Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 35
Ida B. Wells

(Dead Ladies Show Music - ‘Little Lily Swing’ by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast, I’m Susan Stone.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: And I’m Katy Derbyshire

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: I’m Florian Duijsens.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. And we do it through women’s history storytelling on stage, here in Berlin and beyond.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: After a few months absence we’re back at ACUD, our beloved venue here in Berlin where we recorded most of our episodes, where we have most of our live shows. And today we had our first socially-distanced, limited-seating outdoor edition. And if you’ve never been here, it’s the most Berlin place you’ve ever imagined. It’s everybody sitting around, having beverages outside, possibly also smoking, exposed brick, there’s uh…

SUSAN STONE: Exposed ankles.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Exposed ankles, oh my god! And also lovely sort-of hanging planters over our heads, there’s the Berlin night sky, there’s lots of different colored florescent lights…

SUSAN STONE: There’s the Berlin night life.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Well, to some extent.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Yes, to some extent. And we were so happy to have our beloved audience here today, especially for these wonderful presentations that we recorded.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Right! And we kicked things off with a presentation from our very own producer, journalist Susan Stone, who you all know. She introduced us to a legendary journalist, suffragist, and civil rights activist. Here she is, speaking about Ida B. Wells.

SUSAN STONE: The story of Ida B. Wells is about the resilience, determination, and optimism of a woman. And it’s also about many of the worst instincts and actions in American history. So, sorry about that in advance.

Ida Bell Wells was born into slavery in Holly Springs, Mississippi in 1862. Her father Jim was the only son of a white slave owner; Jim's mother Peggy was enslaved to the Wells household. Jim married Lizzie, who was of Black and Native American heritage, and had been taken as a child from her family in Virginia and sold twice by abusive slave traders before coming to Mississippi.

At the time of Ida's birth, the Civil War was raging, and Abraham Lincoln was President. The future for Black men and women in the United States, and particularly the South, was unclear. Then came the Emancipation Proclamation, effective January 1, 1863, which changed the legal status of enslaved people in the US to free. The 13th Amendment was passed in 1865, ending legal slavery in the United States. More or less.

Optimism abounded. Jim and Lizzie married again officially as free people. Schools were built for Black children, and education and opportunities were on the rise. Jim opened a carpentry business, and became the trustee of the local Black college, where Ida studied. In 1870, he was able to vote for the first time. The next years were happy for Ida and her six siblings. Young Ida often read aloud from the newspaper in the evenings to her politically-minded father and his friends.

In the background, racism persisted. Federal equality laws were overturned in 1877, and states regained the ability to make civil rights laws. In some Southern states, arbitrary tests and poll taxes were enacted to disenfranchise Black voters, and new laws oppressed Black people and activated segregation rules. What's worse, angry white Southerners began to take the law into their own hands in response to real or perceived crimes — largely by Black people — with deadly consequences. More on that later.

First — the epidemic. In 1878, mosquito-borne Yellow Fever broke out in the port city of New Orleans, travelled on to mid-Mississippi, then to riverside Memphis, Tennessee, about 50 miles away from the Wells family home in Holly Springs. Proud of its elevated landscape and mineral springs, the town declared itself healthy, and opted not to quarantine. (AUDIENCE MURMURS) Ida was away visiting her grandmother at this time, the first of her lucky escapes. When Holly Springs is struck, Ida's parents die within 24 hours of each other. Her baby brother is also taken by the illness. Receiving the news, she heads head home, despite the advice of doctors and family, and everyone she meets. No passenger trains are running, so Ida catches a ride in a freight train caboose decorated in black crepe in honor of its two conductors killed by Yellow Fever.

When she arrives home, she finds community members making plans to spilt up the five remaining children, but Ida refuses to let it happen. She leaves school, dresses herself up to look older, and takes a teaching job. She is 16.

After two years, Ida moves here, to Memphis for a better paying teaching job. So, the big city. At the time she arrives, around half the population of the city is Black.

A Black middle class was emerging in the South including Black doctors, lawyers, state legislators, and newspaper editors. As a teacher, Ida is invited to join a literary club called a Lyceum, which has its own paper, *The Evening Star*. She is elected as editor.

