

# EX POST FACTO

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# THE 1921 TULSA MASSACRE

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ABSENT from state text books and unknown to many Oklahoma residents who were not old enough to recall it, the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, as it was called, had for generations been censored from publications, shrouded in silence, and thus collectively forgotten. However, the African-American community preserved the memory of what took place through a tradition of oral history, retelling the story of their loss and survival to their children and grandchildren. While the sixteen hours of murderous violence that took place in Tulsa were widely reported on the front pages of major newspapers across the country in June 1921, the sensational media coverage of the event was hardly accurate, revealing more about the society in which this horrific racist violence was perpetrated than it did about the event itself. The categorization of the event as a “riot” while other events involving far less loss of life were called massacres is in and of itself one example of historical inaccuracy. Mainstream American media’s inaccurate portrayal of the event and the decades of its deliberate omission from the historical record created the need for African Americans to actively pursue the reformation of the historical memory of the 1921 murders and the destruction of Greenwood, Tulsa’s African-American-owned business district. The community’s organized efforts to preserve their history and demand that it be nationally recognized provoked the conscience of Oklahoma state legislators. In 1997, as a direct result of years of such organized efforts, the state of Oklahoma appointed a commission to study a piece of state history that had been largely ignored for more than a half-century. The state-appointed commission’s final report, submitted in 2001, reflected a vastly different perspective, illustrating a cultural transition toward recognition of the need for reconciliation and historical accuracy.

To begin to understand the transition reflected in the Oklahoma Commission’s Final Report, it is important to examine the prevalent culture of racism, socially sanctioned violence, and structural oppression that existed on the eve of the 1921 bloodshed and destruction in Greenwood. Early twentieth-century Americans saw the routine murder of

African Americans through “lynching,” which was traditionally upheld as an “unwritten law” that allowed for “putting human beings to death without complaint under oath, without trial by jury, without opportunity to make defense, and without right of appeal.”<sup>1</sup> In 1921, fifty-nine African Americans were lynched in the United States and more than three thousand had been lynched in the two previous decades.<sup>2</sup> In 1919, just two years prior to the Tulsa Massacre, there were seventy-five isolated lynchings recorded, and throughout that summer, racist violence erupted into more than twenty-five armed conflicts across the nation, all characterized by white mob-led violence against African Americans. Many of these incidents, like the 1921 Tulsa incident, were called “race riots” and were precipitated by a false accusation of an assault against a white woman by an African-American man. In Oklahoma, there was little or no reprisal for lynching where, much as with a sporting event, local newspapers would announce a lynching and thousands would happily attend. A 1921 Tulsa publication, *Harrows Weekly*, boldly reported, “In Oklahoma among thousands of people it is not considered a crime for a mob to kill a negro . . . If the past is to be made a criterion for the future, it is perfectly safe at any time and at any place for any considerable number of men to gather, to take a[n African-American] prisoner from the hands of an officer and inflict the penalty of death.”<sup>3</sup>

Given the general climate of the day, it is no wonder that alarm spread when on May 31, 1921, Tulsa’s African-American community learned of a large crowd of white men gathering at the courthouse where Tulsa police were holding a young man accused of assaulting a white elevator girl. That afternoon, the front-page story of the *Tulsa Tribune* read, “Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator,” and according to W. D. Williams, an African-American resident of Tulsa and witness to the destruction of Greenwood, the *Tribune* carried an editorial entitled “To Lynch Negro Tonight.”<sup>4</sup> Naturally concerned, given the legacy of racism and mob violence in Tulsa, twenty-five to thirty African-American men arrived at the courthouse armed and prepared to protect the young man,

<sup>1</sup> Ida B. Wells, “Lynch Law in America,” *The Arena*, January 1900, 15.

<sup>2</sup> R. Halliburton, *The Tulsa Race War of 1921* (Oklahoma: Northeast Oklahoma State University, 1975), 1.

