1923

ROSEWOOD, FLORIDA

A Town Called Rosewood

The end of World War I marked the beginning of a turbulent period for race relations in America. The wartime economy had drawn a wave of African American workers from the South into Northern cities. Returning veterans found jobs scarce as factories scaled back or closed altogether. Economic hardship aggravated old prejudices. The Ku Klux Klan experienced a nationwide revival, and in most major U.S. cities groups of angry whites rioted through African American neighborhoods.

In the rural South, lynch mobs stepped up their reign of terror over the black population. By the rules of "Judge Lynch," any perceived offense against a white person — particularly a white woman — was punishable by death. Whistling at a schoolgirl could get a black man hanged. The residents of one Florida hamlet learned how far this jurisdiction of hate extended.

TODAY THE WOODS AND SWAMPS of Levy County in north central Florida are mostly uninhabited, but in the latter half of the 19th century and early part of the 20th, they were dotted with thriving villages whose citizens made their living off the region's natural wealth. Timber companies chopped down red cedar for manufacturing pencils; turpentine stills boiled and distilled pine sap; women wove the leaves of the spiky palmetto into brooms and brushes; men hunted and trapped the abundant wildlife.

There are few reminders in the woods today of this enterprising era. The tracks of the railroads that once connected the villages have been lifted for scrap, and the overgrown rail embankments now pass through mile after mile of unvarying pine forest. The towns that flourished there, towns like Rosewood, Sumner and Wylly, survive only as names on old train schedules and in the memories of a few elderly men and women.

It is an obscure moment in Florida's history, and it might have been forgotten — except

that something happened in these woods, something so awful that decades later some people can hardly bring themselves to speak about it.

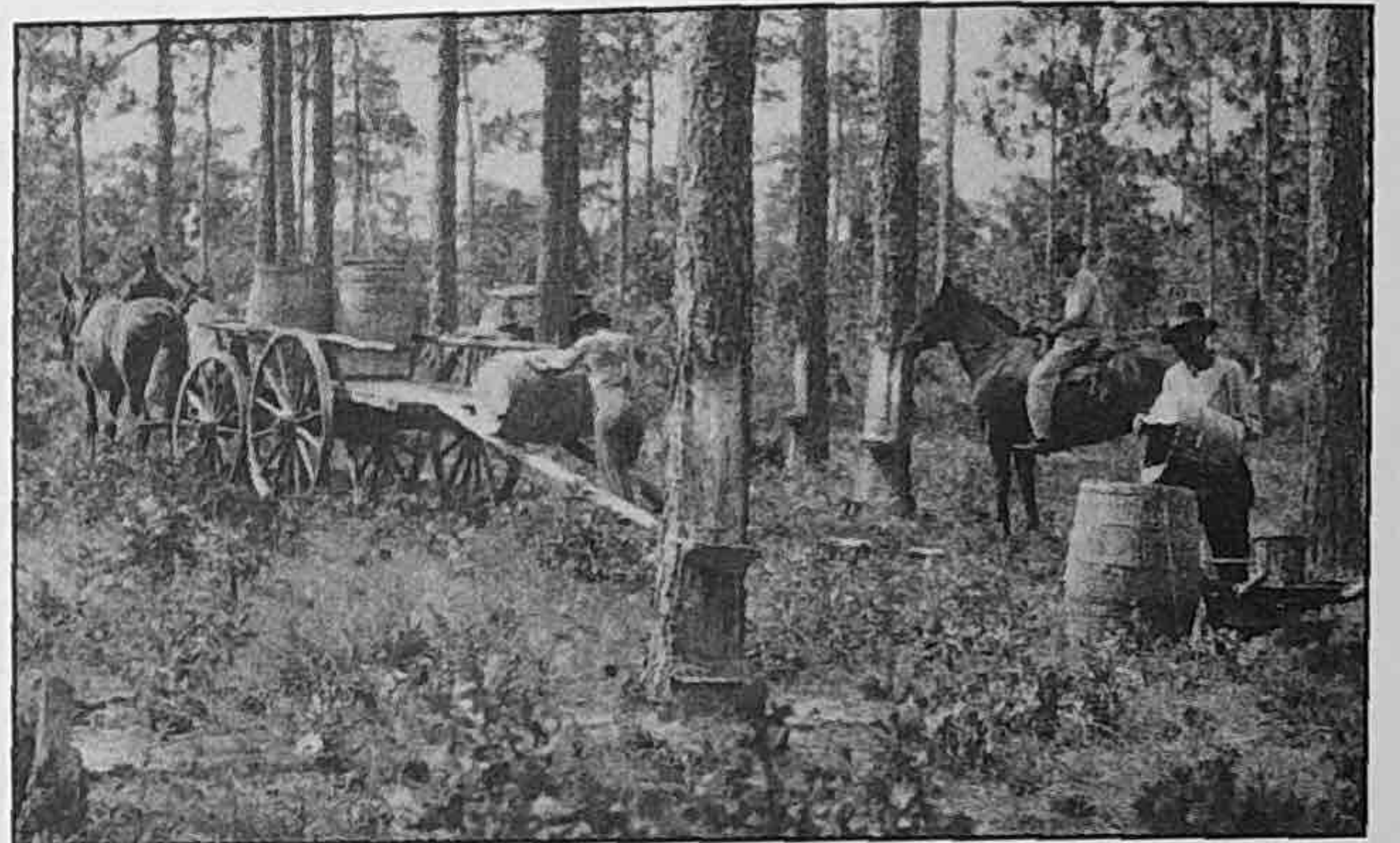
It all began on January 1, 1923, a day that survivors and eyewitnesses would remember as bitterly cold. On that morning, a young, married white woman named Fannie Taylor emerged from her home in Sumner in extreme shock. Her husband had left early for work at the town's lumber mill. In his absence, she said, a stranger, a black man, had come into her house and assaulted her. Though she was not badly injured physically, Fannie Taylor lapsed into unconsciousness for several hours soon after describing the attack.