In 1883, on her way to her teaching job outside of Memphis, Ida takes her seat in a 1st class ladies car on a C&O railroad train as she's done many times before. This time, the conductor tries to make her move into the 2nd class smoking car with other people of color, despite her first class ticket and impeccably ladylike demeanor.

She wrote: "He tried to drag me out of the seat, but the moment he caught hold of my arm, I fastened my teeth in the back of his hand." (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) It took three men to drag the under-5 foot-tall Ida from her seat. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) In the process, they ripped the sleeves from her linen coat. She still refused to change cars, getting off the train at the next stop to the applause of white passengers.

So, 22-year-old Ida sues the railroad, and wins $500 in damages. (AUDIENCE CHEERS) At the time, her salary is $30 a month. The event makes her a bit of a celebrity.

There were many articles on the case written in Black and white newspapers - this one from the *Memphis Commercial Appea*l is headlined "A Darky Damsel Obtains a Verdict for Damages Against the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. What it Cost to Put a Colored School Teacher in a Smoking Car - $500." I think you can guess that's a white newspaper.

She also wrote her own stories about the case, which were published in some of the numerous Black newspapers around the country, kickstarting her own journalism career. Ida begins penning editorials under the name Iola, which deepens her mystique.

That $500 would have been quite welcome for Ida; though she had lived as a responsible adult since the age of 16, she had a weakness for fine clothes, and very much enjoyed shopping at the upscale department store Menken's Palatial Emporium, I mean — who wouldn't? (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) So, at times spending her rent money on fine capes and hats as well as the gloves and parasols a lady was expected to carry.

Unfortunately, the case against the railroad was appealed and eventually overturned, forcing her to pay $200 in legal fees. (AUDIENCE GROANS) It was also bad omen for the coming future of legalized segregation.

An accomplished and lovely young woman as we see here, she had her share of suitors. At one point, she was entertaining three at once, by which I mean exchanging affectionate letters — (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) one beau wrote that he wanted to "sip nectar from her lips" — and going on occasional chaste social outings. Though she could be flirtatious, her morals were fairly Victorian. Her popularity did not endear her to others; the proportion of eligible men to woman in Memphis skewed strongly in the men's favor. But young love lost out to journalism. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

In 1886, Ida is asked to join the *Memphis Free Speech* newspaper as editor. She agrees only if she can buy an equal stake in the paper, and become a partner, which she does. She also becomes the first female Black newspaper editor.

Things are going fairly well for Ida, she's dubbed the "Princess of the Press," and is a bit of a rising star. But other things are also rising in the South. Racial tensions and mob violence, called 'lynchings' were increasing, particularly targeted against Black people. These actions were often ignored or even encouraged by law enforcement, but they hadn't yet occurred in Memphis, with its prosperous black business class. Then, in 1892 comes an incident that changes Ida's life forever.

This is the People's Grocery here. To cater to a growing group of black consumers, Calvin McDowell, Will Stewart, and Thomas Moss, a local postman and dear friend of Ida's — she was after all godmother to his little daughter Maurine — they opened the People's Grocery in a neighborhood called The Curve. A nearby white store owner vowed to destroy the competition, and he did, by reporting them on false charges. When a group of plain clothes law officers busted into the back of the grocery store, the owners of the People's Grocery fired on them in self-defense, and they were arrested, along with everyone else in the neighborhood — we're talking 30 people.

While awaiting trial, the three men were dragged from their jail cells, marched to a field, and executed. The crime was never investigated. Thomas Moss's dying words were recorded by a witness. He said: "Tell my people to go West — there is no justice for them here."

Traveling at the time, Ida returns to Memphis devastated, and questions her role as a journalist. How to respond to such a shocking event? Her strongly worded editorial holds nothing back: "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," she wrote. "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 property, nor give us fair trial in the courts but takes us out and murders us in cold blood when accused by white persons."

6,000 Black residents of Memphis do leave in an exodus, many heading to the western state of Oklahoma, where Native American lands had recently been opened to settlement by homesteaders. The remaining group follow Ida's call for a boycott of businesses, one of the economic and political strategies she would find most effective in her activism.

In her writings, Ida documented the growing number of lynchings that were becoming almost a form of horror entertainment in some areas, with a carnival atmosphere and thousands in attendance. The so-called crimes prompting these illicit executions were minor if true at all: debt, insulting white people, or even testifying in court. In fact, between 1876 and 1919, at least 3,000 Black men were murdered by white lynch mobs.