<sup>3</sup> “Let us Return to a Reign of Law,” *Harrows Weekly*, June 1921, quoted in *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 48. Exactly what the *Tulsa Tribune* printed remains conjecture because the original bound copies of their volumes are not complete. A microfilm version exists but the May 31 city edition had the front page and back page editorial deliberately cut out before the microfilming was done. A 1946 MA thesis by Loren L. Gill includes the entire text of the article “Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator”; at that time, the author had access to the paper. Loren L. Gill, “Tulsa Race Riot” (master’s thesis, University of Tulsa, 1946).

Dick Rowland, if the police chose to release him to the mob. At the courthouse, one white man in the crowd insulted an armed African-American man and attempted to disarm him. Shots rang out. The initial shot may have been accidental—a result of the struggle as one man attempted to wrest a gun from another. However, the immediate response from the gathered mob, and possibly police, was to open fire on the African Americans, who fired back while retreating toward Greenwood.<sup>5</sup>

In order to comprehend the magnitude of the destruction that took place in the hours that followed, it should be understood how Greenwood stood as a well-established monument to African Americans' remarkable achievement of prosperity in spite of Tulsa's oppressive racist climate. In part due to the rigidly enforced segregation laws, an insulated African-American economy had gradually developed and remained separate from the white business district. At the intersection of Greenwood and Archer Street, a thriving business district was born as African Americans opened hotels, restaurants, barbershops, grocery stores, dance halls, and movie theaters to cater to the consumer market within their community. African-American dollars circulated within the community as Greenwood thrived and sustained itself. Teachers, lawyers, physicians, and journalists soon flocked to the area and a variety of African-American professional establishments made their home in Tulsa.

Meanwhile, the rapid growth of Greenwood frightened a white population concerned with maintaining the long-standing tradition of racial hierarchy and white privilege. The African-American population in Tulsa increased from 1,959 in 1910 to 8,873 in 1920.<sup>6</sup> By 1921, it was close to eleven thousand.<sup>7</sup> Coinciding with increased KKK activity in Tulsa and white unemployment, a deep resentment of Greenwood's accumulated wealth festered.

The Dick Rowland incident captured in the *Tulsa Tribune's* inflammatory article was merely the spark that unleashed and exposed the prevailing sentiment of racist fear and resentment. After the initial outbreak of gunfire in front of the courthouse, armed white men invaded Greenwood. For sixteen hours, these armed invaders shot at African Americans in the streets, fired into homes, and looted and burned businesses and residences. Throughout the night, the bloodshed and destruction continued until a thirty-five-block area of Greenwood lay in

<sup>5</sup> Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Oklahoma, 2001), 60–64 (hereafter cited as *Oklahoma Commission Report*).

<sup>6</sup> Ellsworth, 14.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

complete ruins. The thorough devastation is visible in photograph collections showing empty shells of once tall prominent brick buildings lying in piles of smoldering ash.<sup>8</sup> With the entire community destroyed, and hundreds murdered, more than six thousand African Americans were placed in internment camps and thousands were left homeless.

Almost immediately, mainstream white America seemed determined to absolve itself of all responsibility, and major newspapers across the country printed front-page articles placing the blame on African Americans and an alleged communist plot. A *Los Angeles Times* article entitled “Blame Red Propaganda for Tulsa’s Race Riots” is one example. The opening sentence stated unequivocally, “Bolshevik propaganda, which was inciting negroes of this city and elsewhere in Oklahoma to become antagonistic to the whites . . . was the principal cause of the race riot,” yet the author gave no examples of such “propaganda.”<sup>9</sup> While the title may have captivated a patriotic, pro-capitalist American audience, it was very misleading concerning the content of the article itself, which failed to support the claim of a communist plot. This sensational title effectively shifted the blame from American racism by suggesting that “Bolshevik” radicals were responsible. The mass murders and enormous amount of property damage that took place could be, according to this logic, easily explained as having no connection with American society or values. This line of thinking did not cause the reader to contemplate possible contributing factors such as segregation, the routine lynching of African Americans, or the highly tense social climate steeped in racial hatred that existed throughout the nation. Blaming communists served to deny that American culture was in any way culpable. Furthermore, by crediting “Bolshevik propaganda” with “inciting the Negroes of this city,” the author denied that African Americans had the capacity to develop and organize protests through their own will, and suggested that they lacked agency to think independently of external influence. Continuing along this trend, the *L.A. Times* printed another article a few days later entitled, “Negro Reds Started Riots,” which claimed, “members of own race in Tulsa make accusation.” Again, void of actual evidence that linked communism to the events in Tulsa, the author reported, “negro radicals had been at work for some time.”<sup>10</sup>

