

IV. IN THE OLD SOUTH

1. *Hahnville, Louisiana, 1869.*

On August 5, 1896, in Saint Charles, not far from New Orleans, the Italian Lorenzo Salardino killed an American citizen named Jules Gueymard and wounded his friend Robert Espenard. Salardino was arrested immediately. The New Orleans newspaper *The Daily Picayune* reported the same day that rumors of an impending lynching were circulating.¹ The following day the newspaper talked about the “innate brutality” of the assassin, implicitly giving legitimacy to a killing that had not yet happened. **“It is feared that Lorenzo Salardino will be taken away from public officers and hanged on the public street as a warning.”**² The next day, August 8, an angry mob went to the nearby jail of Hahnville to take possession of the alleged assassin along with two other Italians, Salvatore Arena and Giuseppe Venturella. These two had been imprisoned previously and they were awaiting trial for the murder of a certain Joaquin Roxino, an accusation that later would be found to be baseless. The three Italians, all awaiting trial, were hanged by a group of masked men. The most important local paper did not write a single word condemning the event, hiding behind an apparent neutrality while defining the lynching “a protest against the methods of mafia.” No condemnation appeared against the mob either, nor towards the authorities responsible for the *de facto* protection of the accused in this climate of pre-announced tragedy.”³

The representatives of the Italian government, who immediately understood the enormous gravity of the triple lynching, had to face a series of substantial and formal obstacles. First of all, they found that a climate of fear dominated the county where the Italians lived. This had the effect of hardening the community’s penchant

¹ “Assassinated in St. Charles.” *The Daily Picayune* August 6, 1896.

² “St. Charles Decides Against a Lynching.” *Idem* August 7, 1896.

³ “Trio Lynched in St Charles.” *Idem* August 9, 1896.

for reticence, something already seen in other circumstances that made the work of finding the truth even harder, also in view of the fact that there were strong doubts on the honesty of the work done by local police authorities. The Acting consul of New Orleans, Carlo Papini, wrote to ambassador Fava apologizing for his delay in sending information on the case. “Many of the people who knew the victims and could have given the information I sought, were totally negative. Some even let me know they were not willing to come to the office unless they got paid for their statements.”⁴

(...) On August 24, 1897, the *New York Herald* published the news that “a black man from Hahnville, Louisiana, confessed to the killing of the old Roccina [Roxino], for whose murder [...] two Italians, Arena and Venturella, together with Salardino, were lynched on August 1896.”⁵ The news was confirmed by New Orleans Consul Papini: the black man, named Creole, accused of numerous murders and hanged on January 1898, was found guilty of one of them, but not of the Roxino’s. A secret report sent by the new Italian consul in New Orleans, Magenta, to the Italian Embassy two months after the death of Creole, contained blood-chilling details on the torture that the “drunken and savage crowd,” “those feral beasts in human form” inflicted to the Italians who, to the very last minute, continued to proclaim their innocence.⁶ The worst aspect was the secrecy that the public authorities kept even after the truth was discovered. The consul concluded that “the judiciary authorities after becoming aware through Creole’s confessions that the unfortunate Arena and Venturella were innocent, unable to repair the dastardly deed, decided to cover everything up at all cost.” Considerations of political expediency, primarily the fear of reactions by Italians in the county, likely led the sheriff to prohibit Creole to confess the homicide in front of the judge, in exchange for we-don’t-know-what.”⁷

⁴ ASDMAE, Serie Politica “P” (1891-1916), b. 623, f. 629. From the Italian Consulate in New Orleans to the Italian Embassy in Washington, August 14, 1896.

⁵ ASDMAE, idem. From the Italian Embassy in Washington to MAE, September 2, 1897.

⁶ Here is the description of how the two Italians were tortured before being killed: “A noose was tied to the neck of each one, while the other end of the rope was looped around the branch of a tree. The rope was pulled and let go so that the feet of the Italians were suspended in mid air or were lowered to touch the ground just before they would die. As soon as the tortured became conscious again, those feral beasts in human form forced them to confess their crime. This torment was repeated several times.” In ASDMAE, idem. From the Italian Consulate in New Orleans to the Italian Embassy in Washington, March 30, 1898.

⁷ Ibidem.

2. Tallulah, Louisiana, 1899.

Tallulah was one of the worst cases of lynching: five Italians were massacred after being accused of attempted murder. The complicity of the local authorities was brazen, as was the local press's. This explains the very harsh attitude of the Italian Embassy, at least initially, and the enormous echo in Italy and in the United States.