Ida publishes the books *Southern Horrors, Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, and later *The Red Record*. She argues that lynching is not being used to punish the criminal behavior of Black people but rather, their economic success.

Speaking in frank terms, she refutes the justification often given for lynchings — the raping of white women by Black men. In order to do so, she travelled the South conducting research and interviews, finding that in many cases where there was in fact a relationship between a Black man and a white woman, it was consensual, if illegal.

In response, she fired off another editorial questioning these spurious rape charges, ending “If Southern white men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction: a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women,” and she headed off to Philadelphia for a conference.

Stopping in New York, she learns that a committee of white citizens has smashed up the *Memphis Free Speech* newspaper offices and printing presses. There was now a price on her head.

Ida stays in put in New York, writing for the Black newspaper there, and begins lecturing about lynching and race crimes to packed crowds. *The Appeal: A National Afro-American Newspaper* approves of her move away from Memphis and to a broader audience, writing approvingly, “Free Speech is not so easily suppressed as *The Free Speech*.”

She becomes friends with Frederick Douglass, the pre-eminent Black statesman, social reformer, and writer — who was also the most photographed American of the nineteenth century, and she meets women’s rights campaigner Susan B. Anthony, both of whom prove essential to her growing renown.

Ida’s connections take her abroad, too. In 1893, she’s asked to lecture on lynching in Britain. “It was like an open door in a stone wall,” Ida said of the invitation. After a year in exile in the north of the US, she had received little attention for her anti-lynching campaign from the white press, except in Boston, where the *Herald* compared her to French revolutionary Charlotte Corday, and wrote, “…the salvation of the colored people of the South may yet come from a woman.”

In response, her hometown paper in Memphis insulted Bostonians, and called Ida “that Wells wench,” saying, “she was never editor of the *Free Speech*, only mistress to that scoundrel who was, [boo] which in Boston may be regarded as the same thing.” It was a typical of the sorts of slights Ida fought against her whole life — white supremacists impugning the character of Black women — out of hatred and fear of their power. She decides to sue for libel with the aid of a handsome Chicago lawyer named Ferdinand Barnett, but in the end it is deemed too dangerous.

So, she sets off in this White Star Lines ship, the Teutonic — not the Titanic, the Teutonic (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) — accompanied by a female doctor friend. In her diary, she writes.

*First Day: Wednesday, April 5, 1893*
*Sailed for England today…Day is fine and trip so far enjoyable.*

*Second Day: No seasickness. Hope to get through alright. At any rate, Miss Patton is with me. She is a doctor and will take care of me, but I don't think I am going to need her.*

*Third Day: Seasick. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) So is Dr. Georgia E.L. Patton. We have a stateroom to ourselves and lie in the two lower berths looking at each other. Ugh.*

*Fourth Day: Seasick still. Am afraid to lift my head. How I hate the sight of food. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)*

*Fifth Day: Seasicker.*

*Sixth Day: Seasickest. Ugh. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)*

Poor Ida! Safely on dry land, Ida's grand tour began in Aberdeen Scotland; then it was on to Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, then London, to receptive audiences. The next year she's invited back again.

During her journey, she serves as a correspondent for the *Chicago Daily Inter-Ocean*, a liberal white newspaper, and is interviewed extensively by the English papers. She also gets in a feud with Frances Willard, president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. One of the most respected Americans abroad, Willard's zeal against demon alcohol has resulted in her using negative stereotypes about Black people and drinking. Like many white reformers, she makes moral compromises to gain traction for her cause in the southern US. Willard also fails to come out strongly against lynching, which Ida calls out. While in England, Ida inspires the London Anti Lynching Committee formed by the Duke of Argyll, which is the first organization of its kind.

In response to her very visible actions in England, which could disrupt trade between the two countries, the *New York Times* calls Ida "a slanderous and nasty-minded mulattress," "more in search of an income than an outcome." (AUDIENCE GROANS) And *The Memphis Commercial Appea*l belittles her as a Negro Adventuress. When Ida journeys back to the US, she relocates to Chicago, where she lives for the rest of her life. Ida does not return to the South for 30 years.