Nowhere was the swift denial of responsibility more clear than amongst the white population of Tulsa. The *Tulsa World’s* front page headlines the day after Tulsa’s Grand Jury Report was submitted proudly claimed, “Grand Jury Blames Negroes for Inciting Race Rioting; Whites

<sup>8</sup> Ellsworth, 80–81, 91.

<sup>9</sup> “Blame Red Propaganda for Tulsa Race Riots,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 June 1921, 1.

<sup>10</sup> “Negro Reds Started Riot,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 June 1921, 1.

Clearly Exonerated.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the final report of Tulsa’s grand jury investigation definitively concluded, “We find the presence of the armed negroes was the direct cause of the riot” and insisted, “there was no mob spirit among the whites, no talk of lynching and no arms.”<sup>12</sup> This statement contradicted first hand accounts of African-American survivors and effectively denied the legitimacy of their memories.

Meanwhile, the rest of the country sharply criticized Tulsa for lawlessness and “official neglect.” Such criticism did not directly hold Tulsa’s white population accountable for racist violence; rather it was blamed law enforcement for failing to properly contain the violence. The publicity Tulsa received as a result of the violent chaos created a poor public image at a time when the state of Oklahoma was interested in appealing to business investors and settlers.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it was convenient for Tulsa’s white population to unburden their consciences and forget. This self-interested forgetting set the stage for a historical memory obscured by inaccuracies and tucked away in a collective decision to depreciate the significant and lasting impact that the tragic event had on the African-American community.

Disappearing from the front pages of American newspapers, the horror in Tulsa was quickly transformed from a national calamity to a dim memory. The incident was not well mentioned in state history, it was completely absent from textbooks, thus all public discussion was effectively silenced. Commenting on this pervasive silence, Danny Goble, faculty member at the University of Oklahoma, wrote, “Oklahoma history textbooks published during the 1920s did not mention the riot at all—nor did ones published in the 1930s. Finally in 1941, it was mentioned . . . but only in one brief paragraph.”<sup>14</sup> Nancy Feldman, a sociology professor at the University of Tulsa in 1946, was astonished to discover how suppressed this piece of state history was. “I mentioned the riot in class one day,” Feldman recalled, “No one in this all-white classroom . . . had ever heard of it, and some stoutly denied it and questioned my facts.” Bringing elder Tulsa resident Robert Fairchild into the classroom to recount his experience as a survivor of the destruction caused Feldman to be called to the dean’s office. She was “advised to drop the whole subject” and in her own words, “certainly felt threatened.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> “Grand Jury Blames Negroes for Inciting Race Rioting; Whites Clearly Exonerated,” *Tulsa World*, 26 June 1921, 1, quoted in Alfred L. Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Riot of 1921; Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 74.

<sup>12</sup> Halliburton, 38.

