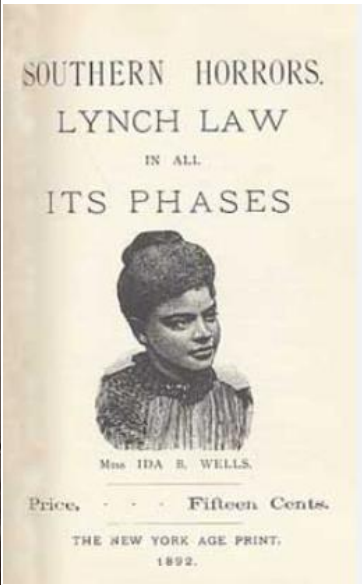
Witness Moment – Ida B Wells



Today's Witness Moment is different, because this is African American History Month, a time when we celebrate the proud history of African Americans, including their unceasing fight against racism. Today I'm going to tell you a brief story of the life of one of the heroes of that history.

Ida B. Wells was born into slavery in 1862. When she was 16 her parents died of yellow fever, and she quit college to become a teacher and raise her five younger siblings.

Ida became a journalist and eventually, co-owner of a newspaper in Memphis. At this time Southerners described lynching as necessary justice, and this explanation was accepted by everyone.
In 1893 a friend of Ida's, a black man, owner of a successful store, was lynched by a gang led by a rival storeowner. Outraged, Ida started researching lynching victims. She published and gave lectures exposing the truth about lynching. Then she wrote a scathing editorial calling Southern men to account. She was out of town when the editorial was published, which probably saved her life. The building housing the paper was burned down, the other owners were run out of town, and Ida was told she would be lynched if she ever returned. Her editorial was reprinted throughout the north, and opinions started to change.

Ida moved to Chicago and became a tireless speaker against lynching. She gave speeches throughout the northern states and was invited to England where her speeches led to the formation of an anti-lynching society. The international exposure led to change. Southern cities like Memphis, which exported cotton to England, found their reputation damaged and started to crack down on lynch mobs.

Ida married Frederick Barnett and continued working to improve opportunities for African Americans while raising four children. In 1896 she campaigned throughout Illinois, traveling by train with her nursing infant son in an early version of "take your child to work."

In 1909 a sheriff in Cairo allowed a mob to take a prisoner from the jai to be lynched. The Black leadership in Chicago demanded that the governor remove the sheriff. A hearing was scheduled, and someone needed to attend and argue for the removal. Ida's husband told his family at dinner that he had spent all day trying to find a speaker, but no one would go, then turned to Ida and said, "And so it would seem that you will have to go. . . Your train leaves at 8 o'clock." She replied that she had been criticized for putting herself ahead of the men and didn't want to go. She then put her youngest daughter to bed and sitting with her, dozed off. In her autobiography she wrote, "I was awakened by my oldest child, who said, 'Mother, Pa says it is time to go,' 'Go where?' I said . . . "To take the train to Cairo.' 'I told your father downstairs that I wasn't going. I don't see why I should have to go and do all the work that the others refuse.' My boy was only ten years old. He . . . had been at the table when [his] father told the story. He stood by the bedside . . . and said, 'Mother if you don't go nobody else will.'
I looked at my child . . . and thought of that passage of Scripture which tells of the wisdom from the mouths of babes . . ." She went. In Springfield a contingent of influential white men spoke first, giving all their reasons for keeping the sheriff. Then Ida, standing alone, spoke. She prevailed. The governor removed the sheriff, and the number of lynchings in Illinois dropped to almost zero.

Ida was one of the cofounders of the NAACP. She also founded the Alpha Suffrage Club for Black women in Chicago. When the National American Women's Suffrage Association organized a march in Washington on the day before Woodrow Wilson's inauguration, the Alpha Club went. Once there they were told that they couldn't march with the other Chicago women, because it might offend the sensibilities of the southern women. They would have to march at the back. The day of the march dawned, and Ida was a no-show. They started, and as they passed the first spectators, Ida suddenly appeared and took her place between two white women. Ida B. Wells-Barnett **never** accepted being at the back.

Sources

Crusade For Justice Ida B. Wells c: 2020
When and Where I Enter Paula Giddings c: 1984
White Poverty Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II c:2024