

The Radical Lives of Ida B. Wells: A Mixer

1.

I was born into slavery on July 16, 1862, in **Holly Springs, Mississippi**. When slavery ended in 1865, my family was eager to vote, own property, start businesses, and attend school. My childhood was a happy one, full of school, reading, and chores. My parents also made sure to teach me about the importance of being politically engaged and using my voice to speak up for justice, even if it was dangerous. My mom shared stories of her life under slavery. My dad was active in local politics and attended political meetings. I attended many of these meetings with my dad, often reading the newspaper to him and his friends and listening in on discussions about events of the day. Some of my dad's friends were even elected to local government positions. Many of these stories gave me hope that political and racial equality would be possible.

2.

In 1918, I was selected to represent the Universal Negro Improvement Association at the **Paris Peace Conference**. We believed that any agreement about global peace should include a commitment to racial equality. This seemed natural to me. How could the United States send delegates to France to discuss peace when their own country treated Black citizens so poorly? The U.S. government denied my passport application without explanation, so in the end I did not go. That same year, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) created a file about me. One entry included: "We have on file quite a few reports from different cities, where [Ida B. Wells] has addressed meetings of colored people and endeavored to impress upon them that they are a downtrodden race and that now is the time for them to demand and secure their proper position in the world. She is a very effective speaker and her influence among the colored race is well recognized. I believe she is considered by all of the intelligence officers as one of the most dangerous negro agitators, and it would seem that her case should be considered very carefully before she is given a passport to the Peace Conference."

3.

The Great Migration began in 1910. This was a time when thousands of Black people across the South began moving to the North, including Chicago, where I lived. We noticed a few places that migrants could go to help them get settled after their move. So my husband, Ferdinand L. Barnett, and I started a new organization called the **Negro Fellowship League** and opened a community center to aid Black migrants. Each day, an average of 45 people used the community space. Some used the center as a short-term hotel. We provided free legal advice. We had a library of newspapers from around the country so that migrants could look for jobs or read news from where they came from. We even held weekly lectures to educate the community about the important topics of the time. Despite all the good we were doing, we ran out of funds after our third year. So I took an extra job to keep the center open. This is how I became Chicago's first Black and female probation officer. I worked a full day at the court, and then worked at the center until late at night. Having migrated from South to the North myself, I knew the challenges these young men faced. I was willing to sacrifice my own time to help these young men, like others had done for me.

4.

One day in 1918, two white Secret Service agents came to me with a warning. They showed me a picture of a button I had distributed. It read, “In Memoriam Martyred Negro Soldiers Dec. 11, 1917.” I made these buttons to protest the U.S. Army’s lynching of Black soldiers at **Camp Logan in Houston, Texas**. The agents told me that if I continued to distribute the buttons, I could be charged with treason. They demanded that I give them the buttons and promise not to distribute them anymore. I refused and said, “I think it was a dastardly thing to hang those men as if they were criminals and put them in holes in the ground just as if they had been dead dogs. If it’s treason for me to think and say so, then you will have to make the most of it.” I knew my rights and knew that they couldn’t arrest me. And they didn’t. In fact, they left without even taking the buttons. And I kept distributing them.

5.

I had long believed that winning the right to vote for women — what we called suffrage — was important. But I also believed it was only important if all women, Black and white, could vote. For years, white-led suffrage organizations excluded Black women. That’s why other Black women and I co-founded the **Alpha Suffrage Club** in 1913. Our club was the first all-Black suffrage organization in Illinois, where I lived. One of our first activities was to send me, the president of the Club, and 61 other delegates from Illinois, to Washington, D.C., to join the March 3rd Women’s Suffrage Parade. Our group was racially integrated, but when we arrived in Washington, D.C., we were informed that Black women would need to march at the back of the Parade to appease Southern white suffragists. I pretended to go along with the plan. But when the parade started, I joined the front of the Illinois delegation arm-in-arm with white suffragists. No one was going to put me in the back — ever.

6.