"This crowd wants blood," warned Sheriff Walker, "and they [are] going to have blood."

The Levy County Sheriff, Robert Elias Walker, quickly assembled a posse and deputized several men to help search for Taylor's assailant. They were joined by a large and growing number of white men from the area, who were outraged at this violation of Southern white womanhood.

"This crowd wants blood," warned Sheriff Walker, "and they [are] going to have blood." Together, the men followed a pack of hounds into the neighboring town of Rosewood, looking for the man they suspected of the assault: a prisoner named Jesse Hunter, who had escaped from a nearby chain gang where he was serving time for carrying a concealed weapon.

In the early 1920s, Rosewood was a solid, largely African American community of between 100 and 200 people. It boasted three churches, a train station, two general stores, a Masonic hall and a one-room schoolhouse. It



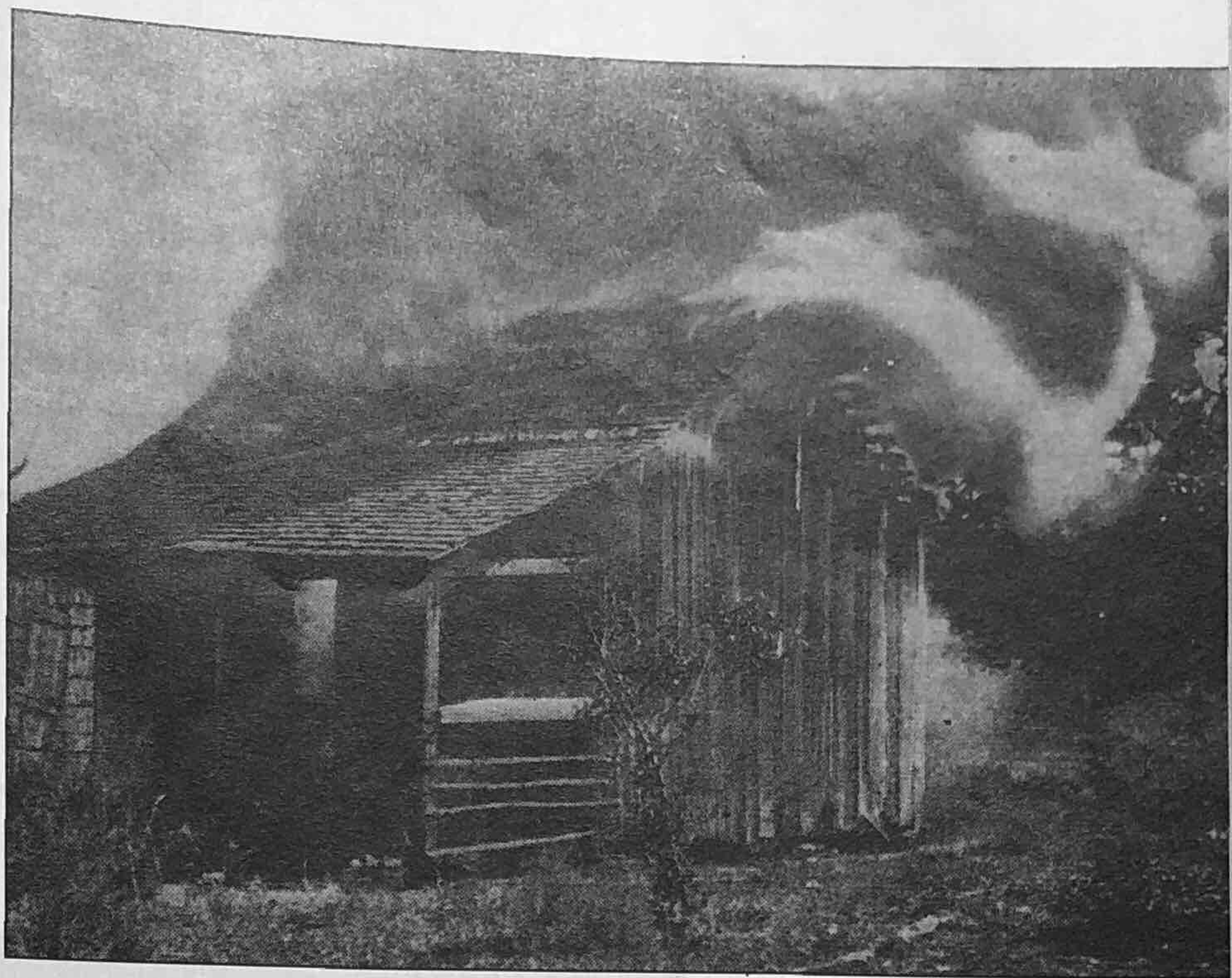
was, as a white resident of Levy County would later characterize it, a "good community," whose "people had nice homes and were law-abiding and took care of themselves."

The bloodhounds led the posse to the home of a blacksmith named Sam Carter. Carter, a 45-year-old African American, had had a brush with the law once before. In 1920, he was accused of assaulting a police officer but was set free when the grand jury failed to indict him. Questioned by the posse, Carter admitted that he had driven the suspect away in his horse and wagon. He took the men to the spot where, he claimed, he had dropped the man off. But the hounds weren't able to pick up the fugitive's scent. Carter insisted that this was the spot, but the posse, thinking they had been duped, tortured Carter, then hanged and shot him. His corpse was left lying in the road where it was discovered the next morning.

For the next two days, the white mob combed the area, looking for Jesse Hunter. During that time, they harassed, intimidated and threatened to lynch blacks that they came upon. They dragged one young black man, Aaron Carrier, whom they suspected of helping the fugitive escape, from his sickbed to a stand of pine trees and would have hanged him if a white mill supervisor named W.H. Pillsbury had not intervened. Twice, the posse warned Sylvester Carrier, another resident of Rosewood, that he had better be careful about what he said and about his attitude around whites. Some even told him he should leave town.

Sylvester Carrier was not one to take these threats submissively. A proud, strong man who was active in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Carrier taught music, was a crack shot and hunted for his livelihood. One of the most respected men in Rosewood, he was also married to a woman who was described as extraordinarily beautiful.

On January 4, the mob heard rumors that some African Americans, including Sylvester Carrier, had barricaded themselves inside a two-story house in Rosewood owned by Sylvester's mother, Sarah Carrier. The mob surrounded the house, and two of the men, who were acquainted with the Carrier family, approached the front door. Accounts differ as to whether the men tried to force their way in, but in any case they didn't get far: A round of gunfire from inside the house killed them both on the porch.



