from Crusade for Justice (1892)

Setting the Stage  Ida B. Wells was the editor of the Free Speech and Headlight, a small Baptist newspaper in Memphis, Tennessee. She used the paper to attack the evils of Jim Crow, especially lynching. In her autobiography, Crusade for Justice, she described the events that led to the lynching of three of her friends. See Primary Source Explorer

While I was thus carrying on the work of my newspaper . . . there came the lynching in Memphis which changed the whole course of my life. . . .

Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart owned and operated a grocery store. . . . There was already a grocery owned and operated by a white man who hitherto had had a monopoly on the trade of this thickly populated colored suburb. Thomas's grocery changed all that, and he and his associates were made to feel that they were not welcome by the white grocer . . .

About ten o'clock that [one Saturday] night, . . . shots rang out in the back room of the store. The men stationed there had seen several white men stealing through the rear door and fired on them without a moment’s pause. Three of these men were wounded, and others fled and gave the alarm.

Sunday morning’s paper came out with lurid headlines telling how officers of the law had been wounded while in the discharge of their duties. . . . The same newspaper told of the arrest and jailing of the proprietor of the store and many of the colored people. . . .

On Tuesday following, . . . a body of picked [white] men was admitted to the jail. . . . This mob took out of their cells Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart. . . . They were loaded on a switch engine of the railroad which ran back of the jail, carried a mile north of the city limits, and horribly shot to death.

Although stunned by the events of that hectic week, the Free Speech [Wells's newspaper] felt that it must carry on. Its [lead article] for that week said:

The city of Memphis has demonstrated that neither character nor standing avails the Negro if he dares to protect himself against the white man or become his rival. There is nothing we can do about the lynching now, as we are out-numbered and without arms. The white mob could help itself to ammunition without pay, but the order was rigidly enforced against the selling of guns to Negroes. There is therefore only one thing left that we can do; save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a fair trial in the courts, but takes us out and murders us in cold blood when accused by white persons.

1. **hitherto**: until this time.
2. **monopoly**: exclusive control by one person or group.
3. **associates**: friends or partners.
4. **lurid**: causing shock or horror.
5. **discharge**: performance of duty.
6. **proprietor**: owner.
7. **avails**: helps.
Like Country Pretty Much

Setting the Stage  Kee Low was a Chinese immigrant. He had come to the United States in 1876. He was interviewed in 1924 as part of a project by scholars to create a “Survey of Race Relations.” This is an excerpt from that interview. In it, Kee Low tells his story. Despite the racism, he still “like country pretty much.”

I arrived in San Francisco in 1876, 49 years ago. Come to San Francisco when country one hundred years old. People treat Chinese rotten then. Don’t blame people much at that time. Chinese and European not educated as much then as today. More civilized today. People drive Chinese out of country.

I was living on the waterfront, and they told me to get out one day. Sunday morning, they come together and drive Chinese out. . . . They want to get us out to San Francisco, to go on steamer, and we stayed on the wharf all night, and they bring us little black coffee and little bread in morning. We pretty hungry. The last day, some of the citizens, Judge Greene, Judge Hanford, United States Attorney, nice fellow want to help us. . . . Judge Greene told the Chinese that those who wanted to stay and make good citizens could stay, and those who wanted to go could go. One half wanted to go, and one half wanted to stay. . . .

There were so many around the streets that they had to have somebody to protect these people. Some of the hobos tried to make them go back to the wharf, but volunteers tried to keep these fellows away. They commenced shooting and kill one of them. So Chinese people get excited when gun begin to sound, so they throw shoes, blankets and everything and run. I was uptown myself. I didn’t intend to go. I ran outside to see what happened because I was so excited. . . . Call up one or two friends of mine and tell them get killed, and we better get out of the way. We run out in woods. Build fire. Pretty cold. I told friends, we got to protect ourselves. We got to get out of here.

1. wharf: landing place for ships.
2. hobos: homeless people.
3. commenced: began.

A CLOSER LOOK
RACIST ATTITUDES
Some people believe that racism is caused by ignorance.
4. Why does Kee Low believe that discrimination against the Chinese was worse in the 1870s than in the 1920s?

A CLOSER LOOK
REASONS TO STAY
Despite the violence that they faced for having Asian ancestry, half of the Chinese with Kee Low wanted to stay in the United States.
5. Why do you think Asian-Americans stayed in the United States despite discrimination?

Interactive Primary Sources Assessment

1. Main Ideas
   a. What do the accounts of Wells and Low have in common? (REP4)
   b. How did the officers of the law behave differently in the report by Low than in the one by Wells? (REP4)
   c. What conclusions do Wells and Low come to about how someone should respond to discrimination? (REP4)

2. Critical Thinking
   Forming and Supporting Opinions  Do you think Wells and Low were right to flee racism? Why? (REP4)
   THINK ABOUT
   • the causes of racism
   • the threat of violence to Wells and Low

Changes in American Life  625