The various versions of the facts are generally in agreement: a goat belonging to an Italian, Francesco Difatta, used to enter the bordering yard of a certain Doctor Hodges, the county's doctor and coroner. Eventually, on July 20, 1899, this caused an argument, started by Dr. Hodges. Giuseppe Difatta, Francesco's brother, came to his help and shot the coroner causing a non-lethal, superficial wound. A crowd gathered and the two brothers for self defense barricaded themselves in the house where the third brother, Carlo, was, together with two other Italians, Rosario Fiducia and Giovanni Cerami. When the sheriff arrived he arrested three of the five Italians, who "did not resist arrest despite the fact that they were armed, like everybody else in those places."⁸ Carlo and Giuseppe Difatta managed to escape arrest by hiding out somewhere else. In the course of the night, a mob of over 300 armed people removed the three prisoners and hanged them from the trees in the prison's courtyard. Still not satisfied, they started looking for the other two. They found them and they hanged them in a slaughterhouse nearby. Four of the five Italians were originally from Cefalù, in Sicily, while Cerami was from Tusa, in the province of Messina, also in Sicily. They were working in the fruit and vegetable trade and they had reached a respectable economic position.

The local American press, once again, took a complicit or conniving position. The only exception was the *Evening Post* of Vicksburg that maintained there was **"no valid reason for the mass lynching of Italians" and that "this lynching, similar to what happened in New Orleans a few years ago, is motivated only by an outlaw mentality and by prejudices against foreigners."**⁹

The grand jury, once again, drenched in the worst and trite Italian stereotypes, declared that the five Sicilians had formed a conspiracy to kill the doctor. After a "diligent investigation" they claimed the people responsible for the lynching could not be identified. This seems to be rather unbelievable in a place like Tallulah where, according to *L'Italo-Americano* "barely 400 people

⁸ "Il linciaggio di cinque italiani a Tallulah, La." *L'Italo-Americano. Gazzetta Quotidiana della New Orleans* July 22, 1899.

⁹ *The Evening Post*, July 21, 1899.

live and where everybody knows everybody else and where, if there was the will, the culprits could be found easily. Unfortunately, sad previous experiences teach us that NEVER in any case of lynching, the killers have been arrested and punished.”¹⁰

The same newspaper, the following day, commenting on lynchings, defined Louisiana as the “classic land of this superior form of civilization,” thus casting blame on the entire population: “The lynching minority enjoy the complicity of the majority, of the citizens asleep. Has it ever happened that a jury denounced the names of the members of a lynching mob? Has any lyncher ever been punished? And yet, just one example of full justice would be enough to wipe away the lynching habit.”¹¹

The Italian *Chargé d’Affaires* in Washington, Count Giulio Cesare Vinci, moved immediately to contact Secretary of State Hay, who revealed embarrassment and probably even shame for what happened and, as usual, promised total commitment to act in order to solve the case as soon as possible.¹²

The Italian consular agent in New Orleans, Natale Piazza, was put in charge of an investigation, with the help of one of the editors of the newspaper *L’Italo-Americano* who had been deputized by the consulate. The investigation’s goal was to verify the nationality of the victims and, in case they turned out to be Italian citizens, the sequence of events. It became immediately evident that it would be impossible to gather credible testimonies about the facts. Piazza wrote: “It is impossible to get any

¹⁰ “Il linciaggio di cinque italiani a Tallulah, La.” *L’Italo-Americano. Gazzetta Quotidiana della New Orleans* July 22, 1899.

¹¹ “Il linciaggio di cinque italiani a Tallulah, La.” *Idem*, July 23, 1899.

¹² Correspondence between the Italian Ambassador and Secretary of State Hay on the Tallulah lynching, in FRUS 1899, pp. 440-66, and in FRUS 1900, pp. 715.36.

affidavits about the crime because there are no longer any Italians in that place and it would not be expedient or prudent or effective to rely on Americans, who are openly hostile toward our nationality.”¹³

Piazza sent to the Italian consulate in New Orleans a report containing an accurate review and scrupulous reconstruction of the events, showing that the coroner was responsible for the initial argument, as well as for the silence of the witnesses afterwards. The consular agent was skeptical that the sheriff could be impartial in correctly reconstructing the events, “because after washing his hands of the affair, he doesn’t want to take the chance of ending up the same way our co-nationals did, unless the authority forced him to do so and granted him immunity from prosecution and relocation in exchange for revealing the names of the culprits.

