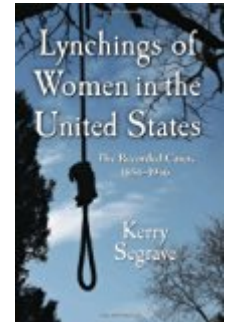


Kerry Segrave. *Lynchings of Women in the United States: The Recorded Cases, 1851-1946.* Twenty-First Century Works Series. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2010. 195 pp. \$39.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-5898-1.



Reviewed by Helen McLure

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In *Lynchings of Women in the United States*, Kerry Segrave, author of short studies on such topics as vending machines, drive-in movie theaters, tipping, jukeboxes, ticket scalping, smoking, and American women and capital punishment, presents an equally brief précis of the extrajudicial execution of women in U.S. history. Segrave's work is important because it addresses a major gap in the literature of this topic, as it is only the second published study of the lynching of American women and the first to attempt to chronicle these collective killings on a national scale. The book proceeds in a chronological fashion and consists of summaries of ninety-seven lynching cases based on nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspaper reports. Several of these cases have not been previously documented by lynching scholars, and this new information, when adequately sourced, constitutes one of the book's major contributions to the scholarship. However, Segrave's inclusion in this compilation of several completely unsourced, unconfirmed cases from the Web site [autopsis.org](http://www.autopsis.org) also suggests using con-

siderable caution regarding some of these alleged incidents. The case summaries are based on contemporary newspaper reports and flesh out the stark details of most of the previously known cases, and the collection serves as a valuable and convenient reference and starting point for more serious research and analysis. This book should be most useful to historians of American crime, lynching, and mob violence; the American South; and women's and gender history; as well as a wider audience of the reading public interested in crime and violence in U.S. history.

Claiming (mistakenly) that no lynchings of women occurred prior to 1851, Segrave explains that he primarily relied on the data compiled by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States* (1919) to construct his own tally of such cases. He identifies additional sources as "the lynching calendar on the autopsis website" (<http://www.autopsis.org/foot/lynch.html>); however, this anonymous Web site provides no sources at all for its alphabetized lists of lynching cases.

Segrave also mined the treasure trove of digitized historic newspapers available on the Web by conducting a few keyword searches on such terms as “woman lynched” at the commercial site newspaperarchives.com and at Web archives hosted by state historical societies in Colorado, Utah, and Missouri. The main secondary sources referenced in the text include Wikipedia, spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk, and the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. His explanation of the origins of lynching is confined to the *OED*’s entry on the etymology of the word. None of the extensive modern scholarly literature on the subject of lynching is referenced except for historian Leon Litwack’s essay in James Allen’s *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (2000). In addition to an article in a criminal justice journal about black women, slavery, and capital punishment, Segrave cites only the studies of James Elbert Cutler (1905) and Arthur Raper (1933) (misspelled in the text as “Rapper,” although spelled correctly in the cited source, www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USALynching.htm). Indeed, if Segrave had delved just a little deeper into the scholarship, he could have added well over two dozen additional cases to his total from the list compiled by historian Crystal Feimster. Moreover, his narrow focus on southern lynching fails to include and consider a substantial number of documented lethal mob attacks on Chinese, Latino, Native American, black, white, and mixed-race women in the U.S. West prior to and during much of the period he is studying.

The summaries consist of narrative accounts that are also plagued by errors, beginning with the very first case presented, that of “Josefa Segovia,” a young Mexican woman who was lynched in Downieville, California, in 1851 (p. 21). Despite a vague acknowledgment that “many accounts” identified her as “Juanita,” Segrave references only one source for his narrative and his assertion that “Josefa Segovia appeared to have been her full name” (p. 21). This was a 1921 Alaska newspaper article detailing the reminiscences of a ninety-four-year-old man who claimed to

have witnessed the lynching. However, historian Rodolfo F. Acuña has established that her name was in fact Juana Loaiza, as documented in the 1877 *Schedule of Mexican Claims against the United States*, which included the (unsuccessful) claim by her husband José María Loaiza for damages caused by “the lynching of his wife and the banishment of himself by a mob.”[1]

Similar errors recur throughout the book. A Nebraska woman lynched in 1886 is identified as “Eliza Taylor,” despite the fact that virtually all contemporary newspaper accounts as well as local court records clearly indicate that her name was Elizabeth (p. 41). Segrave includes an 1895 victim named “Florentina Suarro,” but, as established by historian William Carrigan and a 1901 Senate report of the incident, the person lynched in Cotulla, Texas, on October 5 of that year was a Mexican man named Florentino Suaste (p. 82). Segrave also includes cases that were not lynchings at all, according to the definition commonly accepted by scholars of the subject and that he himself quotes: “There must be legal evidence that a person has been killed, and that he met his death illegally at the hands of a group *acting under the pretext of service to justice, race, or tradition*” (emphasis added, p. 10). The 1896 killing of Mr. and Mrs. William Whaley in Tennessee apparently was performed in retaliation for Whaley’s grand jury testimony against local vigilantes called “whitecaps,” not because the Whaleys had been accused of any crimes themselves (pp. 91-92). Similarly, some initial newspaper reports described the 1895 murder of Mrs. W. E. Holton in Keya Paha, Nebraska, as a “lynching” because she was found hanging in her home amid signs of a great struggle. However, they also immediately speculated that the murder was intended to prevent Holton’s testimony against a local gang of cattle thieves (p. 76). Segrave quotes “one account” that “claimed there was ‘no doubt’ but the crime was committed by rustlers” and that Mrs. Holton had been the “main witness” against a man accused of horse theft (p. 77). Thus, Holton’s

