

# A Segregation of Memory: The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot

By Vi Brown, SWE Vice President of Transition

About three years ago I made a discovery into the annals of African American history while sitting in the salon chair of my hair stylist, Charlesetta Lee. While getting a shampoo and cut, Charlesetta and I talked about her childhood in Tulsa, Okla.

About 30 minutes into our discussion, she mentioned a riot that took place in Tulsa during the early part of the 20th century that devastated the black community. I was dumbfounded by what she was saying because I considered myself to be well versed on African American history in the United States. But I had never heard of any incident in Tulsa. In fact, I could not recall ever reading anything about a major race riot in Tulsa at anytime during my education from K-12 to graduate school.

Our conversation evolved into a series of questions about the riot and the events surrounding it. Charlesetta said that most people outside of Oklahoma had never

heard of the Tulsa riot. In fact, with the exception of the last five years, the riot was one of Tulsa's brooding secrets.

## Indian Territory

Tulsa began as an outpost of the Creek Indians, free of the bitter memories of the Civil War or Reconstruction. It was no sprawling northern metropolis plagued

by poverty, unemployment and rotting tenements, nor was it a southern backwater where racial prejudice was endemic. The city's population boomed between 1890 and 1920, primarily due to the discovery of oil. Suddenly, the city grew into a thriving, bustling, enormously wealthy town of 73,000 by 1920 with bank deposits totaling more than \$65 million, according to Leroy Vaughan, Ph.D., in his book, *Black Wall Street: Black People and Their Place in the World History*.

Tulsa in the 1920s was a boomtown with a short fuse. As an original part of the sprawling Indian Territory, the city had for years seen itself as beyond the reach of state or federal law. The town became a notorious haven for criminals, and there appeared to be an unwritten understanding



A view of Greenwood just prior to the total devastation brought about by the riot. In only 12 hours, a once-thriving 36-square block business community was burned to the ground.

between the town and the outlaws. City officials would furnish them with asylum in exchange for being spared from their criminal acts — an “if you can't beat-um, join-um” operation.

Even after the American legal system moved in, Tulsa remained a rough and volatile mix of desperadoes, gamblers, prostitutes, cowboys, wildcatters, and



roustabouts, while the Ku Klux Klan was enough to weaken the knees of the bravest law-enforcement officials. Tulsa was also "a tale of two cities," isolated and insular, one black and one white, Jonathan Larsen wrote in a 1997 *American Visions* magazine article.

### Greenwood

By 1910, African Americans made up 10 percent of the city's population. The main thoroughfare into the Black community was Greenwood Avenue, from which the community took its name, intersected by Archer and Pine streets. Early in the 20th century, the black community of Tulsa was a nationally renowned entrepreneurial center. It was frequently referred to as "The Black Wall Street," and it attracted black pioneers from all over America who sought new opportunities and fresh challenges.

Because of strict segregation, blacks were only allowed to shop, spend, and live in this 36-square

block area, and Greenwood prospered as dollars circulated within it. Greenwood was the golden door of the black community, and it proved that African Americans

aters, a hospital, a bank, a post office, libraries, schools and law offices. And at a time when the entire state of Oklahoma had only two airports, six blacks owned air-

*"That which we do is what we are. That which we remember is, more often than not, that which we would liked to have been, or that which we hope to be. Thus our memory and our identity are ever at odds."*

*from The Golden Age/Time Past (1959), by Ralph Ellison*

could have successful infrastructures. The dollar circulated 36 to 1,000 times, sometimes taking a year to leave the neighborhood.

Black Ph.D.s, black attorneys and black doctors resided in the district. Black Wall Street had its own bus system; there were pawnshops, brothels, jewelry stores, 21 churches, 21 restaurants, 30 grocery stores, two movie the-

planes. Ron Wallace and Ronald E. Childs, in their book, *Black Wall Street: A Lost Dream*, said the area encompassed more than 600 businesses with a population as large as 15,000. Greenwood boasted the second highest literacy rate among Oklahoma's more than 30 black communities.

Race relations in Tulsa mirrored what was happening in other

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parts of the U.S. around the turn of the century. Beginning in 1917, race riots broke out in Minnesota, Nebraska, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and in the South. In 1920, Oklahoma adopted a grandfather clause that disfranchised the state's black population, a continuation of the Jim Crow segregation laws created in the 1890s. The decade also saw a rise of the KKK and lynchings.

### The Riot

Many accounts of the events that started the riot exist. Scott Ellsworth, in his book, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, cites the most frequently reported account:

"On Monday morning, May 31, 1921, 19 year-old Dick Rowland, a black male and 'bootblack' or shoeshine operator went into the Drexel Building to use the

restroom on the top floor. He had to ride up the elevator that was operated by a white female, Sarah Page. Page started the elevator when Rowland was only halfway in. To save himself from injury, Rowland jumped into the car, stepping on the girl's foot in the process. This caused her to fall and the elevator to lurch. When Rowland grabbed Page's arm to keep her from falling, she screamed. A crowd gathered outside the elevator, and when the door opened, Rowland ran."