In 1913, some might have believed that I should slow down my activism. I was **51 years old** with four children at home and a full-time job. But I could not slow down. There was always an injustice to fight. In fact, I doubled down on my anti-lynching, anti-segregation, and pro-women’s voting activism. I was the president of the Alpha Suffrage Club, a group that fought for women’s right to vote. I edited two newspapers and wrote articles about lynching, segregation, and voting. My husband and I ran the Negro Fellowship League, a center for Black migrants who fled the violence and discrimination in the South and came to Chicago. In 1913, thanks to the work of women — both Black and white — Illinois passed a law granting limited suffrage to women. Although it was not perfect, the law allowed me and other women the right to vote for presidential candidates and other local officials.

7.

In September 1883, a train conductor asked me to move to the “colored car” from the ladies coach. I refused and explained that I was no different than the other white, educated, and professional women who rode in the ladies coach. Two years earlier, Tennessee passed a law that required white and Black train passengers to ride in “**separate but equal**” cars. I ignored the law because I knew it was unjust. After a brief argument, the conductor grabbed me. I bit his hand and fought back. Eventually, I was kicked off the train. But I still had a job to get to. So the next day I bought another ticket and rode in the ladies car once again. The next time I was ordered to move, I filed a lawsuit against the railroad company. On Christmas Eve, 1884, a court ruled that the railroad company broke the law and awarded me \$500, worth almost a year’s salary from my teaching. I thought we beat the racist “separate but equal” law, but the victory was short-lived. Two years later, another court ruled that the railroad company was right to force me to sit in the “colored car.” I felt gutted. The court’s decision broke my faith that the law alone could be used to protect Black people’s rights.

8.

My writing career started in 1885 when I joined the *Living Way* newspaper, one of more than 200 Black-owned newspapers in the country. It was rare for a Black woman to write for any newspaper. Only 5 percent of journalists in the Black press were women. And it was especially rare that a Black woman wrote about racial issues. Most women wrote about “women’s topics,” such as book reviews, school news, fashion, home decorating, marriage, children, and cleaning. But that was never going to work for me. I had strong opinions and aimed to write *toward justice*. In my mind, everyone was fair game for criticism — Black, white, men, women, institutions, ministers, and laypeople. I challenged both gender and racial roles and exposed every form of inequality, no matter the cost. In fact, I lost my full-time job as a teacher in Memphis, Tennessee, after I criticized the inequalities between white and Black schools. Newspapers from across the country reprinted my stories. Some people even called me the “**Princess of the Press.**” And by 1889, I was elected convention secretary at the annual Afro-American Press Convention.

9.

In 1889, I was invited to become editor for the *Free Speech and Headlight*, a Black-owned newspaper in Memphis, Tennessee, with a large circulation. I was excited about the opportunity, but I did not want to only be an editor. I wanted to be a part-owner as well. I scraped together the money to buy one-third of the paper, making me one of the few women in the country to be both editor and owner of a newspaper. My direct style of criticism and focus on exposing the truth of racial and gender inequality caused controversy. So much so that we had a hard time selling advertisements. My courageous writing eventually led me to lose my full-time job as a teacher in Memphis, after I criticized the school system for racial inequalities between white and Black schools. Despite this, I refused to give up and worked full time to grow the newspaper.

10.

In 1892, I became an activist when three of my friends were lynched in Memphis, Tennessee. Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart operated People's Grocery, a successful Black-owned business. The success of **People's Grocery** angered a nearby white grocery store owner. After weeks of verbal threats, a white mob raided People's Grocery. Moss, McDowell, and Stewart defended themselves and injured some of the mob. Afterward, they turned themselves in to the sheriff, believing that the facts would prove they acted in self-defense. Despite the facts, white-owned newspapers twisted the truth about the raid. One night, a white mob entered the jail and lynched Moss, McDowell, and Stewart. Afterward, the mob looted and burned People's Grocery to the ground and terrorized the Black neighbors who tried to protect it. This opened my eyes to what lynching really was: an excuse to get rid of Black people who were acquiring wealth and property. And it was a form of terrorism used to scare Black communities and keep white supremacists' rules in place. I turned my grief into anger, and vowed to use my journalism to expose the truth behind lynchings.