Now the mob unleashed their fury. They poured volley after volley of lead into the house, and as day turned to a bright, moonlit night, the siege and the fusillade continued. At 2:30 in the morning, a solitary white man made his way toward the house across the open field separating the two armed camps. As he tried to enter the house through a darkened window, he was shot in the head. The next day the local newspapers reported that a man was dying of a gunshot wound but never gave his name. The man's identity remains a mystery to this day.

Finally, at about 4 a.m., the whites ran low on ammunition and left to replenish their supply. The surviving blacks took advantage of the lull in the fighting to flee. At dawn, when the whites returned, they retrieved their two dead from the front porch and discovered in the now-quiet house the lifeless bodies of Sarah and Sylvester Carrier, killed in the midnight siege.

That the blacks had escaped — with the exception of the two Carriers — was for many whites the final insult. They went on a rampage, setting fire to five houses and a church in the immediate vicinity. Most of the black residents of the area had already fled into the

Opposite page, above. Turpentine production was a major industry in the pine forests around Rosewood.

Opposite page, below. In late December 1923, one Florida landowner capitalized on African Americans' desire for self-determination.

Above. After the violence ended, the survivors of the Rosewood riot had no homes to return to.

woods, but one woman, Lexie Gordon, had hidden under her house during the night. As it went up in flames, she ran toward a clump of bushes and was shot in the back.

Twenty miles from Rosewood, Mingo Williams, nicknamed "Lord God," was shot through the jaw by whites who had been drinking. The posse had graduated from being a lynch mob, which at least pretended to identify the guilty parties before murdering them, to being "nigger hunters." On a "nigger hunt," any and all blacks became targets. Williams, a 50-year-old turpentine worker, had nothing to do with Rosewood or the events there. His only crime was that he was a black man who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Nearly all the African American men and women who remember Rosewood today were children at the time of these events. What they remember most vividly is being awakened at night and taken, while still in their night-clothes, into the overgrown hammocks. Cold and hungry, they endured several days in the swampy woods, not daring to light much of a fire for fear of attracting the mob. "It was cold, man, it was cold," one survivor testified years later. "Jesus, I will never forget that day."

On Saturday morning, January 6, James Carrier, Sylvester's brother, turned himself over to the white superintendent of the Sumner lumber mill for protection. W.H. Pillsbury, the mill superintendent, had tried to protect Sylvester earlier in the week, and now he tried to help James, locking him in one of

er white rioters burned
e black section of Tulsa in
921, armed guards escorted
isplaced residents into the
ulsa Convention Hall.

IN CONTEXT

Race Riots

Today, when we hear the term "race riot" we are apt to think of the burning and looting that has occurred in poor, primarily black urban areas since the 1960s — of Watts, for example, a neighborhood in Los Angeles where anger about the conditions of ghetto life exploded in 1965, leading to 34 deaths in six days. Or we think of South Central Los Angeles in 1992, where violence erupted after a jury found white policemen not guilty of beating a black motorist named Rodney King, despite a videotape that clearly showed them clubbing and kicking King. The riot that followed that verdict left at least 45 people dead and caused an estimated $1 billion in damages.

Yet for many decades, the instigators and participants in race riots were usually white, not black, and the purpose of the rioting was to assert white domination rather than to express black anger and frustration. During Reconstruction and for a while thereafter, race riots often occurred during elections, as white mobs sought to intimidate the newly enfranchised black voters and to regain power from politicians who would give blacks an equal opportunity in post-Civil War society. Riots in Memphis, Tenn.; New Orleans, La.; Charleston, S.C.; and Eufaula, Ala., led to dozens of African American deaths.

Prior to the 1898 election in Wilmington, N.C., whites took to wearing red shirts to symbolize their willingness to resort to the Winchester rifle and "a baptism of blood" to regain power. They would teach the "Southern Negroes that they cannot rule over the property and the destinies of the superior race," the

Rosewood's dozen remaining houses. But somehow James's whereabouts were discovered later that day. James was driven to the black cemetery, and there, beside the newly dug graves of his mother and brother, he was interrogated and tortured. When he refused to give up the names of the people who had joined him and his brother in the shoot-out, he was riddled with bullets and left to bleed to death.