<sup>13</sup> “Riot Charged to Official Neglect,” *Washington Post*, 2 June 1921, 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Oklahoma Commission Report*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

The same year, University of Tulsa graduate student Loren Gill, wrote an MA thesis entitled “The Tulsa Race Riot,” marking an unusual inquiry into an event that was largely censored. While Gill gave an account of the white mob-led violence against Greenwood in a way that certainly represented a more balanced view than the blatantly prejudiced and sensational 1921 newspaper articles, he affirmed the Tulsa Grand Jury Report’s assessment that armed African Americans were a principal cause. His thesis propounded, “a study of the immediate causes of the riot indicates there is considerable evidence to support the statement of the grand jury that the appearance of the armed Negroes was responsible.” The author goes on to suggest that, “the riot would not have occurred . . . had the Negroes not been incensed to the point where they felt they could successfully invade the business section.”<sup>16</sup> Gill’s statement clearly reflected a Jim Crow era discourse, which considered it inappropriately bold and socially unacceptable for African Americans to arm themselves, even in self-defense. Passivity and humble obedience to the social order regardless of its inequities was the standard role for African Americans. While Gill’s thesis is notable for, what was at the time, an unprecedented attempt by a white scholar to study the incident in detail, it would take the implementation of significant social reforms in response to African-American protest movements before more complete and racially unbiased studies would emerge.

While most of the nation continued to ignore or deny the events of May 31, 1921, it was unforgettable to the survivors, their family, and their friends, as well as to those in the African-American community who collected and preserved the memories of the day, determined to one day bring them to the surface. Debates over issues of racial discrimination in housing, employment, and education began to take hold of the nation during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Student protesters during this period demanded the inclusion of the African-American experience into college curricula, forcing professional historians to consider the study of African American history as a legitimate field.<sup>17</sup> Reflecting the change in the national climate, the city of Tulsa gradually began to address racial discrimination as well. The reassessment of race relations forced Tulsa’s white population to confront the city’s own past exclusion of African-American history from the state’s historical narrative.

<sup>16</sup> Gill, 93.

<sup>17</sup> Darlene Clarke Hine, *African-American Odyssey*, vol. 2, *Since 1865* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2003), 562; Darlene Clark Hine, *The State of Afro-American History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), x.

Not until the 1970s, following the social change resulting from the civil rights movement, did public discussion of African-American history emerge. Correspondingly, the organized efforts of Greenwood's descendants and survivors intensified. In 1971, on the fiftieth anniversary of Greenwood's destruction, African-American survivors met in Tulsa at Mount Zion Baptist Church for a commemoration marking the first recorded public acknowledgment of the event.<sup>18</sup> However, that same year when journalist Ed Wheeler was commissioned by the publications manager at the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce to run a story in the Chamber's magazine on the riot, the Chamber of Commerce management refused to publish it. Faced with anonymous threats as he researched and wrote the article, Wheeler was determined to get the story out. He tried unsuccessfully to get the story published in two of Tulsa's daily newspapers. Finally, *Impact Magazine*, an African-American-oriented Oklahoma magazine published his story, "Profile of a Race Riot." The story's impact was unfortunately limited, as the magazine was not widely circulated outside of Tulsa and its readership was primarily African-American. With previously unpublished photographs illustrating the extent of the devastation, the story's publication nevertheless marked a significant milestone toward the lifting of the veil of silence that had cloaked the Tulsa tragedy for decades.

While "Profile of a Race Riot" contributed to public acknowledgment of the Tulsa tragedy on a local level, continuous efforts of determined individuals would, in the context of a new cultural awareness, eventually move the incident into the national spotlight. One such determined individual was Ruth Sigler Avery, who had childhood memories of trucks carrying dead bodies of African Americans as flames engulfed Greenwood. Convinced of a conspiracy to cover up this piece of history, she devoted herself to research. As she personally interviewed survivors and collected old photographs, Avery "embarked upon what turned out to be a decades-long personal crusade to see that the true story of the riot was finally told."<sup>19</sup>

In her work, Avery connected with other like-minded individuals such as Mozela Franklin Jones. Inspired by the legacy of her father, B. C. Franklin, a riot survivor and prominent African-American attorney, she, like Avery, was concerned with the preservation of Greenwood's history, including the event that had brought it to its untimely destruction. In partnership with Tulsa's Booker T. Washington High School history teacher, Jones worked to desegregate the Tulsa Historical Society. Jones

<sup>18</sup> *Oklahoma Commission Report*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

was also responsible for the creation of the first public collection of photographs of Tulsa's 1921 massacre.

