



Text Version of Audio Story: Piney Woods

We need a rope! Who has a rope?

What do you need a rope for?"

There's a black fella. He's a troublemaker!

This black fellow, the so-called troublemaker, was named Lawrence Jones. He was a preacher and a teacher there in the rural area known as the Piney Woods, about 60 miles north of Jackson, Mississippi. The year was 1917. America was at war – World War I. The rumor mill was churning out stories about how Germany was trying to incite Black Americans to rise up and rebel against the United States. Several white men happened by a black church and had heard Reverend Jones giving a fiery sermon. With all the rumors fresh in their mind, they felt sure Jones must be preaching rebellion. Someone did come up with a rope, and now a gang of misguided white men were using that rope to drag Reverend Jones.

They dragged him about a mile on a gravel road. Their final destination — a tree, a tree used for lynching. And if lynching wasn't enough, they constructed a pile of firewood. They were going to burn him, too. As they were stringing one end of the rope over a tree limb, the other was being fashioned into a noose and was being placed around the Reverend's neck. There he stood on that pile of firewood with his hands tied behind his back, bruised and bloody from the dragging, and now with a rope around his neck, moments from a violent death.

Someone from the crowd shouted out, *"Let that no-good Negro beg for his life. That ought to be entertaining!"*

Suddenly, the crowd started to chant, *"Speech! Speech!"*

As they quieted down, Reverend Jones began to speak. He spoke of his mission, the very mission that brought him to the Piney Woods. He graduated from college in 1907, an almost Herculean feat for a black man of that time. Upon graduation, he was offered numerous jobs. He turned every one down. He had read the autobiography of Booker T. Washington, and like Washington, he felt compelled to improve the lives of Black Americans. Like Washington, he felt the best way for Black Americans to rise to their highest and best was through education. As Jones spoke, he knew that, even more than he was trying to preserve his life, he was trying to preserve the mission of his life.

Jones spoke with passion and eloquence. He spoke of how he arrived in the Piney Woods with only a-dollar-sixty-five in his pocket. He chose the Piney Woods because he felt that's where the most need was. He spoke of the white men of the area who came to his aid and supplied him with building materials for his school and church, and money and food to help him get started. As Jones spoke, the crowd of angry white men fell spellbound. Finally, an old Confederate soldier stepped forward.

"Gentlemen, I know the white men he speaks of. They would not have helped him had his cause not been just. Furthermore, gentlemen, I do not believe we should hang this man here today. I believe we should help him."

And with that said, the old Confederate veteran took off his hat and passed it through the crowd to collect a donation for Reverend Jones's Piney Wood schoolhouse.

Later in life, Jones was asked about that incident and whether or not he harbored ill feelings towards the men who had visited such injustice and violence upon him. Jones replied, *"I've been too busy with my cause to take time to hate. I have no time for quarrel, no time for regrets, and no man can make me stoop so low as to make me hate him."*

Broadcasting from the Juniata Valley with the music of Johnny X, I'm the American Storyteller.