FAIR ENOUGH

By Westbrook Pegler

NEW YORK, May 17—According to the newspaper accounts, the lynching of a Negro in a little town in Northwestern Florida a few nights ago was an episode which, for bestiality, could be matched only in cultural exercises of the super-race of Adolf Hitler. Suspected but not yet formally accused of criminal assault on a white child, the victim was roped to a tree, shot and left for dead, but crawled to a refuge and was reacquainted by a law officer. He then apparently surrendered without a struggle to a mob which finished him off.

Social Slum

The section of the country in which this horror occurred is in the social and intellectual slum which, according to the newspaper historians of Florida, was populated by low whites who fled from the other Southern states, notably Georgia and Alabama, to escape servitude in the Civil War, and the white population is distinguished from the Negroes only in the matter of complexion and other racial characteristics.

It should be easy to catch and convict all the murderers, but any serious attempt to do so probably would result in either local revolution or such a farce as would further discredit the law and civilization.

Many areas of Florida are civilized only in a few outward appearances, for the state still consists largely of frontier and backwoods, and we deceive ourselves by imagining that frontiersmen and backwoodsmen are all brave, chivalrous characters. The robbers and killers of the Old West glamourized in song and story out of all resemblance to their diseased and dirty criminal character, were, in fact, no better than the common city gun

Irresponsible State

Florida, in an adolescent, irresponsible and, thus far, incorrigible state whose most respected political and civic leaders in the urban areas have frankly insisted that it is necessary, in the interests of progress and prosperity, to concede at crime and build on vice and official corruption. Knowing, for example, that a gambling house cannot operate openly without the corrupt consent of the local officials, many of these leaders hold, nevertheless, that if gambling were put down the tourists would go elsewhere and business would suffer.

In the crude back country the conditions of life are primitive, and habitations may be seen from the highway in which there are neither panes nor screens to the windows, and creatures having the physical appearance of human beings live in such squalor as to revolt the very civilized.

Degraded Themselves

It is not to shock the people of the state that such observations are made, but rather to indicate how it can be that white men, claiming to be members of a superior breed, can so degrade themselves and embarrass the race in which they hold technical membership in an effort to impress their superiority on their Negro neighbors. Ignorance and brutality die hard and slowly in certain strains of Florida Caucasians and resist such refinements as electric signs, the radio, plumbing and paving, even on the luxury coast of the Atlantic.

Only two years ago, in one of the oldest and most sedate cities of the coast, a community where wealth abounds and books have been reported, a Negro taximan ran down a white child in a traffic accident and was taken from the hands of the law by relatives of the deceased and shot under the law of flight in the presence of a little party of shocked and frightened tourists. This was duly listed as a lynching in the annual report, whereas it was plainly a common, premeditated murder which could have been punished by the death penalty if the morality and public opinion had existed.

Miscarriage of Justice

There is never any reason for excuse for the lynching of a Negro in Florida, and it must be added that the worse the crime the less the white man need concern himself about a miscarriage of justice. In the most recent crime the prisoner would have got his promptly if in full measure had the law been allowed to take its course, but the killers doubtless were afraid that on trial the accused might prove his innocence or, in point of the North some lawyer who would demonstrate that the victim tempted him and, anyway, that he wasn't in the State of Florida at the time but studying in class at the College of the City of New York.

Civilization can't be hurried in the Florida swamps and backwoods, on either the whites or the Negroes. Each degrades the other, but the white man has moments when he can really show the Negro a very reprehensible stump of the tail by which his not so remote ancestors swung from tangled vines amid the under trees.