In 1975, amidst a newfound national interest in African-American historiography, Rudia H. Halliburton published his book, *The Tulsa Race War of 1921*. Accompanying the text was a collection of photographs of the carnage in Greenwood, mostly taken by white speculators who then sold the photos as postcards celebrating the murderous destruction. Halliburton's book brought a new perspective in his use of the term "war" as opposed to riot. He explained, "this study is entitled 'The Tulsa Race War of 1921' because the authorities, press, and participants used the term 'war' and other war terminology such as prisoners, skirmish line, concentration camp, casualties, refugees and reconnaissance."<sup>20</sup> Significantly, this focus on the terminology of the event suggested that white Tulsans had waged an offensive war against Greenwood. Critical of social conditions that precluded peaceful coexistence in Tulsa, Halliburton's conclusion cautioned, "many in the black community—and especially the young—are quick to articulate that the avarice, mistrust, paranoia, frustrations, suspicion, ignorance, prejudice and hate which caused the riot all remain. They acknowledge that a half century later it is mostly latent, but remains nevertheless."<sup>21</sup> A thoroughly well-researched book, Halliburton's work was unfortunately not widely known outside of academic circles.

Scott Ellsworth's 1982 *Death in a Promised Land* broke new ground. Reaching a larger audience, Ellsworth managed to incorporate into his book many first-hand accounts from interviews he conducted with survivors, giving Greenwood's residents a voice. Furthermore, he urged his readers to recognize that "the story of Tulsa is very much a story of America."<sup>22</sup> Ellsworth emphasized that what happened in Tulsa in 1921 was not a "lone aberration rudely jutting out of a saner, calmer past" but rather, "the Tulsa race riot is but one chapter in the troubled history of racial violence in America."<sup>23</sup>

All of these earlier publications and the continuous tenacious activism of Tulsa's African-American community eventually led to the state-appointed Tulsa Race Riot Commission in 1997. In the 1990s, national debates on reparations intensified as organizations such as N'COBRA (National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America) encouraged Congressman John Conyers to introduce bill H.R. 40, the Commission to Study Reparations Proposals for African Americans Act. Mirroring this

<sup>20</sup> Halliburton, 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>22</sup> Ellsworth, 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

national trend, in Oklahoma, state representative Don Ross became a driving force behind the creation of the Tulsa Race Riot Commission. Having first learned of the incident from his history teacher at Booker T. Washington High School, he had long since vowed to bring the destruction of Greenwood to national attention. Ross gained support from members of the state legislature's Black Caucus and Oklahoma Senator Maxine Horner, the first African-American woman Senator in Oklahoma, who co-sponsored the bill that created the commission. The majority of the legislature responded to the African-American community's demand for truth and reconciliation, and established the commission. Composed of African-American and white Oklahoma state officials and professionals, the commission undertook an extensive and specialized research project, meeting regularly to discuss and debate their findings. Over the course of the four years of research and discussion, the commission received national and international media coverage. Tulsa's 1921 tragedy once again became front-page news. Eliciting contributions from consultants such as respected African-American historian John Hope Franklin and author Scott Ellsworth, the final report was the work of a diverse team.

