

THE TULSA OKLAHOMA RACE RIOT OF 1921

The true story of what really happened.

Whites in places like Oklahoma resented Blacks. Whites in these places came in two categories. Very rich and poor. And the rich took full advantage of the poor. They ran roughshod over their land rights to build the railroad. Cattle barons with spreads of 800 square miles ran down poor farmers and sheep ranchers.

The only thing that made poor whites of any value at all was the fact that they were white.

Later oil was discovered and some poor whites got rich, and some rich whites got richer. Rich whites became more autocratic and poor whites became more desperate.

By the turn of the century Blacks were doing well in Oklahoma despite the racism. They consolidated into a segregated area in Tulsa and tried to build something. Some Blacks had money having been given land by Creek Indians who had enslaved them but later intermarried with them. On the Indian land had been discovered oil! Whites couldn't figure out how to take it from them so they made Blacks miserable.

In response Blacks had become tight knit. Blacks had their own everything. Their own clubs, homes, businesses, even an airport and a movie theatre so they would not get beaten up doing down town to see a movie.

Greenwood had beautiful homes and well tended gardens, bus lines, hotels, restaurants, and their own hospital and school. There were Black doctors, lawyers, teachers, shop keepers, saloon keepers, dress shops, barber shops and hair dresser shops. And Blacks who had heard about Greenwood were moving there.

Blacks felt for the first time a sense of pride and well being because they needed no one and did not have to depend on whites for anything.

Whites lie when they claim they want Blacks off their backs and doing for themselves. That is in fact when they hate and fear Blacks most.

On the morning of Monday, May 30, 1921, a 19-year-old bootblack named **Dick Rowland** brushed up against a white female elevator operator in the Drexel Building at Third and Main Streets, in downtown Tulsa. The woman, **Sarah Page**, cried out and maintained the boy brushed up against her on purpose. She ordered him off the elevator but he maintained he had to go up to an office to shine the shoes of a regular customer.

His impertinence caused white males nearby to fly into a rage. And rumors began to fly that a Black male had assaulted a white woman.

Rowland became afraid and ran home to Greenwood to hide. When word got out Blacks were angry. They had heard this story before.

A poor white trash women making a fuss because some Black guy looked at her. The Black town rallied around Rowland.

Nevertheless, Sarah Page was pressured into filing a charge of assault against Rowland maintaining he a tried to rape her, and he was arrested that afternoon.

In Tulsa poor whites had a strong Ku Klux Klan of over 3,000 members. Whites resented Black prosperity and were looking for an excuse to take the Blacks down. **The Tulsa Tribune** printed a fabricated, sensational and untrue account of the incident maintaining Blacks were becoming too impertinent and out of their place to openly assault a white woman and what were decent white men going to do about it.



Beulah Smith, 93, one of the few survivors of the 1921 Tulsa Riot hid in tall weeds as rioter burned her home.

Klansman.

The KKK which had died out at the turn of the century saw a resurgence as a result of the film D. W. Griffiths *"Birth Of A Nation"* based on the book - *"The Klansman -Birth of a Nation."*

This was the break the Klan had been looking for. Any excuse to run the niggers out of Tulsa and take their property and land.

But Blacks were not having another lynching of an innocent Black boy. A truck load of armed Black men - many veterans of WWI pulled up in front of the Tulsa Court House to make sure white mobs didn't storm the courthouse and take Rowland out and lynch him just for sport.

Reportedly two shots were fired into the air. A white man in the crowd confronted an armed Black man, a war veteran, who had joined with other Blacks to protect Rowland.



White males as young as 13 were deputized - Blacks were shot on sight. (Oklahoma Archives.)

The next morning, Tuesday, May 31, the **Tulsa Tribune** newspaper in one of the most blatant racist acts of terrorism actually maintained Rowland had tried to rape Sarah Page, and announced a lynching for that night that had not as yet been planned. Which meant the editor of the **Tulsa Tribune** was a

According to **Eddie Faye Gates** an appointed member of the Oklahoma Commission studying



Eddie Gates of the Tulsa Riots Reparations Commission.

the 1921 riots with the task of making recommendations concerning reparations:

"This white man," she said, asked the Black man, "'What are you doing with this gun?'"

"I'm going to use it if I have to," the Black man said, according to Gates, "and (the white man) said, 'No, you're not. Give it to me,' and he tried to take it. The gun went off, the white man was dead, the riot was on."

Whites responded by breaking into every store in the downtown area, such as sporting goods and hardware stores, grabbing rifles, pistols, shotguns and ammunition.

They launched an attack against the Blacks who were driven back towards Greenwood.

