**The Tulsa Race Massacre**

**What was "Black Wall Street"? In the early 1900s, Tulsa, Oklahoma, was a racially segregated city of about 100,000 people, with about 9,000 Black residents confined to the Greenwood neighborhood. Forbidden from patronizing or opening businesses on the white side of town, Black Tulsans established Greenwood as a bustling middle-class neighborhood, with more than 200 businesses spread across 35 blocks, including 15 doctors, two newspapers, luxury shops, restaurants, hotels, theaters salons, and a library. "Black Wall Street," as some called it, also had its own school system, post office, savings and loan bank, and hospital. Many white Tulsans resented the bustling, self-contained prosperity of what they derisively called "Little Africa," and "N ---- town." and racial tensions simmered. Greenwood "disproved the whole idea that racial superiority was a fact of life," said Jim Goodwin, current publisher of The Oklahoma Eagle, a Black newspaper. On May 30, 1921, a spark ignited racial resentment into terrible violence.**

**What happened? Dick Rowland, a 19-year-old Black shoe-shiner, stepped into an elevator in the Drexel building in downtown Tulsa to use the "colored only" restroom on the top floor. The elevator operator was a 17-year-old white girl, Sarah Page, who ran out of the elevator screaming. No one knows what happened; in the Black community, it was said that Rowland tripped and grabbed onto Page's arm. The next day, The Tulsa Tribune ran a front-page story saying Rowland "scratched and tore her clothes," an accusation that in that era was tantamount to an attempted rape. Rowland was arrested by police, and a lynch mob of hundreds of men quickly assembled outside the courthouse, demanding Rowland be handed over. A group of about 75 Black men rushed to the scene to protect Rowland. A scuffle broke out between the two groups, a gun discharged, and witnesses said "all hell broke loose." That night, a white mob of more than 1,000 -- including police officers -- descended on Greenwood for a 13-hour orgy of violence.**

**What did the mob do? The attackers looted and ransacked homes, set nearly every structure on fire, and shot men, women, and children; at least one machine gun was reportedly used in the massacre, The terror rained down from above, as pilots dropped homemade incendiary bombs from crop dusters over the neighborhood. As many as 1,471 homes were burned or looted. More than 800 were injured, and 8,000 people were left homeless. "I still see Black bodies lying in the street," Viola Fletcher, a 107-year-old survivor, recently said in testimony before Congress. "I still see Black businesses being burned. I still hear airplanes flying overhead. I hear the screams. I have lived through the massacre every day.**

**What happened to survivors? Many were taken into custody and forced to march with their hands in the air at gunpoint through white neighborhoods while being taunted and humiliated. Several prominent Black men were charged with "inciting a riot." (No white person was ever charged with a serious crime or imprisoned.) Insurance companies refused to pay damage claims, and Greenwood families lived in tents and shanties for much of the next year. Greenwood did begin to rebuild later that year, but most families never recovered their lost wealth.**

**How much was lost? A 2001 report by an Oklahoma state commission put the cost of the properties destroyed in Greenwood at $1.8 million, or $27 million in today's dollars. R. T. Bridgewater, a Black doctor and property owner, lost 17 houses he had built as rental investment properties. O. W. Gurley, a wealthy landowner who founded Greenwood in 1906, lost nearly $158,000, equivalent to $2.3 million today. The Tulsa massacre was a dramatic example of how African-Americans have been denied the opportunity to accumulate wealth. To this day, 1 out of 3 Black people in the Greenwood area live in poverty, and the median income for Black households is $30,955 -- about 55 percent of white households. Still, the true story of the Tulsa massacre was hidden until very recently.**

**In what way? For 80 years, Oklahoma schools did not mention the destruction of Greenwood in teaching local history. It wasn't until 2002 that the Oklahoma Education Department added the "Tulsa Race Riot," as it called that event, to the state academic standards, but only as an example of "raising racial tensions" during the period. Even in The Black community, the topic was addressed in whispers, if at all. "It was taboo to speak about it," said Vanessa Hall-Harper, a member of Tulsa's city council. "I didn't even know about the massacre until I was an adult." In 2019, a commission organized to mark the massacre's centennial finally convinced the state education department to include lessons on the destruction of Greenwood. Still, no attempt has been made to repay families or the community for what was stolen from them. "The historical trauma is real," said Alicia Odewale, an archeologist at the University of Tulsa. "That trauma lingers especially because there's no justice, no accountability, and no reparation or monetary compensation."**

**The search for remains: A hundred years after the massacre, the locations of the remains of most of the victims remain a mystery. Hunting them down has become a mission for several Black forensic anthropologists including Phoebe Stubblefield, a research scientist at the University of Florida. That effort is tempered by the lack of historical records about the massacre and what happened afterward. There are stories of bodies loaded on trucks and dumped in the Arkansas River, thrown down mine shafts, or burned in the city incinerator. None of the stories has been verified or disproved, and until recently, searches for graves have been unsuccessful. But in October, Stubblefield and a team of archeologists used ground-penetrating radar to survey the Oaklawn Cemetery, in eastern Tulsa, and discovered 12 previously undocumented wooden coffins. They believe they could be connected to Greenwood, and a massive excavation of the cemetery began last week. So far, 20 coffins have been found. *(The Week magazine, June 18, 2021)***

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