Based on personal impressions, the consular agent described a tangible climate of hostility toward Italians: “I was forced to notice that the people who received us were collectively hostile toward the dead” and that in that particular day “the killing mob acted as if they smelled in an instant the wish of an immense vengeance.” With regard to the “origin of such heinous act, committed by a savage populace with the approval of the entire white population of Tallulah” Piazza thought it could be found in: “first, racial hatred; second, the jealousy of the towns merchants who didn’t like the fact that the few Tallulah Italians were doing pretty well in their business to the detriment of the locals’ interests; third, the opposition to allowing Italians to vote. It is possible that the local power factions were competing for the three Italian votes that could effect the outcome of an election, since the total electoral body is composed of approximately 150 votes.”

The only hope, according to Piazza, was the intervention of the governor of Louisiana: “It would be desirable that in the epistolary exchange between the Royal Government, the Embassy and Your Excellency [the Acting Consul of Italy in New Orleans, Papini], the governor be made aware that his intervention is needed to obtain the immediate incarceration of the culprits which may be possible with the arrest of those Law Enforcement Officers who have acted as accomplices of the assassins, and are in any case unworthy of their titles. Action of this kind

¹³ ASDMAE, Serie Politica “P” (1891-1916), b. 656. From the Italian Consulate of New Orleans to MAE, July 26, 1899.

would greatly gratify the national sentiment so badly offended by this vile lynching, compared to which all precedents fade.¹⁴

The reconstruction of the lynching by the majority of American press, not just the local newspapers, was falsely neutral, reporting a white-washed version of the fact and abstaining from judging the crowd's behavior.¹⁵ Some newspapers, though, presented the Italian victims, and indirectly Italian immigrants as a whole, as rogues and malefactors, thus justifying between the lines the lynchers' initiative as the only defensive measure available to the community.¹⁶

One voice that sang outside the choir was *The Daily Item* that blamed directly the coroner accusing him of provoking the confrontation, thus dismantling the thesis of a conspiracy to kill him.¹⁷ It was clear, in fact, that Joseph Difatta shot and wounded the coroner only after he saw the coroner was about to shoot his brother. The New Orleans's *Italo-Americano* denounced the version published by the *Times-Democrat* that justified the lynching as "the only manner possible to secure white supremacy." For the Italian newspaper, there was very little hope that American justice would do its course: "The administration of justice is in the hands of friends of the lynchers [...] who are completely sure of their impunity."¹⁸ The mass of elements accumulated led the *Chargé d'affaires* at the Italian Embassy in Washington, Count Vinci, to the conclusion that the massacre was related to the competition for jobs between Italians and Americans: "Never was a lynching more atrocious and unjustifiable, with the traits of a despicable criminal act. The goal was to get rid of foreigners whose business undermined the Tallulah's residents."¹⁹

¹⁴ ASDMAE, idem. From Consular Agent Piazza to the Acting Consul of the Italian Consulate in New Orleans, July 29, 1899.

¹⁵ See *The New York Sun* and *The Washington Post*, July 23, 1899.

¹⁶ See *The Daily States*, July 1899.

¹⁷ See *The Daily Item*, July 26, 1899.

¹⁸ "Un'asserzione coraggiosa sul linciaggio di Tallulah," *The Italo-American* July 27, 1899.

¹⁹ ASDMAE, ivi. From the Italian Embassy in Washington to MAE, August 6, 1899. The event had wide echo in Italy: there was a parliamentary debate in addition to large coverage by newspapers. In the same year a ballad was composed by a "cantastorie" [street performer]: *I cinque poveri italiani linciaty a Talulah* [sic] ("The Five Poor Italians Lynched in Tallulah"): "I sing those poor lynched / Who honest and hard working/ Because their name was Italian/There was no piety for them....Oh Italian youths / lower the flag half mast/ and onto the vile sickening mob/ Unleash your darkest vengeance!" The text is in E. Franzina, *Dall'Arcadia in America. Attività letteraria ed emigrazione transoceanica in Italia (1850-1940.)* Torino: Edizioni della Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1996 (101.)