Soon the riot shifted to the southern fringe of north Tulsa in the area of the Frisco tracks and Greenwood Avenue. The whites poured gunfire into the Black area until midnight.

Truckloads of whites set fires and shot Blacks on sight. Whites of every kind were deputized, including white males as young as 13.

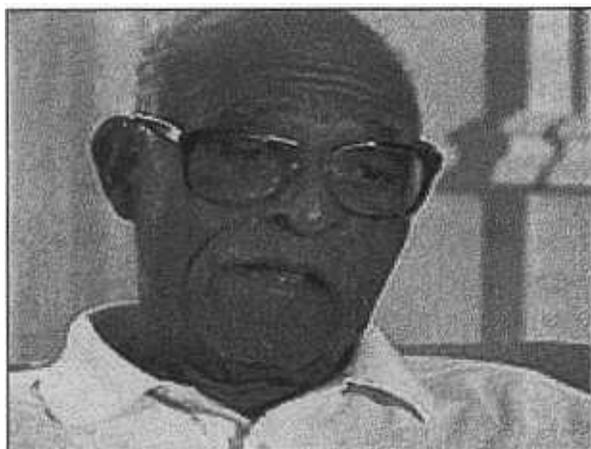
Mayor T.D. Evans asked the governor to send in the National Guard. Shortly after midnight, Guard units from Oklahoma City were sent to

went up in flames.

"Get your families out of here because they're killing niggers uptown," she remembers Frenchie saying. "We hid in the weeds in the hog pen," Smith told the Oklahoma Riot Commission.

A mob of whites came to **Kenny Booker's** house and demanded, *"Nigger, do you have a gun?"* Booker told the Oklahoma Commission.

Booker, then in his teens hid with his family in their attic until they realized their home was on fire. *"When we got downstairs, things were burning. My sister asked me, 'Kenny, is the world on fire?' I said, 'I don't know, but we're in a heck of a lot of trouble, baby.'"*



Kenny Booker, 97, recalled the terror of that night when rioters burned down his family's home. They were lucky to escape with their lives. Other were not so lucky.

Ruth Sigler Avery, who has written a documentary "Fear of the Fifth Horsemen" was 7-years-old at the time of the riot. She told of small planes flying overhead and dropping gasoline bombs on Greenwood. The explosive devices may have been dynamite or Molotov cocktails - gasoline-filled bottles set afire and thrown as grenades.



Ruth Avery

"They'd throw it down and when it'd hit, it would burst into flames," Avery said.

Tulsa by special train. When word of the Guards arrival circulated, the white mob turned to arson.

The first fire was set near Archer Street and Boston Avenue. Fire companies answered the alarm, but the rioters drove them off and would not let them fight the fire.

Beulah Smith was 14-years-old the night of the riot. A neighbor named Frenchie came pounding on her family's door in a Tulsa sub-neighborhood known as "Little Africa" that also

Over 300 Blacks were shot dead.

The number could be higher. Tulsa authorities tried to minimize the numbers. Bodies that were not burned outright were dragged to large burial plots and dumped.

That was Tuesday, May 31. On Wednesday June 1, when the smoke lifted more than 1,400 Black homes and businesses in Tulsa's Greenwood district, a prosperous area known as the "Black Wall Street," lay in ruins.

Unmarked Graves

Many of the survivors told of bodies stacked up like "cord wood" says Richard Warner of the Tulsa Historical Society. In its search for the facts, The Oklahoma Commission has literally been trying to dig up the truth.

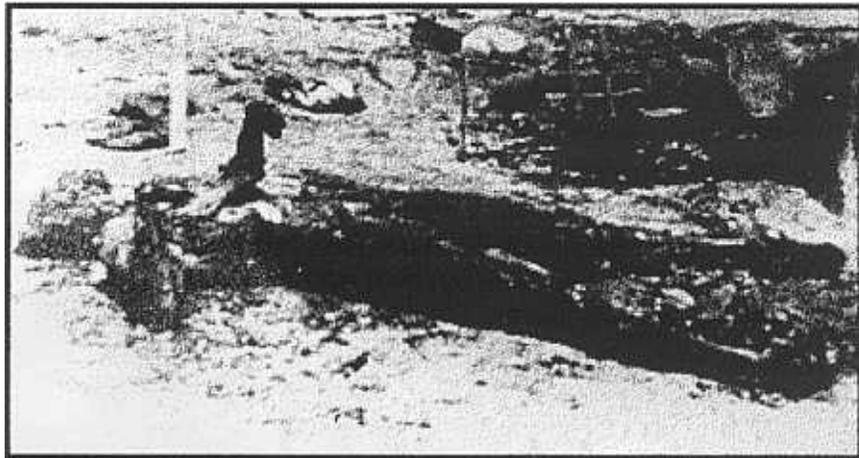
Two headstones at Tulsa's *Oaklawn Cemetery* indicate that riot victims are buried there. In an effort to determine how many, archeological experts have used ground-piercing radar and other equipment to test the soil in a search for unmarked graves.