The extensive 178-page report released in 2001 was the collective work of professional scholars of history, forensic anthropology, geophysics, and law. Attacking the long-standing code of silence that shadowed the Tulsa tragedy, the report addressed a wide variety of issues. Controversies investigated by the commission included the use of airplanes to drop incendiaries, collusion between city officials and the white mob, and the potential locations of mass graves. Contrasting with earlier reports of casualties, the commission's report stated, "given the intensity of the conflict . . . it would not be unreasonable to estimate 150 to 300 deaths."<sup>24</sup> Assessing property damage and state culpability the report contained a recommendation for further study because "the historical analysis by this Commission is not yet complete." It also recommended restitution in the form of "direct payment of reparations to survivors . . . [and] to descendants."<sup>25</sup> With regard to collusion, one striking statement in the report read, "At the time, many said that this was no spontaneous eruption of the rabble; it was planned and executed by the elite. Quite a few people including some members of this commission have since studied the question and are persuaded that this is so, that the race riot was the result of a conspiracy [by whites]."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Oklahoma Commission Report*, 124.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

While the question of conspiracy remains conjecture until further investigation, the study of another act of violence in the same era as the event in Tulsa illustrates how the language selected to describe an event plays a significant role in forming historical memory. In 1919, during an Armistice Parade in Centralia, Washington, members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) shot and killed four World War I veterans. It was later revealed by police investigations that a group of World War I veterans—including those killed—had, in fact, attacked the IWW headquarters and that the IWW members acted in defense.<sup>27</sup> However, at the time, the killing of these four men “infuriated the town and country.”<sup>28</sup> Politicians denounced the “Centralia outrage” as “wanton and deliberate murder,” and the press gave ample sympathetic coverage to the victims.<sup>29</sup> The *New York Times* described one of the victims as “an attorney and once a football star at the University of Washington” and announced, “the death of this athletic idol especially angered the populace.”<sup>30</sup> The incident in Centralia that killed four white World War I veterans was memorialized in historical accounts as the “Centralia Massacre,” whereas an incident in Tulsa that resulted in the death of hundreds of African Americans (many of whom were also World War I veterans) was called a “riot.”<sup>31</sup> This comparison brings to light the erroneous classification of the 1921 event in Tulsa as a “riot.” The connotation of the word “riot” implies a spontaneous eruption of irrational violence rather than a premeditated act. It is reasonable to question why the enormous loss of life due to unprovoked (and possibly premeditated) violent mass murder in Tulsa’s 1921 African-American community is not commonly referred to as a massacre. It is also reasonable to suggest the answer is related to the fact that the victims in Tulsa were African Americans, which diminished the value placed on their lives. In today’s context, it is imperative that we revise the historical record to reflect accurately and equitably what took place.

More than eighty years have passed since the 1921 massacre in Tulsa, and progressive efforts towards reconciliation have changed popular understanding of this historical event. This process of change illustrates how people actively create and destroy historical memory. Those who write historical texts may not give the traditionally oppressed and

<sup>27</sup> John McClelland, *The Wobbly War: The Centralia Story* (Tacoma: Washington State Historical Society, 1987), 74–79.

<sup>28</sup> “Reds Shoot Down Marching Veterans,” *New York Times*, 11 November 1919, 1.

<sup>29</sup> “Congressmen Urge Action Regard Centralia Crime as Attempt to Start Armed Revolt,” *New York Times*, 13 November 1919, 1.

<sup>30</sup> “Reds Shoot Down Marching Veterans,” *New York Times*, 11 November 1919, 1.

<sup>31</sup> James W. Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 28.

disenfranchised a voice. However, as the story of Tulsa illustrates, there are those motivated by a sense of justice who refuse to forget. After the mass murders of Greenwood residents, and the thorough and complete destruction of entire families' inheritance, what followed was a conspiracy to further dehumanize their suffering by censoring and denying their history. When issues of racism and self-interest distort historical accuracy, there is a need for revision. For Greenwood survivors and descendants this became their mission. The long struggle of Tulsa's African-American community to get their story told reflects the ongoing need to expand and revise the history of the African-American experience. Through persistent activism, Greenwood survivors and descendants successfully reconstructed the historical memory of the Tulsa massacre, demonstrating a larger lesson for all students of history.

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