11.

In 1892, I wrote an editorial that asked all Black residents to leave Memphis. A lynch mob killed three of my friends and burned their business to the ground, and our local government and law enforcement did nothing to stop it. I wanted the white community in Memphis to face consequences for the injustice they caused. And I believed that the white people who did nothing to stop the mob were as guilty as those who set fire to our homes and businesses. After my article went to press, hundreds of Black residents packed up and left. Some moved to Arkansas, Oklahoma, and even as far west as California. Those who could not move away boycotted — refused to do business with — white-owned businesses and the streetcars. My writing angered many white residents. My newspaper's co-owners and I received death threats. And on May 27, 1892, a white mob destroyed our office and our press. Fearing for my safety, I fled Memphis and **moved to Chicago**. This would be the last time I lived in the South.

12.

In 1878, **Yellow Fever** spread through Mississippi. Thousands fled my hometown of Holly Springs, Mississippi, to avoid becoming sick. Not my parents. They stayed behind and took care of those who became sick. Eventually my parents became sick, too. They became two of the thousands who died that summer. I couldn't spend much time mourning. I was 16 years old and the oldest of my six siblings. I had to be my family's leader. So I did everything I could to prevent our family from breaking up. I took a teaching job in a rural school to earn the money to care for my siblings. The schoolhouse was several hours by mule away from home, so I lived with my students' families during the week and returned on the weekends to wash, iron, and cook. My grandmother moved in with us to help me raise my siblings. I worked myself to the bone to keep everyone together, but after two years it became too much to bear. Our siblings split up to live with two aunts, split between Mississippi and Tennessee. It was the last time we lived together.

13.

The second time I met with a sitting president of the United States was in 1913. At the time I was vice president of the **National Equal Rights League**, a Black-led organization that fought for full citizenship rights for African Americans. We met with President Woodrow Wilson to demand a ban on racial segregation for all federal government jobs. During his campaign for president, Wilson supported the advancement of African American civil rights. However, when Wilson became president, his administration segregated the Post Office and the Department of the Treasury. Walls were built to separate Black and white workers' desks. Black secretaries were forbidden from eating at the same restaurants and using the same bathrooms as their white co-workers. Despite my meeting with Wilson, he did not act to end racial segregation — just the opposite.

14.

In 1930, at almost 68 years old, I ran for the **Illinois State Senate**. Neither the Republican or Democratic Parties would support me, so I ran as an Independent candidate. The campaign was grueling. We printed and distributed posters, newsletters, and letters throughout the community. And I gave, on average, two speeches a day. We lost the race by a large margin, but my campaign for elected office was history-making. I was one of the first Black women in the nation to run for a state senate office. More importantly, my campaign challenged the racial and gender norms of the day that said Black women like myself could not be public leaders.

15.

In 1898, I met with a U.S. president for the first time. Other Black civil rights leaders and I met with President William McKinley to demand that he sign a federal anti-lynching law. We believed McKinley needed to act quickly after the lynching of postmaster Frazier B. Baker to protect other Black citizens from violence. A few months earlier, a white mob murdered Baker after he was elected as the first Black postmaster in South Carolina. Black civil rights leaders across the country were enraged and believed something needed to be done. We formed the **National Afro-American Council** and I became its first secretary. We worked to end lynchings and racial segregation and protect Black people's voting rights. Despite our arguments and our evidence for the need for a federal anti-lynching law, President McKinley refused to act.

16.

In the 1880s and 1890s, women campaigned across the country for the right to vote — what we called “suffrage.” I too believed women should have all the same rights as men. In fact, I believed that all people should be equal. Man or woman. Black or white. But all the national organizations that fought for women’s right to vote excluded Black women like me. And they didn’t agree that there should be racial equality. So in 1896, I joined with other Black women to create the **National Association of Colored Women**. We had two goals: to win the right to vote for women *and* to win greater racial equality. This is why we chose the motto “Lifting as we climb.” We worked to win rights for ourselves as Black women while also fighting for the rights of all Black people. But we were not just an advocacy organization. We did community service work, too. We raised money for kindergartens, libraries, orphanages for children, and homes for the elderly.