death does not seem to constitute a “lynching” under the generally accepted rubric. In fact, some seventeen of the cases appear to be erroneously characterized as lynchings, or were not confirmed by even a single newspaper report or other primary source, whittling his total from ninety-seven to some eighty confirmed cases.

The failure to ground this study in the extensive modern literature of the field results in a superficial argument that “lynching was about power, control, terror and intimidation; it was about rage and hate; and the unleashing of all that was bestial in humankind” (p. 5). To some extent, this is accurate; however, numerous studies, particularly the work of historians William Carrigan and Michael Pfeifer, have explored the complex gender, race, ethnic, and class dimensions of lynching, and have expanded its geographic boundaries well beyond the South. Despite the book’s focus on women, Segrave’s analysis of the gender dynamics of the lynchings consists largely of the statement that such incidents were relatively rare because of “the place held in society by women. That is, they were viewed as non-violent, passive, and the moral and ethical centers for humankind, and so forth” (p. 8). Again, this is accurate enough, as far as it goes, but fails to explain why, then, were some women lynched? What other factors were in play in addition to the “bloodlust of the mob”? (p. 11). He notes the work of antilynching activist Ida B. Wells, but not her crucial point that white lethal mob violence against black women and children palpably demonstrated the falsity of southern claims that lynching constituted an instinctive response by chivalrous white men to the rape of white women by African American men. Instead, Wells argued, such cases, and the many lynchings of black men for alleged offenses other than rape, proved that lynching at its core constituted white terrorism designed to ruthlessly suppress the economic, political, and social progress of southern blacks. One of Segrave’s most interesting comments links editorial reactions to an 1878 lynching with the increasing prominence of the

women’s movement in the late nineteenth century, but he does not pursue this thread (p. 28).

The text incorporates several large blocks of figures categorizing the victims by race and geographical location, but Segrave does not attempt additional analysis of his data, other than to note the significant percentage of the women who were lynched in conjunction with one or more men. His estimate, somewhat skewed by unconfirmed cases, is 37 percent, and he explains that usually the female victims were simply “swept up by the insane fury of the mob” (p. 19). However, the individual case summaries provide valuable information on the possible (or, at least, publicly stated) motives for the lynchings in seventy-three of the eighty probable cases. Of these seventy-three cases, fifty-three lynchings, or 73 percent, were performed in response to accusations of murder or attempted murder/manslaughter by either the women or men who were lynched with them. This pattern was noted over a century ago in sociologist James Elbert Cutler’s pathbreaking 1905 study of lynching. Cutler found that half of the sixty-three known white and black women lynched between 1882 and 1903 died at the hands of mobs due to allegations of murder or complicity in murder. In nearly every case of Segrave’s fifty-three incidents in which one or more women were lynched for murder, attempted murder, or complicity in murder, the alleged or potential homicide victim was a white man, woman, or child. The summaries do document a few striking exceptions, such as the (unconfirmed) 1891 Alabama lynching of a black school teacher accused of killing her illegitimate baby. In another case, an African American mob apparently lynched a black man and woman suspected of murdering their spouses near Keo, Arkansas, in 1910. But a review of Segrave’s cases indicates that the overwhelming majority of southern black and white female lynching victims died at the hands of white mobs following the homicide or attempted murder of southern whites.

Why, and under what specific circumstances, did these accusations sometimes ignite lethal mob violence against southern black and white women? How does the study of such a relatively rare phenomenon, the lynching of women of any race or ethnicity, furnish crucial insight into the larger record of extralegal executions in American history? Segrave's summaries frequently provide intriguing clues; however, readers seeking in-depth historical analysis and interpretation of this complex and little-studied subject will find this book of limited utility. But the narrative accounts, derived almost entirely from graphic newspaper reports, often provide grim, poignant details that illuminate the human tragedies of the collective killings and point toward possible avenues for further investigation by scholars.

Note

[1]. Rodolfo F. Acuña, e-mail message to author, February 7, 2008; U.S. Senate, Mexican and United States Claims Commission, *Schedule of Mexican Claims against the United States*, Senate Executive Document 31, 44th Cong., 2d sess., vol. 3, February 2, 1877, Doc. 904, 94-95.

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