3. Reactions in the United States

A part of the America public opinion and the press openly took sides against the lynchers, even if with rather questionable arguments. The progressive periodical *Harper's Weekly*, for instance, used as aggravating factor against the lynchers, the fact that the victims, although Italian, conducted themselves like "civilized" Americans, as they had accepted the lifestyle of their community: **"All the Italians spoke English, had adopted the dress style and the habits of Americans and wanted to become American citizens."** However, the writer placed the episode in the context of the conflicts between blacks and whites in the area of Madison Parish – the location of the massacre– where black people were the overwhelming majority of the population without even minimally sharing in the political and economic power. **"It is the most black area of the United States: in a population of 16,000 people there are only 160 white families. There are 20 blacks for every white and in some areas the ratio is 1 to 100. Nevertheless, the entire power is in the hands of whites. They own all the land and every other property. They are the only ones who can vote and sit on juries. They elect all the administrative officers and control all the affairs of this area."** In such an explosive situation of conflict, crimes committed by blacks and lynching of black people were rather frequent. Italians found themselves in the middle of the conflict between whites and blacks, with the unwelcome role of "uninvited third party," difficult to classify, and compared to the image of a bat, half rat and half bird.²⁰ The most interesting part of the article deals with the problems facing the white community at the arrival of Italians, namely their "placement" in the extant rigid ethnic and social hierarchy. This was further aggrieved by the familiarity that Italians displayed toward blacks: "When the first Italians arrived in Madison a few years ago – the article states – they represented a problem for the white population. Like a bat, they were difficult to classify and this was made even more difficult by the fact that they dealt mostly with black people and were socializing with them almost as if they were equals."

²⁰ About the complex "color" placement of Italian immigrants in the United States, see F. Fasce, "Gente di mezzo. Gli italiani e "gli altri." *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*. 1, *Arrivi*. Roma: Donzelli 2002. pp. 283-43.

Consequently, they couldn't really be classified as *white*, although they were not black. Relations with them were a problem." In the end, it seemed more "natural" to place Italians at the same level as blacks. Therefore, Italians who dared assault or kill a white man did not deserve a trial but a lynching, just like black people. The article explains: **"At the end it was decided that they should expect the same kind of justice reserved to black people who assault or shoot or kill a white man in Madison: no trial, lynching. The white people who govern and administer Madison are not willing to let Italians join their own ranks."**²¹

Count Vinci complained to the federal government which in turn pressured the governor of Louisiana. However, the ambassador didn't think this would be enough to even raise hope about a positive outcome in this complex episode. He reported his skepticism in a letter to Minister Visconti Venosta "so as not to feed too much hope in the effectiveness of that pressure." The specificity of the lynching made it exceedingly difficult, if not outright impossible, to ascertain the facts: "Given that this is not an isolated murder but a collective crime perpetrated by the entire citizenship of a village, it is natural that the solidarity for the crime is able to mount a resistance that both constitution and laws did not anticipate."²²

A new case, the "Delfina casa" arrived a little more than a month after the lynching to exasperate the tension, in a climate that was saturated but not yet satisfied with the blood already spilled. It was another threat of lynching in the same place. The lynchers found out that a brother-in-law of the Difatta, Giuseppe Delfina from Cefalù, totally extraneous to the previous events, had moved to the county. They resolved to complete the job of exterminating Italians. Fortunately, a friend of Delfina caught wind of the plan and was able to alert him giving him enough time to gather his family and find safety by crossing the Mississippi River. However, he had to abandon everything, his store, his land and his business.

5. *Erwin, Mississippi, 1901*

Two Sicilians from Cefalù, Giovanni Serio and his son Vincenzo, were lynched in Erwin on July 11, 1901. They were door-to-door fruit and vegetable sellers. They were killed by rifle shots while they were sleeping outdoors on the roof of a house owned by a friend, Francesco Cascio. A third person, Salvatore Liberto, who was also working with the Serios was also wounded.

²¹ N. Walzer. "Tallahassee's Shame," *Harper's Weekly* August 5, 1899.

²² ASDMAE, idem. From the Italian Embassy in Washington to MAE, August 9, 1899.

Cascio managed to escape and reported the massacre. The three casualties were still Italian citizens. The assassination of the two Italians and the wounding of the third were not the result of a violent confrontation, or the outcome of some long-standing dispute that could represent a potential danger for them. In fact they were sleeping outdoors without any reason to suspect an ambush. The only conflict they had been involved in had taken place months earlier for rather futile reasons. The Italian consul in New Orleans, Natale Piazza, sent an agent, Tirelli [probably Adelelmo Luigi Tirelli] to investigate the facts and report back to him. Tirelli's reconstruction was based on the information he was able to gather from other Italians in the area. Eight months earlier the Serios used to live in Glen Allen, near Erwin, where they ran a respectably successful business. A horse they owned often trespassed into the land owned by a certain G.B. Allen, owner of a large plantation. In several occasions Allen confiscated the animal protesting that it damaged his pasture and requesting the payment of one dollar as ransom for returning it. In one occasion

Allen threatened at gunpoint one of the Serios who was complaining against this act of bullying. The next time the horse was confiscated, the older Serio, carrying rifle for self defense purposes, went directly to Allen's house to get back his horse. The same evening Allen and a group of other people went to the Serios house with the intent to kill them. The brother had been warned just in time and managed to flee to Greenville after being chased by an armed posse for six or seven miles.

