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75 Years Later, Tulsa Confronts Its Race Riot

By SAM HOWE VERHOVEK MAY 31, 1996

The Tulsa of 1921 was awash in oil money, so much so that even the poorer, predominantly black Greenwood section enjoyed a measure of prosperity that earned it a reputation as "the Negro Wall Street of America."

All that changed in the span of a few hours on June 1 of that year, when Greenwood burned in one of the worst incidents of racial violence in the nation's history, one that left scores of people dead and 40 city blocks looted, then leveled. Twenty-three churches and 1,000 homes and businesses were ruined.

But as the years and then decades passed, Tulsa seemed determined to forget the riot. No memorial was erected; no citywide commemoration was held; not a single person was ever charged with the deaths or the fires. In the city library, articles about the riot and the formation of white lynch mobs were simply cut out of that day's issue of The Tulsa Tribune.

And when the 50th anniversary arrived, "as bitter as the wounds were, nobody really wanted to talk about it," recalled the Rev. G. Calvin McCutchen Sr., pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church. "It's almost as if it never occurred."

Now, Tulsa has decided to remember.

In what the dwindling corps of riot survivors generally describe as a belated, but nonetheless welcome gesture, an interracial coalition has put together a series of events this weekend to mark the riot anniversary and promote better race relations in Tulsa, which today, as in 1921, is about 12 percent black.

On Saturday, a service will be held at Mount Zion, which was burned to the ground in the riot two months after it had opened; over 31 years, it has been painstakingly rebuilt on the same spot. Speakers will include survivors of the riot, who are now in their 80's and 90's, along with Mayor Susan Savage and David Boren, the University of Oklahoma president and former United States Senator. And then the black-granite "Black Wall Street of America" monument will be dedicated at the Greenwood Cultural Center.

"I wouldn't say it's too late, but it shouldn't have taken this long," said 92-year-old LaVerne Davis, a former housemaid and a survivor. "You're not supposed to cover up history. The only way you're going to know history is to talk about it."

Mayor Savage, noting that Tulsa was preparing for a major commemoration of its own centennial in 1998, made much the same point. "You cannot know where it is you are going unless you know where it is you have been," she said.

Ms. Savage, a Democrat who is white (Tulsa has never had a black mayor), said that although she grew up here it was not until she was an adult that she learned about the rioting. "It just wasn't something that people discussed," she said.

Indeed, the truth behind much of what happened in Tulsa on June 1, 1921, will never be known.

The incident that led to the violence was the arrest of a black shoe-shine man, 19-year-old Dick Rowland, a former star halfback at Booker T. Washington High, for supposedly assaulting a white teen-age elevator operator.

"Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator," screamed a headline in The Tulsa Tribune, which also reported that an angry group of whites was gathering to lynch the man.

One of the most unfortunate aspects of the riot, Mr. Ellsworth said, is that it may have sprung from a misunderstanding: The police later concluded that Mr. Rowland had stumbled into the girl as he was getting off the elevator, and all

charges in the case were dropped.

But the angry whites had gathered within hours, and many blacks armed themselves. While all the property destruction occurred in black neighborhoods, hand-to-hand combat left people of both races dead.

Even the death toll is in dispute. In a report to the Oklahoma Adjutant General, Charles F. Barrett, filed a few days after the worst of the violence, a surgeon with the state National Guard said 26 blacks and 10 whites had died and an additional 317 people were injured.

But many black and white witnesses, saying trucks filled with bodies of black victims had been taken to two local potter's fields, insisted the count was absurdly low. The authorities were never able to correct the count because hundreds of black families fled Tulsa to escape the fires and possible attacks, making it impossible to determine who had left and who had died.

Scott Ellsworth, a Tulsa native and historian formerly at the Smithsonian Institution who wrote "Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921" (Louisiana State University Press, 1982), said black deaths probably approached 100 but might have been much higher.

Several survivors said the week's events are of great symbolic importance here.

Robert L. Fairchild Sr., for example, a former city health worker who is black, said: "I am extremely pleased that Tulsa has taken this occasion seriously. A mistake has been made, and this is a way to really look at it, then look toward the future and try to make sure it never happens again."

Mr. Fairchild, 92, vividly recalled fleeing the neighborhood at 5 A.M. on June 1 with his mother as crowds of white men with torches and guns swept through and many blacks, also armed, fought back.

But there are many black people here who say the ceremonies on Saturday are perhaps a way for the city to forgive itself and feel better about race relations without anyone having been made to pay for the crimes.

No financial reparations were made to black families and the city's white leaders at the time refused offers of help that had poured in from around the nation, said Mr. Ellsworth. "Black Tulsa," he said, "rebuilt itself."

George Douglas Monroe, an 80-year-old nightclub owner, remembers hiding

under a bed with his two sisters and a brother while four white men broke into the family's house, next to Mount Zion.

"They went straight to the curtains of the house and set them afire," Mr. Monroe said. "As they walked past the bed, one of the men stepped on my finger. As I went to scream, my older sister, Lottie, put her hand over my mouth. That's something I will never forget."

Mr. Monroe and his family ran out of the house, which burned to the ground. The family's business, a roller-skating rink in Greenwood, was also destroyed and was never rebuilt; his father, Osborn Monroe, could find work later only as a janitor at a white-owned theater.

As he spoke, Mr. Monroe fingered a necklace that he made many years ago out of the charred dimes the family later recovered from a strongbox.

For Mr. Fairchild, the commemorative services are important. "Of course we've got to talk about this," he said. "People can learn how to get along with one another. It can be done, but you have to work at it. It's an art."

But Mr. Monroe was clearly torn about whether to attend the commemorative services.

"I guess I have decided to go, more or less because of one reason," he said. "And that is, because my Dad has finally been recognized by the City of Tulsa. I'll leave it right there at that."

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