

**LAURA
NELSON**
c.1876-1911



**NO
JUSTICE
BUT
PUBLICITY**

On a bridge outside Okemah, Laura and her 16-year-old son L. D. (Lawrence) Nelson were lynched on May 25, 1911. The controversy would involve monstrous photographs sold as postcards, songs by an Oklahoma icon, and a state that embraced their Jim Crow laws.

Austin and Laura Nelson lived with their teenage son and 2-year-old daughter Carrie on a farm near Paden, a largely black town west of Boley. On May 1st, Austin stole a crow from Claude Littrell's ranch to feed his hungry children. The next day, Deputy Sheriff George Loney, along with Constable Cliff Martin and Littrell, got a search warrant for the Nelson's farm. They arrived at 9pm, read Austin the warrant, and found the steer's remains in the barn before entering the house.

The "Independent" (supporting the Nelsons) and "Ledger" gave different stories of what happened next. Either Laura tried to get the rifle from Lawrence and it went off, grazing Martin in the thigh and hitting Loney in the abdomen or Austin grabbed the rifle from Lawrence to shoot Littrell. During the ensuing gunfight, Loney was shot. No one realized Loney was hit until he asked for water. Laura responded, "Let the white *** die." Loney reportedly bled to death within minutes.

At the "white" Okemah county jail, Austin admitted his theft. After pleading guilty to larceny, Austin got three years and was sent to McAlester state prison on May 16th, which probably saved his life. Laura and Lawrence were arrested at the boy's uncle home and charged with murder. They were held without bail until their May 25th arraignment. Laura had her baby with her in the jail cell.

Around 11:30pm on May 24th, about 30-40 men stormed the county jail. They bound, gagged, and blindfolded the jailer and took his keys at gunpoint. They removed the Nelsons from their cells and disappeared without arousing any other prisoners. No one attempted to search for the mob. The Nelsons were taken to a bridge on the North Canadian River. Laura placed her baby on the ground before she was assaulted by the mob. The men hanged them from middle of the bridge, and walked off, leaving Carrie lying there. She was later rescued and raised by a local resident.

After the lynching was discovered the next morning, hundreds of white people came to view the bodies. Photographs were taken of the lynched bodies and the spectators included white-supremacist politician Charles Guthrie, father of folk singer Woody Guthrie. These photographs became postcards sold as souvenirs in local shops. Laura Nelson's photograph would become the only surviving single shot of a black female lynching victim.

Woody Guthrie, who was born fourteen months after the lynching, said he recalled seeing the postcards for sale in Okemah. He wrote three songs about the lynching: "Don't Kill My Baby and My Son", "High Balladree" and "Slipknot". They were published in a book compiled by Alan Lomax and edited by Pete Seeger.

Oswald Garrison Willard of the NAACP protested to Oklahoma Governor Lee Cruce, who called the lynching an "outrage" but defended Oklahoma laws as "adequate" and its juries "competent". District Judge John Caruthers convened a grand jury in June 1911 but no one would identify the lynchers.