In Greenville the Serios tried to restart the fruit-selling business but they weren't doing well. Their friend Francesco Cascio suggested that they move to Erwin where they could stay as his guests. They were reasonably reassured that Allen would not try to kill them again. Glen Allen was over six miles from Erwin and, in any case, the quarrel seemed to have cooled off. Tirelli's investigation also included the testimony of Rosario Liberto, 17 years old, brother of the person who was wounded in the attack. The evening when the lynching took place, as he was about to leave Glen Allen where he worked to return home to Erwin, he ran into the town's doctor, Hollow, who warned him not to go back to Erwin because there was a plan to kill the Italians living in that village. The boy, terrified, told two *paesani*, Vincenzo Giglio and Giuseppe Butera who ran to the town's telephone office to urge the other Italians in Erwin to flee and find safety elsewhere. At the office they were told that the telephone was out of order. Unconvinced, they kept insisting they needed to make an urgent call. The employee replied that it wasn't their

business to spread the news to people in Erwin and threw them out. At this point the two Italians, afraid they would be assassinated, avoided reporting the information to the sheriff. When they spoke to Tirelli they stated that they were willing to testify in court under oath. This was additional overwhelming evidence about the conspiracy-complicity surrounding Allen's violent plan. Tirelli in a survey of the crime scene counted 35 bullet holes, which led him to conclude that several shooters were involved.²³

The Italian language press in the United States immediately denounced the events with heavy accusations against the "most civilized" American population and against the feebleness of the Italian government with loud demands for "strong and resolute action." The New York *Progresso Italo-Americano* commented on the devastation brought onto Italians by the news of yet another lynching.

"Once again American hands drip with Italian blood. Once again savage brutality triumphs at the expense of free citizens. Once again the spilled blood denounces the failure of the law and the shame of primitive practices. Lynch's Law is the name given to a crime that carries in itself the vestiges of barbarism – with savage mob running amok and abandoning themselves to truculent acts: this is something that terrifies and causes horror."²⁴

In the general tone of condemnation expresses by the entire Italian language press in the United States, some nuanced differences emerged in the degree of revulsion. The New York Italian newspaper *L'Araldo*, for instance, in a comment about an article appeared on *Il Progresso* criticized the fatalism of calling lynching "an endemic and incurable disease of this country," and the paradoxical comparison that an Italian who migrated to Brazil could fall victim to yellow fever while in the United States he could be lynched.²⁵

6. The Embassy Reacts

The usual procedure was started, like in previous cases of lynching. First came the protest by the Italian *Chargé d'affaires* in Washington, Carignani, to his counterpart at the State Department²⁶ who responded with the traditional formula of regret for the tragedy and the

²³ ASDMAE, Italian Diplomatic Delegation in Washington (1901-1909), b.1 47, f. 3225. From the Italian Consulate in New Orleans to the Italian Embassy in Washington, July 19, 1901.

²⁴ *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* July 13, 1901.

²⁵ *L'Araldo* July 25, 1901.

²⁶ ASDMAE, idem. From the Italian Embassy in Washington to MAE, July 24, 1901.

promise that everything would be done to find and punish the offenders. “He expressed the regret of the government for the recent lynching of two Italian in Mississippi and indicated that every effort was being made to identify and bring the culprits to justice.”²⁷

(...) And once again the investigation ordered by the governor of Mississippi, exactly like in previous cases, showed that the local authorities had not made any effort to identify the authors of the crime.²⁸ Not particularly surprised at the outcome, the *Chargé d’Affaires* Carignani wrote to the person in charge at the State Department complaining that “several days after the crime, it doesn’t seem that a judiciary inquiry has been started, which is the very first step for the prosecution of a crime.” It was obvious that the criminals could rely on a network of accomplices, first and foremost the person in charge of the telephone office. “We have full confirmation of the depositions by Vincenzo Giglio and Giuseppe Butera in which they declare that the day before the lynching took place they tried to alert Vincenzo Serio about the lynching plans, but they were denied the use of the telephone three times. The Embassy also requested protection for the witnesses, after noticing the existence of an atmosphere of fear and intimidation surrounding the Italians living in that village.

