

## *Graded Assignment*

### **Research Project**

**Total Score: \_\_\_\_ of 100 points**

#### Turning Points: The Leo Frank Case

By Rebecca Tanenbaum

Between 1865 and 1919, American life changed in a variety of ways. One of the biggest turning points in America, specifically in the American South, was the murder of Mary Phagan, and subsequently the trial, conviction, and later hanging of Leo Frank. This led to two major organizations forming/reforming. The KKK (Klu Klux Klan) which had been dormant for about 45 years, became active again a month after Leo Frank's lynching. On the other hand, his murder also inspired Chicago attorney Sigmund Livingston to found the ADL (Anti-Defamation League) which was created to stop the defamation of Jewish people and "secure justice for all".<sup>1</sup>

To understand why this was such a pivotal moment in American history we have to understand the case fully. Mary Phagan was a thirteen-year-old white girl, who was employed at the National Pencil Company on April 26th, 1913. This was also the day of Atlanta's Confederate Memorial Day Parade. She went in to collect her paycheck for her ten cents an hour of work. Leo Frank, a twenty-nine-year-old Jewish male, was the superintendent of this factory and gave her her paycheck that morning. He was the last to admit to seeing Mary alive. The next morning around three thirty, Newt Lee, who was the factory night watchman and was African American, reported the body to the police. This case was odd as there were two "murder notes" found on the bloody body. The murder notes contained many spelling errors. Lee became a suspect in the case, but three days later Leo Frank was arrested.

Frank was from Brooklyn, New York, and had graduated from Cornell University with an engineering degree. He moved to Georgia to run the pencil factory, married Lucille Selig, and was the

president of Atlanta's chapter of B'nai Brith, a Jewish community nonprofit. The police also detained Jim Conley who was an African American custodian at the factory. He was "seen in the pencil-factory basement washing out a shirt soaked with what appeared to be blood," and was able write. Police questioned him for two weeks, and he said that Leo Frank had committed the murder and paid him to write the notes. He made several statements that were contradictory at times but were heard by the court. Based mostly on circumstantial evidence and Conley's testimony, Leo Frank was convicted of murder and sentenced to death by hanging.

For two years Franks's lawyers appealed with a request for a retrial. A retrial motion was still denied even after Conley's former attorney said he believed Conley did it. The appeals went all the way to the Supreme Court and were denied by a vote of 7-2. The governor of Georgia at the time, John Slaton, did not believe Frank to be the murderer and conducted his own investigation of the case. The day before Frank was to be executed, he changed Frank's sentence to life in prison. This caused mobs to storm Jewish businesses and surround the governor's home until they were broken up by state militiamen. His term as governor ended a few short days later, and he and his wife left the state, not returning for a decade.

Leo Frank being off of death row angered many and while in prison an inmate named William Creen slit Frank's throat with a butcher knife. Another prisoner who was a former surgeon stitched him quickly back together to save his life. A month after this event, twenty-five men (the Knights of Mary Phagan) broke Frank out of the prison and drove him 100 miles away to Marietta Georgia, which is where Mary Phagan was born. He was handcuffed and hung on an oak tree on August 17th, 1915. 3,000 people tore his clothes, touched his corpse and photographers took photos.

Much of the sentiment against Frank was led by Tom Watson who was the editor of the Jeffersonian Magazine and published many antisemitic remarks. Widespread antisemitism made it acceptable to condemn an innocent man to death with no proof. After Franks's murder, about half of the Jews in Georgia left the state, and those who stayed had their businesses boycotted and stayed hidden.