Blacks Stage Last Stand at Standpipe Hill

It is important to mention that Blacks fought back as best they could. What undid them was underestimating the level of hatred against them by the whites; and an ineffective "what if" defense plan. - 'We are surrounded by hostile whites. What if they turn on us, what do we do, where can we hide, what offensive and defensive measure can we employ.'

Blacks in self defense killed around 28 whites. In the late morning of June 1, a band of armed Blacks made their last stand at the foot of **Standpipe Hill**. They were gathered in groups behind trees and in small buildings.

According to a report in the Tulsa Tribune newspaper, the National Guard mounted two machine guns and poured deadly fire into the area. After the continued barrage the Blacks then surrendered. They were disarmed and marched in columns to Convention Hall; the McNulty Baseball Park at 11th Street and Elgin Avenue; and The Fairgrounds and airport flying field east of Tulsa.



Charred remains of murder victim 1921 Tulsa race riots.

Tulsa had a Black population of about 7,000 at that time and many of them fled into the **Osage Hills** and to the surrounding towns to escape the riot.

It is important to note that the National Guard instead of rescuing the Blacks from rioters was the death knell for the armed resistance. Some 300 Blacks were arrested, they never stood a chance.

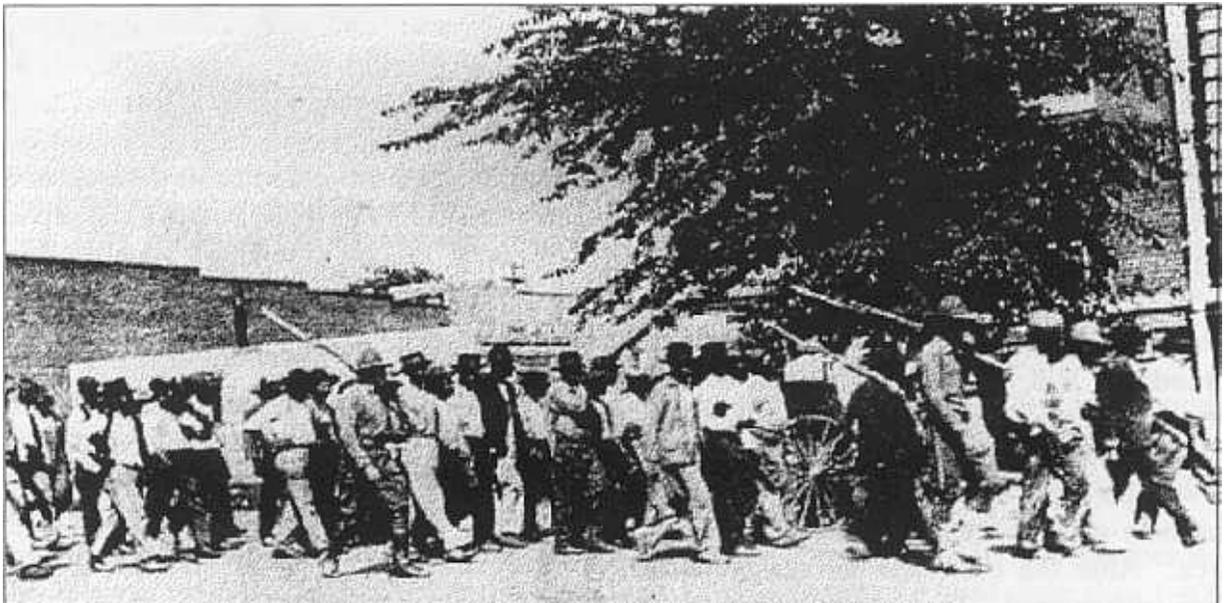
On the afternoon of June 2, the National Guard troops left the city. **The Red Cross** was called in and began giving assistance to the displaced Blacks. Thousands of families were literally out doors. In many cases the head of the family had been killed and widows and orphans in this once affluent community were left dazed and confused. There was no further violence from either side.

White rioters had burned 35 blocks of north Tulsa, Piles of bricks and rubble, and a few chimneys and columns was all that remained of the Black area. The section looked like it had been hit by a bomb. Cattle and other livestock were destroyed; clothing and other items of value were stolen by the rioters; horses and mules were stolen. Cars were stolen and driven out of town.

Blacks could not recover from the devastation.



