

“NEVER THOT THIS COULD HAPPEN IN THE SOUTH!” THE ANTI-LYNCHING ADVOCACY OF APPALACHIAN NEWSPAPER EDITOR BRUCE CRAWFORD

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The lynching of black miner Leonard Woods,¹ a resident of Jenkins, Kentucky, on the nearby Virginia border on November 30, 1927, capped a spate of mob killings in the Old Dominion and spurred the adoption of the state’s progressive anti-lynching law. The passage of this law fulfilled the personal and professional advocacy of *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot* editor Louis I. Jaffé to end mob justice in the Commonwealth. No other documented lynching occurred there after that of Woods.² Jaffé, who earned the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished editorial writing two years later, has justifiably received scholarly acknowledgment as the measure’s principal author and as a prime mover behind its ratification.³

A detailed and expansive examination of the lynching and its press coverage, while not diminishing Jaffé’s crucial role in enacting the law, reveals that it spawned a remarkable parallel crusade by Bruce Crawford, a leftist publisher/editor in Norton, Virginia, who almost certainly on a daily basis brushed shoulders with members of the mob. Working together, the big-city and small-town editors at opposite ends of the state stirred to action newspaper publisher Harry F. Byrd Sr., Virginia’s young business-minded governor.

Crawford’s refusal to moderate his indictment of his community garnered the attention of the *New York World*, then the nation’s foremost liberal daily, and celebrity in newspapers in the black press. Despite his extraordinary bravery, however, he could only hint at the event’s probable inciting incident.

The mountain editor’s activism merits far more consideration than it has thus far received, but the geographic setting in which the incident occurred and the social, economic, and racial tensions that helped trigger the mobbing also deserve study. Examining Crawford’s anti-lynching advocacy—with particular focus on the Woods lynching and the events that precipitated it—augments current historical scholarship exploring the racial violence in the biracial communities that flourished in Central Appalachia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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Model Mining Town Arises in a Turbulent Area

In 1909 the powerful Consolidation Coal Company (Consol)—soon to become the nation's largest extractor of bituminous coal—expanded into Eastern Kentucky's Cumberland Plateau. Consol's purchase of a mining site in Letcher County and the company's forceful persuasion of the venerable Baltimore & Ohio Railroad to service that area gave birth to the model mining town of Jenkins, whose creation anticipated the railroad's arrival in 1912.⁴

A paved Main Street lined with beautiful maple trees soon bisected the town. The company constructed an enormous brick three-floor company store and bragged about its inventory in its promotional literature. A huge



Bruce Crawford, 1940s, photograph courtesy *Goldenseal* and editor John Lilly, with thanks to Kim Johnson

recreation building with a theater, bowling alley, and poolroom materialized, in addition to a bakery, a drugstore, a ballpark, and power, brick, ice, and ice cream plants. Many hundreds of identical wood-frame, two-story duplex homes and a lesser number of identical single-family cottages sprang up for workers and their families. A "Silk Stocking Row" of managers' homes overlooked an artificially constructed lake, which the town's residents used for boating and fishing. The company oversaw the building and staffing of Protestant and Catholic churches, grade and high schools, and a modern hospital.⁵

Enticed by word of mouth, Consol's recruiters, and agents employed by other coal companies, thousands of outlanders poured into largely homogeneous Letcher County and radically transformed its demographics and its indigenous, highly independent mountaineer culture. Although the county's population had grown slightly between 1900 and 1910, it more than doubled to 25,000 by the time of the next federal census.⁶

The company signed on Kentucky mountaineers seeking to escape their washed-out farms. Other whites from West Virginia, Tennessee, Virginia, and marginal farms deep in Dixie surged into the new town. Consol enticed many