Summary: On July 14th, 1879 Lucian (also listed as Lucius) Weaver was the victim of an extrajudicial murder by a group of men in Strawberry Plains, Tennessee. Weaver was accused of assaulting Mrs. Sallie Stipes-Howell the wife of John Howell at their home in rural Jefferson County.

Teacher’s Note: This film portrays a painful story in Appalachian history. It offers teachers a unique opportunity to bring a local and regional example of life in the post-Reconstruction South. Through discussion of the lynching of Lucian Weaver, students can draw connection to the larger themes of race injustice during the period and the legacy of that injustice in shaping our communities today.

This film contains descriptions of lynchings. Teachers are strongly encouraged to preview the film and related materials before using them in the classroom.

Discussion Questions

Use the questions below to lead a class discussion after viewing the film.

1. Where is Jefferson County located? Describe the area (i.e. geography, population, economy).
2. What was the initial crime committed? How the was the suspect described in the initial newspaper accounts?
3. What is known about Lucian Weaver?
4. Why do you think Lucian Weaver was identified as the perpetrator of this crime?
5. Discuss the timeline from Weaver’s arrest to his trial. What do you find noteworthy about the timing of these events?
6. Where did Weaver say he was when the crime took place?
7. Was he allowed to present a defense? Why do you think he was not allowed to present any witnesses to support his claims?
8. Who was noted as being part of the mob?
9. What was done to dissuade the mob and protect Weaver? Do you think these were good faith efforts?
10. Why do you think Weaver’s mother was not allowed to bury her son in the local black cemetery?
11. How did the local justice system respond to Weaver’s lynching?
12. Do you think this served as a deterrent for future lynchings? Why or Why not?
Classroom Extensions

- The lynching of Lucian Weaver is a prime example of how this type of mob violence denies the civil and human rights of an individual. Have your students review the Bill of Rights paying particular attention to the Fifth and Sixth Amendments. You may need to break each amendment down so that students are clear on the various components of each. As a class, discuss how those rights were (or not) applied in Weaver’s trial. You may wish to layer in the newspaper excerpt shown on page one. How does this article allude to the violation of Weaver’s rights and the impact of his lynching on the faith of the judicial process?

- Lynchings were often criticized by some in the white community. In the aftermath of the lynching of Lucian Weaver, the Knoxville Daily Chronicle printed an editorial discussing their thoughts on the events and the danger of mob violence. Have students read the editorial (see page three) and analyze the text. Discuss as a class. Then challenge your students to consider this article in comparison to the broader story presented in the film. Based on the sources presented have your students construct a historical argument on the impact of the lynching of Lucian Weaver and how the community responded. Student can use this graphic organizer to outline their thoughts.

Additional Educational Resources

- Lesson: Due Process of Law from the Bill of Rights Institute
- Lesson: Why Is Due Process So Important to American Justice? From iCivics
- Lesson: Due Process Ignored: Lynching and American Culture from Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute

A DANGEROUS SPIRIT

We have as little sympathy for the wretch who perpetrates a brutal and fiendish outrage like that perpetrated upon Mrs. Howell, near Strawberry Plains, as any man can have. We advocate the most rigorous laws for the punishment of such crimes and favor their prompt and rigid enforcement. But mob law is never justifiable. Men will say that for the fiend who outrages the person of a defenseless female, no punishment can be too severe or summary. We grant it. But this is not the objection to mob law. It is the interest of the community to which we must look. The spirit which prompts infuriated men, in the heat of passion, burning for revenge, to take the law into their own hands, if encouraged, leads directly to anarchy, and is destructive of every safeguard placed by the law around the lives and the property of the people. It will prove a progressive evil. If it is permitted, at first the guilty might suffer perhaps, but soon public opinion, always uncertain and capricious, will take the place of law, and instead of passing upon the rights of men to enjoy life and property, in the cool, deliberate, dispassionate manner in which our courts are supposed to proceed, and in which they do proceed when they are properly conducted, passion and fury will rule, and life will be of little value. We will relapse into a state of barbarism, might will rule rather than right, people will lose all respect for law, and property will become valueless. Public virtue will degenerate, and our boasted free country will become a pandemonium.

If only reasonable, virtuous men would, in extreme cases, take the law into their own hands, though it would still be unjustifiable, it might be excused. But this could not be the case. It is the unreasonable mob, the unthinking, the blood-thirsty and the ignorant that we are to fear. There are men in all communities, who, if not restrained, would degenerate into creatures but little better than wild beasts. It is this class of men, who, if permitted, will lead mobs and take life upon the slightest pretext. The transition from taking life to that of destroying and confiscating property, with such minds would be easy and natural. If all men were perfect in every respect, never swayed by passion, always thinking, moved only by the dictates of reason and justice, there would be very little use for courts and laws. But the sad experience of the past teaches us that this is not true.

The mob that killed the negro near Strawberry Plains on Monday night have terribly avenged the outrage upon Mrs. Howell, and if the wretch was guilty his punishment was not too severe. But if there were thinking men engaged in the act, when their passions have cooled down and reason has returned, they will regret what has been done and wish that they had allowed the law to take its course. It would have been as well for the injured lady, and God knows a thousand times better for the community. We trust we may never again be called upon to chronicle such a gross violation of law. Would that we might