

The Rosewood Massacre

“How a Lie Destroyed a Black Town”

“From the bruises on her body, it was clear Fannie Taylor had been beaten.

The story she told to explain them away destroyed an all-black town in Florida and got several of its residents murdered.

On New Year’s Day 1923, Taylor, then the 22-year-old wife of a mill worker, said a black man had assaulted her. She didn’t say rape, only that she’d been assaulted, but the word “assault” was interpreted as a sexual violation by the whites in her town of Sumner, Fla.

Sumner was just a few miles from Rosewood, an all-black town of about 120 that had seen its own version of “white flight” after industry left Rosewood and whites moved to Sumner.

As word of Taylor’s claim spread, some black people in Rosewood who worked in Sumner said the assailant had actually been Taylor’s lover and her story was a cover to spare her husband’s wrath, said Maxine Jones, a Florida State University professor of African-American history, who co-authored an account of the massacre for the Florida Legislature in 1993.

While the fear of black-on-white violence had been stoked across the South since the days of slavery, particularly in areas where blacks outnumbered whites, Taylor's claim was especially pernicious.

Taylor's claim came within days of a Ku Klux Klan rally near Gainesville, just to the north of Levy County. With tensions high, her words set in motion six days of violence in which whites from Sumner and neighboring towns and counties descended on Rosewood, intent on finding the alleged assailant and lynching him.

They were met by gunfire from Rosewood residents who'd gotten word of the mob's approach and had barricaded themselves in their homes to make a stand.

Women and children fled to the woods for safety and waited for days in the cold before local train conductors alerted to the violence sent a train to rescue them. Some nearby white families hid their black neighbors to protect them.

By Jan. 6, with the town empty and six black people and two whites dead, the mob burned down what remained of the town. The black residents of Rosewood scattered, abandoning their property, never to return. No one was ever arrested in the case.

Jones, of FSU, and five colleagues wrote the account of the incident in support of a lawsuit against the state of Florida by some of the survivors who had been children at the time. Because of fear, the massacre had “remained a family secret for years,” Jones said. “Not knowing who you could trust and believing people with white skin could get back at you.”

But one Rosewood descendent, Arnett Doctor, finally decided to speak out and seek redress. Based on his account and those of surviving eyewitnesses and the Jones report, the Florida Legislature approved a \$2.1 million settlement in 1994. The governor also issued an apology on behalf of the state for not bringing perpetrators of the destruction to justice, nor sending officials to quell the violence and rescue the innocent.

Three years later the massacre was depicted in the film, “Rosewood.””

Source: Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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