In 1895, at 32, in a cloud of satin and orange blossoms, Ida marries that handsome lawyer Ferdinand L. Barnett. A prominent attorney and activist, he is also a widower with two children, and is 10 years older. Their wedding is rescheduled 3 times to accommodate Ida's busy schedule of lectures. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) But when it

happens, the brief marriage announcement is printed — where else? On page 1 of the New York Times. She decides to hyphenate their names, an uncommon action at the time — becoming Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Her new husband is also the founder of the first black newspaper in Chicago, which he sells to Ida after their marriage. She is now owner and editor of the paper, called the *Conservator.* And soon, she's also a mother.

She and Ferdinand welcome their first child, Charles, in 1896. But Ida can't devote herself fully to motherhood. She is convinced to go on a speaking tour with baby Charles in tow. At one event, Harriet Tubman — yes, the Harriet Tubman — is given the honorary task of introducing Ida's baby to the gathering of women. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Yay!

Together she and Ferdinand have four children with the last arriving in 1904.He is supportive of her activism and holds down the fort in her absence. Still, she wants to retire from public life to care for her children. This is not a popular idea amongst her fellow activists. Ida notes in her autobiography that her friend Susan B. Anthony starts pointedly calling her "Mrs. Wells-BARNETT." Ida asked, "Don't you believe in women getting married?" 'Oh yes,' said Susan B. Anthony, 'but — not women like you who had a special call for special work.'"

Things start getting a little uncomfortable with white suffragists, and also conservative Black leaders. Some are jealous of her popularity, or uncomfortable with a woman rising so high. Others say she's too militant. In the movement there were Radicals, like Ida, and W. E. B. DuBois, who fought discrimination in every form. And the Accommodationists, lead by Booker T. Washington, who felt a segregated society could protect Black people better and guarantee them jobs. He called her a trouble-maker. She called him much worse. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) In 1909, Ida was part of a group of activists who formed the civil rights organization the NAACP — the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She sparred with some of the founders, and was pushed out of leadership, and for decades, out of its recorded history as well.

Votes for women happened gradually. In 1913, the women of Illinois gained partial suffrage, which gave them the ability to vote in presidential and municipal elections. Ida was 50, and she could vote for the first time. She wanted more. She founded the Alpha Suffrage Club, the first all-black suffrage organization in the state; the members elected her to represent them in the 1913 Suffrage Parade in Washington, DC with an integrated group of marchers. Here's a scene from a not-very-good film called *Iron Jawed Angels* about that event and the women's suffrage movement. Ida is played by Adilah Burns.

FILM CLIP: ADILAH BURNS AS IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT: Miss Paul? Ida Wells-Barnett from the Chicago delegation. I'm told you expect Negro women to march in a separate unit, at the back.
HILARY SWANK AS ALICE PAUL: Southern suffrage groups threatened to withdraw —
ADILAH BURNS AS IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT: Are the ladies afraid we'll march out of step? Call their bluff.

HILARY SWANK AS ALICE PAUL:We can't afford to lose their support. Not with the Democrats in office.
ADILAH BURNS AS IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT: Who's we? Women, or just white women?
FRANCES O'CONNOR AS LUCY BURNS: Now wait a minute!
HILARY SWANK AS ALICE PAUL:We have one agenda. Suffrage. Add another issue —
ADILAH BURNS AS IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT: If we don't stand up now, what happens to Negro women when you finally get the vote? They'll keep us out of the polling place anyway they can.
HILARY SWANK AS ALICE PAUL: Other colored groups have agreed to the compromise.
FRANCES O'CONNOR AS LUCY BURNS: It's not perfect but we gotta be practical.
ADILAH BURNS AS IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT: Dress up prejudice and call it politics? I expected more from a Quaker. I'll march with my peers or not at all.
HILARY SWANK AS ALICE PAUL: I understand

That's Hilary Swank in an ugly hat (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) as Alice Paul, a leading white suffragist.

The real confrontation went down a little differently, but here's what happened next. Ida and her white compatriots Belle Squire and Virginia Brooks got "lost" in the crowd, and used the chaos to find their way together to the front and center of the Illinois delegation. Belle Squire is the one in the picture wearing the sash that says, "No vote, no tax." She argued that making women pay taxes without voting rights was taxation without representation. Damn straight!