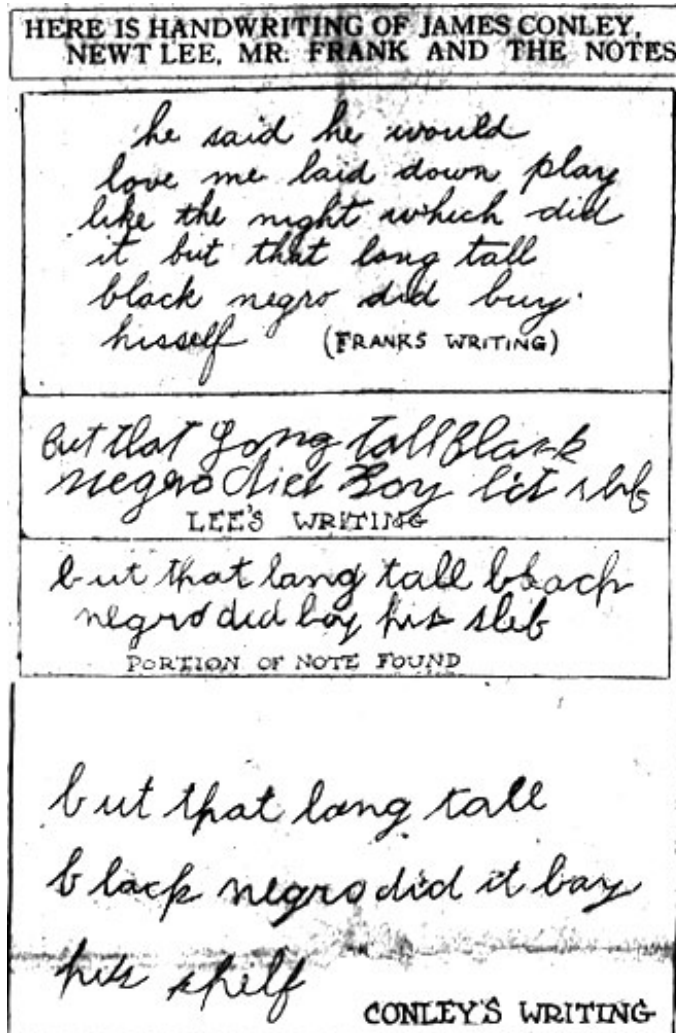
Many people also benefited from Frank's case. Hugh Dorsey was the lead prosecutor in the case and was later elected Governor of Georgia in 1915. He also was on the Atlanta Judicial Circuit Superior Court. Tom Watson became a U.S. senator in 1920. Jim Conley was sentenced to a year on a chain gang but went free for his crimes. On the other hand, Governor John Slaton's career was ended by doing the right thing, and by not falling for prejudice.

Most historians consider Leo Frank to be innocent and Jim Conley to be the real culprit. Alzono Mann, who was an office boy at the factory, said he witnessed Conley holding an unconscious Phagan. Mann was fourteen at the time, and Conley threatened him with death for talking. Mann told his mother who told him to keep quiet. Nearly seventy years later he broke his silence in 1982 in *The Tennessean*. A pardon was issued by Georgia in 1986, not exonerating Frank but for the state not protecting him while in custody and for never having tried his murderers.

The ADL, which was founded in 1913 after Leo Frank's case made national news, is the leading organization to fight hate in America. This organization would not have been made without the gross display of racism and antisemitism in the Leo Frank case. The ADL filed an amicus brief in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case and helped raise support for the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act. In 1977, they established the International Center for Holocaust Studies, which helps American students and educators to understand the Holocaust and prejudice. The ADL is still in existence today.

The Klu Klux Klan's revival, another organization which was restarted after Leo Frank's lynching burned a cross on Stone Mountain near Atlanta a month after the lynching. This was to announce that they were reforming. In the 1920s their membership exceeded 4,000,000 nationally and became profitable from the sale of costumes, memberships, rituals, and regalia. When the civil rights movement happened in the 1960's the KKK was responsible for numerous bombings whippings and shootings in the South. The Klan has been in decline for many years now as racial tolerance grows in America. There are only an estimated 3,000 people members of the KKK nowadays.

Below is the handwriting sample comparisons between the prime suspects.



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