The American press tried to deny that this act of violence fell under the rubric of a lynching, arguing that the classic modalities of lynching were not present since the victims had not been taken from a prison. Notwithstanding the many variables present in different lynchings, the press insisted on the differences, in particular the premeditation factor. The episode was ascribed to the category of bloody actions. The Acting consul in New Orleans, Papini, however, wrote to the Embassy presenting a very different thesis based on strong arguments: “That this was a lynching is also proved by the warning given by Doctor Hollow (or Hanna) of Glen Allen to the youngster Liberto, brother of the wounded victim Salvatore Liberto, alerting him of what was going to happen to Vincenzo Serio. Other proof is the refusal by the telephone operator of Glen Allen to let V. Giglio use the telephone to urge the Serios to flee. We also know that a telephone call was made to Glen Allen on the morning of July 9, with the information that Vincenzo Serio was on the train to Erwin. This latest circumstance was communicated

²⁷ *The Washington Post* July 22, 1901.

²⁸ This is made even more obvious by the meager reward for the capture of the lynchers: \$100 from the governor’s office and \$100 from the County. See FRUS 1901, p. 289.

by means of an anonymous letter, however, it does have value in that it explains the reason why the telephone operator denied use of the telephone to the same V. Giglio.” The message contained the usual accusations against the local and state authorities “whose goal is to drag things on so that eventually everything will be forgotten.”²⁹

Whether the Erwin episode was classified as a lynching was not simply a matter of semantic disputes. The classification was extremely important: if it was considered as a common crime, the victims’ families would have no chance of obtaining reparation from the government. Not coincidentally, this was the thesis of both the American press and Acting Secretary of State David Hill. The Embassy was determined to prove that the killings were a true lynching and was not willing to back down. Carignani wrote to Minister Prinetti that “the grand jury assembled by the sheriff stated that the victims’ death was *God’s will*, which is exactly the same formula used for lynchings.”³⁰ Attached to the report to Minister Prinetti, Carignani also sent to Rome the definition of lynching according to the state of Ohio, which included any illegal act committed by a mob.³¹ He further explained that “in general the laws of one state constitute a precedent for other states.”

Minister Prinetti had given instructions for the hiring of a local private detective to look for the offenders but the Embassy responded that “both private agencies and detectives of the secret police refused to take the job. This is in line with the traditions of the South where lynching is not considered a crime and where anyone trying to track down the assassins would be exposed to the danger of reprisals.” The cultural factors were to be added to the low level of professionalism in the investigation: “Police officers and private investigators in the southern states generally are not considered very capable to the point that Americans themselves do not hire them.” Ambassador Carignani then tried to convince the federal government to send its secret police, offering that the Italian government would foot the bill: “This would demonstrate how deep our interest is in finding the culprits and

²⁹ ASDMAE, Serie Politica “P” (1891-1916), b. 680, f. 856. From the Italian Consulate in New Orleans to the Italian Embassy in Washington, attached to the report of August 1, 1901.

³⁰ ASDMAE, idem. From the Italian Embassy in Washington to MAE, August 3, 1901

³¹ “Lynching was defined by Ohio laws as follows: any group of individuals gathered for any illegal purpose, with the intention of causing damage, wounds or offenses to anyone, claiming the exercise of correctional power on other people by means of violence and without the authority of the law, for such purpose will be considered a mob and every act of violence perpetrated by it against another person will constitute lynching.” 92 Ohio Laws, 136, in ASDMAE, idem.

would also reassure us as to the effectiveness of the investigation.”³² The federal government, however, was convinced that the local authorities were finally actively working to find the offenders and rejected the request explaining that “there would be no reason to send agents of the central government.” This reassurance led Carignani to believe, at least temporarily, that “the Mississippi authorities [were] demonstrating more zeal.”³³

Minister Prinetti was less optimistic and became critical of the trust Carignani had placed in the activities of the governor of Mississippi and of the federal government: “Unfortunately [...] so far there is no evidence that your impression is about to be translated into concrete and effective action.” In reality no honorable solution was appearing on the horizon. All pointed into the opposite direction, starting with the statements by the jury convened by the county sheriff that the authors of the crime were unknown; continuing with the ineptitude of the state’s governor; and finishing with the federal government’s refusal to take action, barricaded behind the limits imposed by the constitution, “to the point of rejecting the suggestion to use at our expense the secret police, whose member – we presume – are less susceptible to local pressures.” Prinetti added: “The inertia is so patent and willful that we can not rest and avoid pointing it to the federal Government.”