Burned out Black residents of Greenwood pitch tents on their property. A water pump and dead long horn are all that is left of a once beautiful homestead.



Disarmed Black men who were defending their homes and community from rioters were marched by National Guardsmen to assorted detention areas.

Many Blacks left town to live with relatives. They had lost everything. Others with nowhere to go had to remain living in makeshift tents on what used to be their home. They feared if they left their property would be seized. Some widows sent for male family members out of state to come to rebuild their property.

Greenwood, but all African Americans who were cheated out of a prosperous example of self reliance and self worth. All most Blacks have ever known of their history is pockets of success amid a sea of failures. It did not have to be this way. <>

The interesting fact is Blacks and Native Americans were on this land before the whites came. They had been resettled there in the 1800s after being removed from their homelands in Florida, Alabama and South Carolina, by whites with the full assistance and mandate from the United States Government. They were literally marched to Oklahoma.

As the scorching summer faded into fall and then winter, hundred of Blacks were still living in tents. The hardships they endured have never been fully documented. The Red Cross was instrumental in assisting burnt out Black families as well as the wounded. They set up hospitals at the local schools.

Greenwood as it once was - was never rebuilt. Of the original town only one block remains as a reminder of what was. The Holocaust of Greenwood was one of many. Reparations are called for. Not only for the descendants of



Greenwood resident arrested in aftermath of Tulsa Riot. Blacks defended their community as best they could but they never stood a chance.



Greenwood residents try to protect their homes against armed whites.

STATEMENT BY ONE OF THE VICTIMS OF THE RIOT CITY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL, J. W. HUGHES, GREENWOOD BLACK SCHOOL

As given to the Red Cross, June 1921

[Editors note: J.W. Hughes was an educated Negro trying to maintain his personal dignity while distancing himself from lower class Blacks. He and his family were dealt with exactly the same as the others. After he was placed under arrest -his home was maliciously burned to the ground after the riot was supposedly over on June 1.]

On the night of May 31, between nine and ten o'clock, someone told me there was a race conflict. I was asked to go down on the street, but after being told that some had gone to the Court House I refused to go, knowing that I could not use any influence with the scattered bunch.

On the morning of June 1, I arose, expecting to go to the schoolhouse. I did not have any idea that the trouble had reached such a proportion.

At five o'clock a whistle was blown, seven aeroplanes were flying over the colored district, and a

I was not allowed to go back into the house. I called my wife and son, she came out dressed only in a kimona and shoes. We were ordered to put our hands above our head, marched up Fairview Street, then across the Standpipe Hill to Easton Street, where we found automobiles driven by ladies and men.

We were carried to the City Jail, the men were placed in the corridor downstairs, the women were carried upstairs. After so many were crowded into the corridor, we were carried to Convention Hall. Many people cheered and clapped their hands as we were marched four abreast with our hands above our head.

A man was shot at the door of the Convention Hall while both hands were above his head. Many men who were shot out in the city were brought in the hall and we heard their cries and groans. Namely: Dr. Jackson, Dr. Johnson and Dr. Stovall.

We looked out of the windows, saw our homes go up in smoke. At noon, we were fed with sandwiches and coffee.

In the late afternoon, we were allowed to leave the Convention Hall *only* when some white person we had worked for would come and vouch for us. Mr. Oberholtzer, City Superintendent of Public Schools, came and called for all colored teachers, and we were taken to the old City High School, where I met my

wife again. All the lady teachers were taken to the homes of the city principals and cared for nicely.

We were allowed to stay in the old High School all night. The next morning, I saw my wife much improved as to her dress. Miss Kimble of the Domestic Science Department of the *white* High School gave us our breakfast.



White residents of Tulsa looted and burned Greenwood.

Machine Gun was placed in front of my home. I was called to the door by home guards (National Guards) and armed citizens. I was not dressed, but was told to bring my family out. They said if we would obey they would protect us and our property.

The next morning, without hat or shoes, I was determined to improve my personal appearance and comfort. After much solicitation I was allowed to go under the guard of a soldier - down on Main Street to Renberg's Clothing Store. He gave all the colored male teachers a suit of clothes and hat.

In the evening of the first day after the trouble, I was allowed to go out and look over the burned area. Thirty-five blocks, including *my home* and eight rent houses, were in ashes. <

Photos from The photo archives of the American Red Cross - Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 and its aftermath. Also photos from Oklahoma- The Tulsa Race Riot 1921 Commission



These burnt out houses nevertheless give an idea of what many homes in Greenwood looked like. Manicured lawns, lovely brick and framed houses.

***Reparations for Slavery and for
150 years of post Civil War Hell***