17.

In 1909, the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** was formed. I was one of the founding members, along with Mary Church Terrell and W. E. B. DuBois. A small group of white progressive activists in Illinois reached out to Black leaders, wishing to form an organization to protest racial violence and discrimination across the country. We saw this as an opportunity to re-energize our long demands for our full civil rights. At first, I had hope for what we could do as an interracial organization, but I quickly grew disillusioned. Most of the leaders were wealthy white men who wanted only to study the race problem. I thought this approach to justice was too passive. We knew all we needed to know about racial violence and segregation. What we needed was concrete action such as new laws. And I was insulted when the NAACP adopted the anti-lynching platform that I created without giving me credit, and then selected the younger W. E. B. DuBois to be the editor of its magazine, *The Crisis*, and not me. At the time, I was one of the most prolific and well-known Black journalists and anti-lynching activists. Eventually, I left the NAACP and became more involved in organizations that shared my views.

18.

In 1919, a young Black man wrote me a letter saying that he and 11 other men were wrongly sentenced to death. He hoped that I could shine a light on the injustice they faced. Without hesitation, I traveled to Arkansas to investigate. To sneak into jail to interview them, I disguised myself as the grandmother of one of the men. I learned that they were sharecroppers (farmers who work for a landowner in exchange for some of the crops) from Elaine, Arkansas. They formed a sharecroppers union to demand higher cotton prices. Immediately a white mob attacked their union. Newspapers called it the **Elaine Massacre** and falsely blamed the violence on the union. I carefully recorded their version of the story so that I could advocate for their innocence. I asked them to tell me exactly what happened before, during, and after the violence. Using everything I learned and gathered, I returned to Chicago and wrote a pamphlet titled “The Arkansas Race Riot.” I printed thousands of copies and circulated them throughout the South. This work led the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to raise funds and send lawyers down to Arkansas to fight their death sentences. Eventually, all 12 men were freed after the Arkansas Supreme Court, and even the U.S. Supreme Court found that their civil rights had been violated.

19.

I am most well known for my **journalism about lynchings**. Between 1892 and 1900, I published four pamphlets, *Southern Horrors*, *A Red Record*, *Lynch Law in Georgia*, and *Mob Rule in New Orleans*. I included statistics of every publicly known lynching so that readers could see how far widespread the problem of lynching in the United States reached. Some called me a “data journalist,” since I was among the first to publish the raw data of what I was reporting about. These pamphlets also presented the Black perspective about lynchings to counter white propaganda. Too often, white reporters blamed lynching on Black people themselves. Instead, I humanized lynching victims by conducting in-depth interviews with family, friends, and community members. My reporting showed that lynchings were not about seeking justice for crimes. Rather, they were used to terrorize, silence, and steal.

20.

In July 1917, a riot broke out in **East St. Louis, Illinois**, after a white mob attacked Black residents. More than 100 Black residents were killed. Thousands more lost their homes, jobs, and property. Whole city blocks were burned. I learned about the violence through newspapers and worried that white journalists were spinning false stories about the violence. I decided to go to East St. Louis to investigate. I interviewed dozens of people who witnessed the violence, recorded photographs, and took account of all that Black residents had lost. I used what I learned to write *The East St. Louis Massacre: The Greatest Outrage of the Century*. It told the story of the horrific violence that Black residents faced during the riot. It also showed that much of the violence was a result of the growing tension between white residents and Black migrants taking place in many northern cities. I hoped that my writing would lead authorities to hold the white people who started the violence accountable while reducing the sentences of convicted Black residents.

21.