(...) In a report to Consular Agent Natale Piazza, the envoy of the consul in New Orleans, Tirelli, talked about the reticence and terror that dominated among the local Italians “all full of fear and regret for the statements they made.” In particular the main witness, Salvatore Liberto, who had been wounded, was certain that his testimony would mean certain death. At first Liberto had promised to Papini that he would appear in court and render the same deposition. Later, however, “he refused to appear in court, explaining that if he talked in front of the jury, that would be the end of his life: in time he would be killed like a dog by the mob of Washington County where he earns his living.” The other Italians in the area were afraid of the ending up the same way: “Everybody is fixated on this idea, and in fact as soon as they found

³² ASDMAE, Italian Diplomatic Delegation in Washington (1901-1909), b.1 47, f. 3225. From the Italian Consulate in New Orleans to the Italian Embassy in Washington, August 14, 1901.

³³ ASDMAE, Serie Politica “P” (1891-1916), b. 680, f. 856. From the Italian Embassy in Washington to MAE, August 21, 1896.

out that I was in the area they managed to disappear.”³⁴ After reassuring them, Tirelli was able to convince them to go to court to testify.

The grand jury met on September 13, 1901, to evaluate if enough evidence was available to proceed to an indictment. The verdict was negative to the great consternation of the Italian government. According to Acting Consul Papini, there could be two possible explanations: “Either the depositions made at the consulate were not *repeated identically* at the hearing [...], or the prosecutor has discarded the depositions in order to save the town’s honor and good reputation.” His sad conclusions left no hope: “Regardless of the reason, we can legitimately conclude that any future attempt to obtain justice would end up in failure.”

9. Ashdown, Arkansas, 1901.

This case concerned the assassination, or the lynching, on August 1901, of an Italian, Giuseppe Buzzotta, from Castelvetrano. According to the reconstruction made by Papini, Acting Consul in New Orleans, he “was killed during a riot by American workers, supported by public law enforcement officers.” Papini immediately alerted that it would be practically impossible to disprove the official version issued by the local authorities that blamed Bazzotta for provoking the incident. The problem was compounded by the difficulty to find witnesses willing to testify. Often the witnesses initially would declare themselves ready to testify but then, because of intimidation, recanted on their depositions or refuse to appear in court: “Usually Italian witnesses are quick with wide and elaborate narrations when they speak with the Representatives of the Italian Government, but later, either because they lack conscience, or due to intimidation or other pressures, when they are facing the grand jury or in court with equal ease they change or deny the original depositions.”³⁵

One month after the episode, it was still impossible to obtain credible and definitive information. Ambassador Mayor wrote to Minister Prinetti: “We haven’t been able to establish if [...] this was a common bloody crime or a true lynching, as some believe.” The ambassador was planning to discuss with the secretary of state this case and also other “frequent bloody

³⁴ ASDMAE, Serie Politica “P” (1891-1916), b. 680, f. 856. From the Italian Consulate in New Orleans to the Italian Embassy in Washington, August 14, 1896. Attached to the report from the Italian Embassy in Washington to MAE, September 22, 1901.

³⁵ ASDMAE, Serie Politica “P” (1891-1916), b. 682, f. 871. From the Italian Consulate in New Orleans to MAE, October 15, 1901.

crimes, either lynchings or not, in which our fellow citizens are victims, without the kind of protection they are entitled to by the authorities, both by virtue of principles of humanity and by force of the treaties.”³⁶

In this case the formalities were followed. The assassin was duly prosecuted, the witnesses testified but the trial itself turned out to be a farce. The initial declarations by Italian witnesses were confirmed by some American newspapers that showed how this was a voluntary homicide. “The judge – Mayor wrote – instead decided this was involuntary homicide or without criminal intent.”³⁷ The outcome left many questions open, among which was the fact that the Italian witnesses who could testify that the crime was committed voluntarily, either were not called to testify or gave statements that were different from those given in the preliminary depositions.

