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The Story of Ida B. Wells

By Shannon Moreau

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IDA B. WELLS, the young journalist from Memphis, Tennessee, stepped out of the Natchez, Mississippi, church with a smile on her face. She had just signed up twenty new subscribers for *Free Speech*, the black newspaper she owned with her partner, J. L. Fleming. Since she had begun traveling up and down the Mississippi Valley seeking new subscriptions, the Memphis weekly's readership had more than doubled.

The minister of the church walked up to Ida with a newspaper in his hand. "Miss Wells, something bad's happened in Memphis."

A bolt of fear shot through Ida. Her hand shook slightly as she took the 10 March 1892 edition of the *Memphis Commercial*.

The night before, a mob of white men had seized three black grocery store owners, dragged them down to the railroad tracks, and shot them to death. One of the store owners, Thomas Moss, had begged for his life for the sake of his wife, daughter, and unborn child. When he realized he was going to die, he said, "Tell my people to go West-there is no justice for them here."

Ida's heart nearly stopped. She looked up into the minister's solemn face.

"It can't be!" Ida's eyes welled with tears. "Thomas Moss and his wife are my good friends. I'm godmother to their daughter, Maurine. This can't have happened to him!"

Ida caught the next train back to Memphis. During the trip, she battled with feelings of anger, shock, and grief. This was not the first time she had been touched by tragedy. Nor was it the first time she had experienced the injustices against blacks in the post-Civil War South.

Ida was born the daughter of slaves in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1862, three years before the end of the Civil War. After emancipation, her father worked as a carpenter. He built the house in which he and his wife raised their eight children. As a child, Ida attended the elementary school at Rust College, which had been founded in 1866 by Methodist missionaries from the North.

Many white Southerners rebelled against citizenship for former slaves. Ida remembered hearing about midnight raids by the Ku Klux Klan, a terrorist group bent on maintaining white supremacy. Ida's mother used to pace the floor at night, waiting for her husband to come home from his political meetings.

In 1878 a yellow fever epidemic swept through Holly Springs. Both of Ida's parents and her baby brother perished. At age sixteen, she quit school to take care of her six brothers and sisters.

In 1883, when Ida was twenty-one, she packed up and moved herself and her two youngest sisters to Memphis, Tennessee, to live with a widowed aunt. She accepted a teaching position in a rural school in Woodstock and commuted to and from work by train. That same year the Supreme Court ruled that the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which prohibited segregation in transportation and public places, was unconstitutional. Southern legislatures had already passed laws that barred blacks from voting. Now the way was paved for a rigid system of segregation, beginning with the railroads.

In May 1884, Ida was traveling from Memphis to Woodstock when the conductor approached her. "I can't take your ticket here," he told her. "You'll have to move to the smoking car."

"I have a first-class ticket," Ida replied. "This is my rightful seat."

The conductor disappeared. A few minutes later he returned with two baggage clerks. The three men dragged Ida from her seat while the white passengers clapped. Ida refused to go into the smoking car; instead she got off the train at the next station. Although she hired a lawyer and sued the Chesapeake and Ohio railroad for discrimination, she lost her case in 1887.

Now, riding from Natchez back to Memphis, Ida was about to face the third test in her life.

Ida arrived in Memphis too late to attend Thomas Moss's funeral, but she went straight to comfort his pregnant widow, Betty, and their daughter, Maurine. She later wrote: "I have no power to describe the feeling of horror that possessed every member of the race." Brutal killings of blacks in the South were on the rise, and they were going unpunished by the law.

"Betty," Ida said to the tearful widow, "I'll never forget the talks Thomas and I had when he delivered mail to the *Free Speech* every day. He believed that we should defend the cause of right and fight wrong wherever we saw it."

Ida fought injustice against blacks in the best way she knew how -- with her pen. The first article she'd ever published had been about her incident with the railroad. Subsequent stories dealt with education and religion. She was now about to tackle the biggest issue of her career.

The *Free Speech* published Ida's editorial. It said in part:

> 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 therefore only one thing left that we can do; save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and prop-erty, nor give us a fair trial in the courts, but takes us out and murders us in cold blood when accused by white persons.

After Betty Moss gave birth to a son, Thomas Moss Jr., the widow moved her family to Indiana. Many other black citizens were packing up and leaving Memphis as well. This exodus got the attention of the white businessmen and city officials. They were losing labor and the money of the black people. The daily papers printed editorials urging black citizens to stay. Ida countered with her own articles describing the new lives people were making for themselves in Oklahoma Territory.

Those who remained in Memphis boycotted the newly opened streetcar line. Two officials from the City Railway Company came to the *Free Speech* office and asked Ida to tell her people to ride the streetcars again. In her next article for the *Free Speech*, she told her readers to keep up the boycott.

Ida was trying to decide where she herself wanted to go. A few years before, she had met T. Thomas Fortune, a New York newspaper editor, at a press convention. Fortune wrote Ida and asked her to come look at New York City before she decided where to settle down. Ida had already planned to attend an African Methodist Episcopal conference in Philadelphia. From there she took a train east to visit New York.

Fortune met her at the train station. "Well, I've been trying for a long time to get you to New York," he said, "but now that you are here, I'm afraid you'll have to stay."

Ida said, "I don't understand what you mean."

"That ruckus you kicked up in Memphis. When I heard about it, I knew it had to be you because it sounded so like you."

Ida was totally bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

"Haven't you seen the morning newspaper?" Fortune asked.

"No."

He handed her a copy of the *New York Sun*.

A group of Memphis citizens had stormed the offices of the *Free Speech* during the night. They had destroyed all the equipment and run Ida's business partner, J. L. Fleming, out of town. They left a note among the ruins: anybody who tried to publish the paper again would be punished by death.

Alarmed, Ida sent a telegram to her lawyer to find out if her partner was safe. Friends sent letters and telegrams back to her. Fleming had escaped Memphis unharmed. Her friends begged her not to return, since white men with guns were watching the train stations and her house. They had orders to kill her on sight.

Ida B. Wells never went home. She stayed on in New York, then moved to Chicago where she married Ferdinand Barnett, a lawyer and journalist. Ida devoted the rest of her life to investigating, reporting, and lecturing on the growing numbers of lynchings of black citizens. She toured England twice and became famous in America and England for her antilynching crusade.

Her speeches raised the consciousness of the nation. Condemnation from the North as well as England forced Southerners first to justify lynching, then publicly to deplore it. Between 1893 and 1898, several Southern states passed antilynching laws.

The day that Ida B. Wells heard the terrible news about her friend Thomas Moss was a day that changed her life forever. Experience had taught her strength and courage. She needed both for her tireless and fearless work, telling the nation about crimes against black citizens and asking U.S. Courts to punish the perpetrators. Change came slowly. It wasn't until decades after her death in 1931 that lynchings of black people almost completely stopped. In 1942 a Gallup poll showed that a majority of Americans favored making lynching a federal crime. Ida launched the movement that changed public sentiment and led to the time when the atrocities would end. Personal tragedy inspired Ida B. Wells to work heroically to bring about justice for her people.