



## The Erwin Expulsion of 1918

Erwin, Tennessee 1918

### Teacher's Guide

**Summary:** On May 19th, 1918 a series of tragic events led to the expulsion of the entire Black population from Erwin, Tennessee, a thriving railroad town along the North Carolina border. In the 100 years since, the reputation of the town as an unwelcoming place for African Americans persists, as does its lack of a viable Black population.

**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 Jim Crow South. Through discussion of racial cleansing of Erwin, students can draw connection to the larger themes of race injustice during the Jim Crow period and the legacy of that injustice in shaping our communities today.

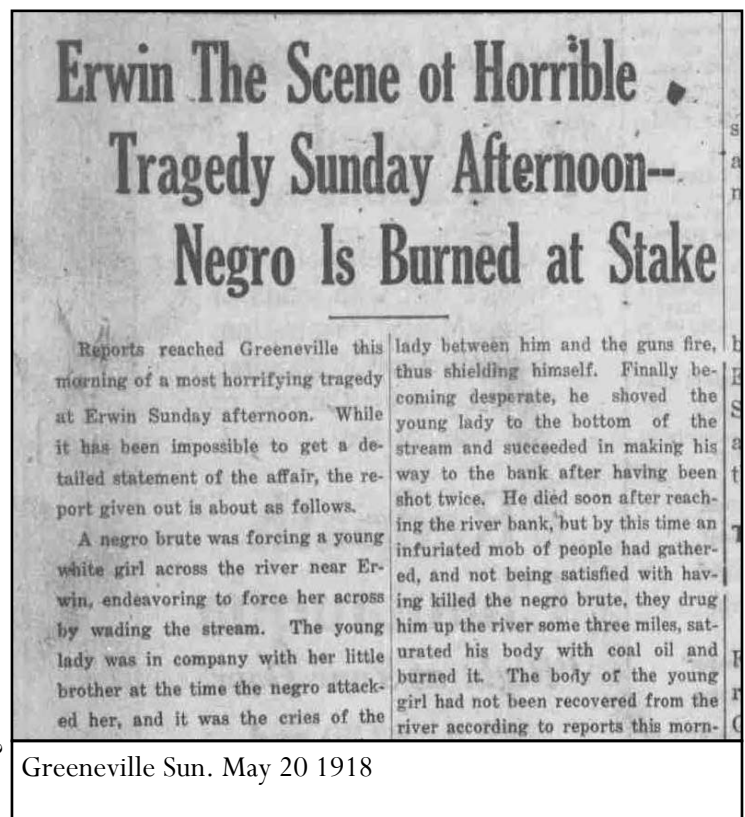
This film contains descriptions of lynchings. Teachers are strongly encouraged to preview the film and related materials before using them in the classroom.

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### Discussion Questions

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

1. Where is Erwin located?
2. Who was Tom Devert? Why do you think it is noted that he had credit with multiple businesses in town?
3. There are two stories that are presented about the events that led up to Devert's death. What are each? Note who was involved and what was the cause of the conflict.
4. Who was the source for the original version of the story?
5. What are the issues that Elliot Jaspin notes that might cause use to question the details of the original version?
6. Where do we get the second version of the events that transpired leading up to Devert's death?
7. Why do you think the local Black community was forced to watch the burning of Devert's body?
8. Who was L.H. Phettplace? How did he deescalate the situation?
9. What was the result of the expulsion?
10. What are the shared characteristics of most racial cleansings that are noted in the video? Why do you think these events share those characteristics?



## Classroom Extensions

- Like many local and community histories, the details of this event are hard to piece together and the available sources offer conflicting details. How do we as historians try to make sense of these conflicting stories? Invite your students to discuss how a historian might try to tackle this problem. Then have them revisit the film. Ask your students to use [this Venn Diagram](#) to answer discussion question three. After they have completed the question and reflected on their responses to questions two—six. Ask to them to discuss how we make sense of these conflicting accounts. Have students discuss how [historical thinking skills](#) can help guide our use of conflicting primary sources.
- Events like the racial expulsion of Erwin often have long-lasting impacts. Ask your students to read the excerpt from the article “Where Blacks Dare Not Go...” from the *Johnson City Press Chronicle* from June 17, 1979 (excerpt provided on page three). What are the long-term consequences of the events of the Erwin Expulsion in May 1918 according to this article? What conclusions can we draw about how traumatic this event might have been for local African Americans who had to flee their homes in 1918? Can we still see those impacts today? How might we determine the continued impact of the Erwin Expulsion?

## Additional Educational Resources

- [The Corbin Expulsion of 1919](#)—Consider having your students study the events of this racial expulsion in the region the following year. Note that you can explore a multitude of different primary and secondary sources related to this event. How do the two events compare? What was the economic impact of losing the African American community in each community?

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**NEGRO POPULATION FLEES  
AS RESULT OF LYNCHING**

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Johnson City, Tenn., May 21 (by A. P.)—The negro population of Erwin, near here, has fled to nearby towns as the result of threats made after the rioting Sunday night which followed the burning of the body of Tom Devert, a negro, who had been lynched. Several industries have been crippled as a result and efforts are being made to get the negroes to return.

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**Purdue Badly Beaten.**

Special to The Courier-Journal.

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The Courier Journal.  
May 22, 1918.

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There have been times during the past 60 years in which blacks lived in Unicoi County — but apparently there are no black residents now.

A few blacks are employed by the Nuclear Fuel Services plant and the Clinchfield Railroad — they commute to work each day.

While many Unicoi Countians deny that they are racially prejudiced, the word has spread among blacks in East Tennessee that they are not welcome there.

“There’s no blacks there and there probably never will be,” says Dr. Arthur J. Cox, president of the Johnson City chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

“Basically, what I know is hearsay,” Cox says, “but it’s kind of a word-of-mouth thing. People just say, ‘Don’t go there if you’re black.’”

His opinion is shared by an observer of recent times in Unicoi County: “The majority of people here want to leave things just as they are.”

Johnson City Press Chronicle.  
Sunday June 17, 1979