The Italian language press in the United States once again erupted in indignation, placing this episode in the context of the competition for work among various ethnic groups. *La Tribuna* wrote: “We have new details on the depraved lynching of a poor Italian worker. A group of Italian workers is employed on the construction of the “Kansas City Southern Railroad.” Here, just like in every other place, Italian workers are eagerly sought after because for the same salary they are much more productive than the ever-complaining drunkard Irish or lazy blacks.” The newspaper reported the reconstruction of the events that “nailed” the responsibility of the murder on a group of about one hundred “indigenous” workers, armed with rifles, who had mercilessly terrorized and threatened harmless Italian workers and killed Buzzotta.” *La Tribuna* lamented and denounced the lack of protection for Italian immigrants by the Italian government, mentioning as proof that even the Erwin’s lynchers had not been found. “The Italian colony is rightfully indignant and is still waiting for effective action by the Italian government. If nothing happens everyone will be persuaded that it is useless to spend money for ambassadors and embassies since all they are good at is acting like the diplomats of... the Grande Duchesse of Gerolstein.”³⁸ Just as stern was another comment published by the newspaper: “Once again this proves that in too many states of the Union there is a chronic and widespread habit of treating Italians worse than the ancient Helots, with no spirit of humanity

³⁶ ASDMAE, idem. From the Italian Embassy in Washington to MAE. November 25, 1901.

³⁷ ASDMAE, idem. From the Italian Embassy in Washington to MAE. April 29, 1902.

³⁸ The reference is to the *opera buffa* by J. Offenbach *La Grande Duchesse de Gerolstein* (1867).

and justice. How long will our flesh and our names be subjected to the offenses and scorn of such scum -- protected and made even more cocky by total impunity?"³⁹

10. *Davis, West Virginia, 1903.*

This episode wasn't a true lynching. Rather, as Ambassador Mayor described, was an attack against Italians with "some characteristics of a lynching." The event took place in the context of a labor conflict and competition for jobs among ethnic groups. The ambassador reported that on May 29, 1903, in Davis, West Virginia, during the night "a box full of dynamite exploded under a house where 37 of our fellow Italians were sleeping." The results were tragic: one person died immediately for the effects of the explosion and a second died a few days later from his injuries. From the fragments of news that could be gathered, it seemed that the bombing was caused by competition for jobs and was aiming at terrorizing the Italian workers and force them to abandon the place. The Italian consul in Philadelphia moved quickly to contact the police superintendent in Davis, demanding the most vigorous protective measures for the local Italian population.⁴⁰ The investigation conducted by Speranza that we previously introduced, had revealed the existence of maltreatment of Italian workers in West Virginia.⁴¹ The report described a terrifying picture of their living conditions, ranging from intimidation to "brutal terrorism." These included recruitment practices by Italian bosses with no scruples; the abuses by store owners who had the monopoly on the sale of every possible item in the encampments; and the impossibility to leave the camp. "Those labor camps – Speranza wrote in his investigation-denunciation-- look like deserts, livable only by feral animals [...] The isolation makes the men anxious to run away. It is proven that armed guards are employed to intimidate workers and to prevent them from leaving the camp. As far as labor organizations are concerned, in West Virginia union members are more or less the same number as non-union workers: this creates a climate of conflicts and reprisals." Italian workers at Camp Davis at that time belonged to the non-union faction and were considered "scabs."

³⁹ "Gli Italiani in America." *La Tribuna* August 24, 1901.

⁴⁰ ASDMAE, idem. From the Italian Embassy in Washington to MAE. June 7, 1903.

⁴¹ The report drafted by Speranza, in date May 15, 1903, is in *Bollettino Emigrazione*, 1903, 14.

The murder, or lynching, was made possible by the neglect of public authorities “despite the fact that it had been predicted for a long time.” This element enabled the victims’ families to request an indemnification from the American government.

Giovanni Angelone submitted immediately a request to the Italian Embassy to process his claim with the American government for \$25,000 as reparation for the death of his brother Vincenzo, due to the lack of protection by local authorities.

Without much enthusiasm, the usual official steps were taken by the Italian consul in Philadelphia with the governor of the state; and by the Embassy with the secretary of state “to obtain, we hope, the punishment of the culprits.” The Embassy was rather pessimistic both about the chance of a trial and the chance to obtain an indemnification: “About the request for indemnification, it would be naïve to expect it would come from the offenders since they will never be known, or, if they are discovered, they probably are workers and agents of the Labor Unions: people with no money.” Even if the request for an indemnification could be pursued, in that moment it wasn’t politically viable to “monetize” the “blood price,” as demonstrated by the accusations against Minister Prinetti by Senator Fava for the Erwin lynching: “Moreover, in the present case that has some characteristics of a lynching and where there is a victim, I don’t know if the intervention of the Royal Embassy would receive approval, after the very recent declarations of Minister Prinetti who rejected, in front of the whole Senate, the shame of having exacted blood price.”⁴²

⁴² ASDMAE, idem. From the Italian Embassy in Washington to MAE. June 29, 1903.