In 1909, the body of a white woman was found in an alley in **Cairo, Illinois**. The local sheriff arrested Will James, a Black man and, without any evidence, accused him of killing the white woman. A white mob later took James out of the jail and killed him. I knew that if I had done nothing, justice would never be served to James’ family. So I traveled to Cairo and investigated. Many Black residents were scared to say anything against the sheriff because they feared retaliation by the same white mob. But I wasn’t scared. I took the facts of the case that I gathered and testified directly to Governor Charles Deneen, arguing that the sheriff had violated his duty and knowingly released a prisoner into an assured death. Sheriffs are obligated to follow the law, and that includes protecting inmates from mobs. I felt that if the sheriff was not held accountable, then there was no point in even pretending to have law enforcement. A few days after I testified, Governor Deneen fired the sheriff. It was the first time that someone in Illinois who was complicit in a lynching was actually punished.

22.

On April 21, 1927, the Mississippi River delta changed forever. After months and months of rain, the levees along the Mississippi River burst. Cities, towns, and farmland from St. Louis, Missouri, to New Orleans flooded. The **1927 Mississippi Flood** was — and still is — the most destructive flood in U.S. history. More than 637,000 people became refugees, hundreds of thousands of homes were damaged or destroyed, and thousands of acres of farmland and farm animals drowned in water that stood for weeks and months. At the time, I wrote for the *Chicago Defender*, one of the most widely read Black newspapers in the country. Weeks after the flood, I received letters from Black refugees about injustices taking place in refugee camps setup by the Red Cross and U.S. government. The Black refugees described living in slavery-like conditions. Whites forced Black people to work for them, did not allow the refugees to move freely in and out of camps, and often forced them to sleep on wet ground in poorly made camps and alongside chickens, pigs, and cows. In contrast, whites were given housing in downtown apartments, given first pick of donated clothes, and given much better food. Other *Chicago Defender* reporters and I demanded that the U.S. government end these racist abuses. We published refugees' firsthand accounts. We called on readers to write directly to President Calvin Coolidge and Secretary Herbert Hoover and demand justice. We refused to allow the plight of Black refugees go unnoticed when everyone from the Red Cross to the U.S. government and even other newspapers refused to tell the truth.

23.

In April 1893 I **toured Scotland and England** to raise awareness about “lynch law” — the use of lynching to terrorize Blacks across the American South. I was invited by Catherine Impey and Isabella Fyvie Mayo two anti-racist activists and suffragists. They believed my lectures about lynchings could inspire people in Great Britain to join efforts to end racial segregation and violence. I did not hold back the truth of what was happening in the United States. I fought against the belief that racial violence and segregation ended with the Civil War. I raised awareness about so-called Jim Crow laws that segregated Blacks and prevented us from voting. I gave countless examples of whites who lynched Black men in order to steal wealth and scare Black people from resisting white rule. Newspapers across Scotland and England printed these stories, supporting our calls for justice and the end of violence. In fact, my tour was so popular that I was hired by the *Daily Inter Ocean*, a white-owned newspaper in Chicago, to become their first Black international news reporter.

Ida B. Wells Mixer Questions

1. Find a time in Ida B. Wells' early life that helps to explain her activism. What was the moment and how did it impact her?
2. Find a time when Ida B. Wells fought against a law. Why did she fight it and what happened as a result?
3. Find a time in Ida B. Wells' life when she used journalism to fight for justice. What did she write and why was it important?
4. Find a time when Ida B. Wells was involved in an organization to aid individuals or groups. Who was the individual or group, and what did Wells do?
5. Find information that helps show Ida B. Wells' advocacy for women's rights. What did she do?
6. Find a time when Ida B. Wells risked her life to expose the truth about an injustice. What was the risk? What truths about injustices were exposed?
7. Find a time when Ida B. Wells' activism led to a victory. What did she do and what was the victory?
8. Now partner with another student who has completed the previous seven questions. Discuss with them a "radical" moment in Ida B. Wells' life that you especially admire. Why do you admire this? What's radical about it?

Post mixer reflection questions:

- What were some of the things you learned about Ida B. Wells that you didn't know before the mixer?
- What story or moment from Ida B. Wells' life did you find most interesting, surprising, or inspiring?
- In 1918, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) described Ida B. Wells as one of the most “dangerous [Black] agitators.” What made Wells so dangerous according to the federal government's leading law enforcement agency?
- What did you learn that confused you or that you'd like to learn more about?

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