As she aged, Ida stayed militant. In this photo you can see her looking very matronly and traditional. But note the badge on her blouse that reads "Martyred Negro Soldiers." She had them specially made in reaction to the death and imprisonment of several Black soldiers after an incident in Texas. This earned her a visit from some Secret Service agents, who threatened her with a charge of treason for criticizing the government during war time, as World War I was going on. She quickly set them straight. Still, chosen as a delegate to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, the US government considers her subversive, and refuses to issue Ida a passport, so she cannot go.

Putting her efforts into Chicago, Ida founded the city's first Black kindergarten and first Black Women's club, supported a Black theatre there and served as the first Black adult probation officer for the Chicago municipal court. In her later years, she worked on her autobiography, and remained active in women's organizations, even as leadership positions went to others.

In 1928, she makes a play for a role as a delegate to the Republican National Convention, and in 1930, she runs for the Illinois State Senate. Neither ends in success.

I'm just going to quickly insert — I didn't want to describe the history of political parties in America, but you can safely say the Republicans were more like the Democrats and the Democrats were more like Republicans, and now this makes a little more sense! (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

In 1931, Ida dies of kidney disease. At the time of her death, she is 68 years old. Ferdinand follows, five years later. Her autobiography *Crusade for Justice* isn't published until 1970, edited by her youngest daughter, Alfreda. *The New York Times*, which listed her wedding notice on page one back in the day, does not write an obit for her until 2018. It is, by the way, in the "Overlooked" section.

In 2019, a blue plaque marking one of the places she stayed while on her speaking tour of England is placed in Edgbaston, Birmingham by the Lord Mayor at the time, Yvonne Mosquito. Such a great name. Also in 2019, a street in Chicago named for her: Ida B. Wells Drive. A campaign is currently underway to build a monument to her in the city. Here's the good part: May 2020, Ida B. Wells receives a Pulitzer prize, the top prize in journalism , 89 years after her death. The citation reads: "For her outstanding and courageous reporting on the horrific and vicious violence against African Americans during the era of lynching." In August 2020, to mark the centenary of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote, she's commemorated in Washington DC's Union Station with a photo mosaic image. It's made up of smaller photos of some of the many important people and moments in women's suffrage.

There's so much more to say and learn about Ida. My main sources were these two books, Ida's autobiography *Crusade for Justice*, and *Ida — A Sword Among Lions* by Paula Giddings, which came out in 2008. There are also numerous documentaries, archives, and articles, to explore. A new take on her story is coming soon, in January 2021. *Ida B. the Queen* is written by Ida's great-granddaughter Michelle Duster, a tireless campaigner for Ida's memory, as well as a speaker and the author of several other books. So watch out for that.

During her lifetime, Ida was the most famous Black woman in the United States. She met with presidents and prisoners, she fought for equality and fair treatment, truth and justice. Ida was uncompromising in her vision, which won both enemies and friends. It's tragic and infuriating that many of the issues she waged battle against more than 100 years ago continue today in the United States and elsewhere — from illegal and immoral violence against people of color to illicit efforts to keep women and Black people from voting.

Her fighting impulse is one we should embrace. Speak truth to power. Stand up for what you believe in. And remember that your vote counts. Many — including Ida — fought for you to have it. Thank you.

(AUDIENCE APPLAUDS AND CHEERS)

FLORIAN DUIJSENS:  Susan Stone on Ida B. Wells, or should that be Ida B. Wells-Barnett? Anyway, it was recorded live here in the ACUD courtyard by our lovely sound guy of the day. Turi Agostino. You can find photos of the inestimable Ida on our website, as well as loads of links to more information about her life and work. That's at deadladiesshow.com.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: And you can follow us on social media @deadladiesshow. And do please share, rate, and review the show as it helps others to find our podcast!

SUSAN STONE: Oh, is it my turn? We now have transcripts of some of our shows thanks to help from our very kind Patreon supporters — you can become one over at patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast if you like. We would like. Thanks everyone for your support.

SUSAN STONE: The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens, over there, and Katy Derbyshire, over here. And the podcast is created, produced, and edited by me. Thank you everybody!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Thank you, Susan!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Thank you, Susan.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

KATY DERBYSHIRE ON TAPE READING CREDIT: Support for this episode of The Dead Ladies Show Podcast comes from the Berliner Senate

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