By late afternoon the *Tulsa Tribune* reported that Page had been attacked and that Rowland had scratched her hands and face and tore her clothing. Despite Ms. Page's denial of any wrongdoing, Rowland was arrested on Tuesday. While the police were conducting their investigation, the *Tulsa Tribune* decided to portray the incident differently, but the accounts are hard to come by. The original bound volumes of the paper have been destroyed, and though the microfiche of the Tuesday, May 31, 1921, edition has the front-page article, part of the editorial page is missing. In his 1946 thesis on the riot, Loren Gill wrote that the *Tribune* "carried the following inflammatory news article prominently displayed on the front page: 'Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator.'"

Shortly after the paper hit the news stands, talk of a lynching began making its way around town. Within hours hundreds of whites were milling around in front of the courthouse. Some African American men also began to assemble, fearing the worst for the prisoner. About 25 African American men drove to the courthouse fully armed to offer assistance to the sheriff to protect the prisoner later that evening. The sheriff assured the crowd that he had everything under control and sent these emissaries home. But the mob outside the courthouse continued to grow and swelled to about 2,000. The blacks returned to the courthouse, this time numbering between 50 and 75 men, Larson wrote. A scuffle began

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between a black man and a white man. A shot rang out. Gunfire erupted.

With a nearly defenseless black community before them, the white mob advanced on Greenwood where they first looted and then burned all black businesses, homes and churches. Greenwood was bombed from the air by airplanes and gasoline-filled bottles set afire and thrown as grenades. In a period spanning fewer than 12 hours, a once thriving 36-square block business district in northern Tulsa burned to the ground and lay smoldering. A model community destroyed, and a major African American economic movement resoundingly defused.

The night's carnage destroyed the entire black community including all businesses, 1,200 homes, 21 churches, 21 restaurants, 30 grocery stores, two movie

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theaters, a hospital, a bank, a post office, libraries, schools and law offices. As expected, the impetus behind it all was the KKK, working in consort with ranking city officials, and many other sympathizers.

The official death count, according to the Tulsa Tribune, was given as 36 (26 blacks and 10 whites). But other accounts estimate this figure to be as high as 3,000 based on actual witnesses to the events. It is also reported that many bodies were buried in mass graves around the city. Some were dumped into a river and others into the coal mine shaft.

Black resisters were shot and thrown into the fires. When the National Guard arrived, they arrested all black men, women and children, herding them into detention centers at a baseball park and convention hall. As many as 4,000 were held in detention under armed guard.

The riot would later be described as one of the largest massacres of nonmilitary Americans. It has also been described as the worst riot in American history. Some liken it to a holocaust. When questioned later about the cause of the riot, Adjutant General Charles Barrett, who led the National Guard into Tulsa to suppress the riot, said the riot "had its origins in the Drexel Building incident, an impudent Negro, a



hysterical girl, an overzealous reporter and yellow journalism," the *New York Times* reported in 1996. A few days after the riot, the editor of the *Tulsa Tribune* allegedly admitted that some of the details reported in the paper were not true.

### A Segregation of Memory

Many blacks left Tulsa immediately after the riot, never to return. A grand jury was assembled to investigate the causes of the riot and issued a finding on June 25, 1921 that fixed the immediate cause of the riot on a "certain group of colored men who appeared at the courthouse."

Greenwood soon rebuilt itself and became one of the country's leading jazz centers in the 1930s and 1940s. However, as Jimmie White, a Connors State College history teacher who is on the Tulsa Race Riot Commission said, this period also began a "conspiracy of silence" around the horrific events that decimated the thriving African American community.

Historian Ellsworth wrote: "It is part of our nature as human beings — whether as individuals, groups, or societies — that we create 'pasts' with which we can live. If the reality of our history poses questions about our lives of today which are too painful or ominous to ponder, then we will mold our past into a less threatening chronicle, or repress it entirely. If anything, our 'historic memory' is as malleable as our personal one. Thus the way in which the Tulsa race riot is remembered speaks to us as much about the Tulsa and America of today as it does about the events of 1921."

The Tulsa Race Riot Commission was created by the state legislature in 1997 to investigate the violence that swept the city nearly a century ago. The exact casualty figures and property losses were obscured in the cover-up that kept the riot out of polite conversation and school history textbooks for nearly 75 years, which the Commission concluded was aided by a "conspiracy of silence" among area white power brokers. They wished to keep word of the riot to a minimum and viewed it as a public relations nightmare that was best forgotten.

The 11-member Commission recommended that direct payments, or reparations, should be made to survivors and descendants of riot victims of the 1921 riot. The Commission also passed a resolution calling the riot "the violent consequence of racial hatred institutionalized and tolerated by official, federal, state, county, and city policy."

The light-hearted and casual conversation my hairstylist and I usually enjoy turned into something else that day. I left the salon with more than a fresh cut and shampoo. Instead, I had much to consider about history, about how events are remembered and recorded by both individuals and groups. I had much to consider about the legacy of the past and the resilience of people, such as the residents of Greenwood, who had suffered so greatly at the hands of racism, to still endure and rebuild their lives. It seems to me that as we celebrate Black History Month, the story of Greenwood and the Tulsa Riot must find its rightful place in the history books and must never be forgotten. ■

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