away from the polls, provoking violence between whites and blacks that left at least seven dead, the black community in Ocoee burned to the ground, and its residents fleeing for their lives.

Perry was one of 34 blacks lynched in **Orange County** from 1877 to 1950 — the sixth-most of any county in the nation, according to a new study on the extent of lynchings as acts of terrorism in the South.

Within the same time frame, Florida ranked third in the nation, with 331 lynchings. The state also led the nation per capita in lynchings.

Altogether, 3,959 lynchings of black people in 12 Southern states were documented by the Equal Justice Initiative, a Montgomery, Ala., advocacy group that specializes in inequalities in the criminal-justice system

The group spent five years researching lynchings and uncovered 700 not previously recorded.

"Lynchings were violent and public acts of torture that traumatized black people throughout the country and were largely tolerated by state and federal officials. These lynchings were terrorism," the study concludes.

Orange County was well known as a place where lynchings were a common form of murder and intimidation, said Vibert White, a University of Central Florida professor and black historian.

"Central Florida was a major area in this type of terrorism against African-American people. Lynching was a way to keep African-Americans submissive, keep them fearful and keep them as second-class citizens," White said.

The Orange Branch of the NAACP was founded in 1920 as the result of the Perry lynching.

"It doesn't surprise me. I know the Klan and other militias were very active in Florida and Orange County," said state Sen. Geraldine Thompson, a black historian.

The NAACP itself was created in 1908 in response to lynchings, which for the most part were carried out without arrests or punishment to those who committed the acts.

By far the worst county in the nation for lynchings was Phillips, in Arkansas, with 243, according to the report. The next four counties, all in Louisiana, accounted for 179 lynchings.

Orange, Marion, Alachua, Polk and Columbia counties combined for 119 lynchings in Florida.

Outside of Orange County, a white mob in Levy County lynched a black man accused of raping a white woman, then burned down the black community of Rosewood in 1923.

In 1951, civil-rights leader Harry T. Moore and his wife were killed in a bombing at their home in Brevard County. Moore, a former president of the Florida NAACP, was registering black voters and campaigning against lynchings at the time of his death. The bombing was later traced to four Klansmen from Orange County.

"I think July Perry, Harry T. Moore and Rosewood document that terrorism occurred in Florida and in some instances with the support of law enforcement," Thompson said.

In its report, the group didn't limit lynchings to hangings, but also included public beatings, torture and violence that resulted in death. The last reported lynching in the United States was a black man who was beaten, flogged and shot to death in Orange County in 1951, according to historians.

White said some of the lynchings in Orange County were never reported in the media but remained a part of the oral history within the black community. He said a section of Orlando's Greenwood Cemetery contains unmarked graves of blacks who died from lynchings and a mass grave near Oviedo where black victims of mob murder are buried.

"Historians have ignored it," White said, but witnesses have corroborated the stories.

In its report, the EJI documents lynchings that were planned, premeditated, public spectacles where large crowds gathered to witness the torture and murder of blacks, photos were taken and later published as postcards, and food vendors worked the crowd.

Some of that happened in Florida, White contends.

"It would be a picnic. They would cut off body parts for souvenirs. These lynchings weren't just mob violence. It was a case of organized violence," he said.

The EJI contends the modern-day legacy of lynching is capital punishment, in which blacks are inordinately sentenced to the death penalty, especially for crimes committed against whites.

"More than eight in 10 American lynchings between 1889 and 1918 occurred in the South, and more than eight in 10 of the nearly 1,400 legal executions carried out in this country since 1976 have been in the South," the report states. "... [C]apital punishment remains rooted in racial terror — 'a direct descendant of lynching.'"

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