The whites returned to Rosewood and torched the remaining houses, the churches, the school, the black-owned general store and the Masonic Lodge. "Masses of twisted steel were all that remained of furniture formerly in the Negro homes, [and] several charred bodies of dogs, and firearms left in the hasty retreat, bore evidence to the mob's fury," the *Gainesville Daily Sun* reported at the time.

Not all the whites in the area joined the mob. One who refused out of conscience to help the vigilantes said that he did not want to "have his hands wet with blood." Others did their best to prevent the violence from spreading. Pillsbury maintained strict discipline at the mill. He established a curfew, segregated the black workers into a special section of the mill and warned whites that anyone who crossed the line into that section would be shot.

Other whites tried to help. John Wright, who owned a general store in Rosewood and lived in a two-story white frame house near the railroad depot, was

Washington Post editorialized, commending the Red Shirts.

Although white supremacists gave ample notice of their willingness to resort to violence, little effort was made to protect African Americans, and as many as 25 lost their lives in the weeks leading up to the election. The bigots won the election handily, despite spirited opposition from black political leaders and clergymen.

By the early part of the 20th century, race riots in New York City, Atlanta, Springfield (home of Abraham Lincoln), Houston and East St. Louis had left scores of blacks dead. Almost invariably, white authorities did little or nothing to protect African Americans, while clamping down hard on those who exercised the right of self-defense.

There were 27 separate race riots and countless lesser acts of racial violence in 1919 alone, including the following:

- In Texas, one man was killed and an African American school principal was publicly flogged after a local newspaper article condemned lynching.
- In Chicago, a race riot erupted after an African American youth was stoned while swimming at an all-white beach, resulting in his death by drowning. Thirty-eight people were killed in two weeks of sustained violence, and 1,000 black families were left homeless.
- In Georgia, a black World War I veteran was beaten to death for wearing his uniform in public. The mob ignored the man's protests that he had no other clothes.
- In Knoxville, Tenn., six persons were killed and 20 injured after unsuccessful attempts to lynch a black prisoner charged with killing a white woman. Afterwards, U.S. troops shot up a black neighborhood on the basis of false rumors that blacks had killed two white men.
- In Louisiana, an illiterate black man suspected of writing an insulting note to a white woman escaped lynch mobs twice before he was finally shot to death.
- In Arkansas, a riot by white racists left up to 200 blacks dead. The violence resulted in 79 murder indictments — all against blacks. Twelve were convicted and sentenced to die before their convictions were overturned on appeal.

FIRST PERSON

Tulsa Riot, 1921

More than 70 years after the event, Dr. Hobart Jarrett recounted the experience of being driven from his family home. In 1960, as a professor in Greensboro, N.C., Dr. Jarrett became the principal spokesperson for African Americans during the sit-in movement that opened local lunch counters to black patrons.

I remember how we found out that there was going to be a riot. I was six years old. My mother and father were taking me several blocks up the street to a church, where I was to recite a poem. As we were going south, we kept meeting people heading north, the direction from which we had come. My father stopped two men, asking what all the commotion was about. They said the whites were going to take a black man out of the jail.

My father, mother and I turned and went back home. The next morning, as I can recall, we all — uncles, nephews, cousins, grandmother, great-grandmother — headed out of town by truck. It was remarkable to me later on to realize that my grandfather — whom I called Uncle Bill — did not run with us. He stayed at home. I have heard all my life that Uncle Bill stayed there

(Continued on page 90)

(Continued from page 89)

Tulsa Riot, 1921

with his rifle on his porch. Our home and his home were not burned because he was there.

He did not keep the rioters from *entering* the homes. When we got back, everything was in disorder. Clothing was scattered. I had a Little Boy Blue bank sitting on the piano. I had saved 13 dollars. The money and bank were not taken by the looters. That became my father's capital — all the money he had left.

Our grocery store was burned to the ground. It was on the south side of the Negro section of town. He had kept his money in the safe. That was all gone.

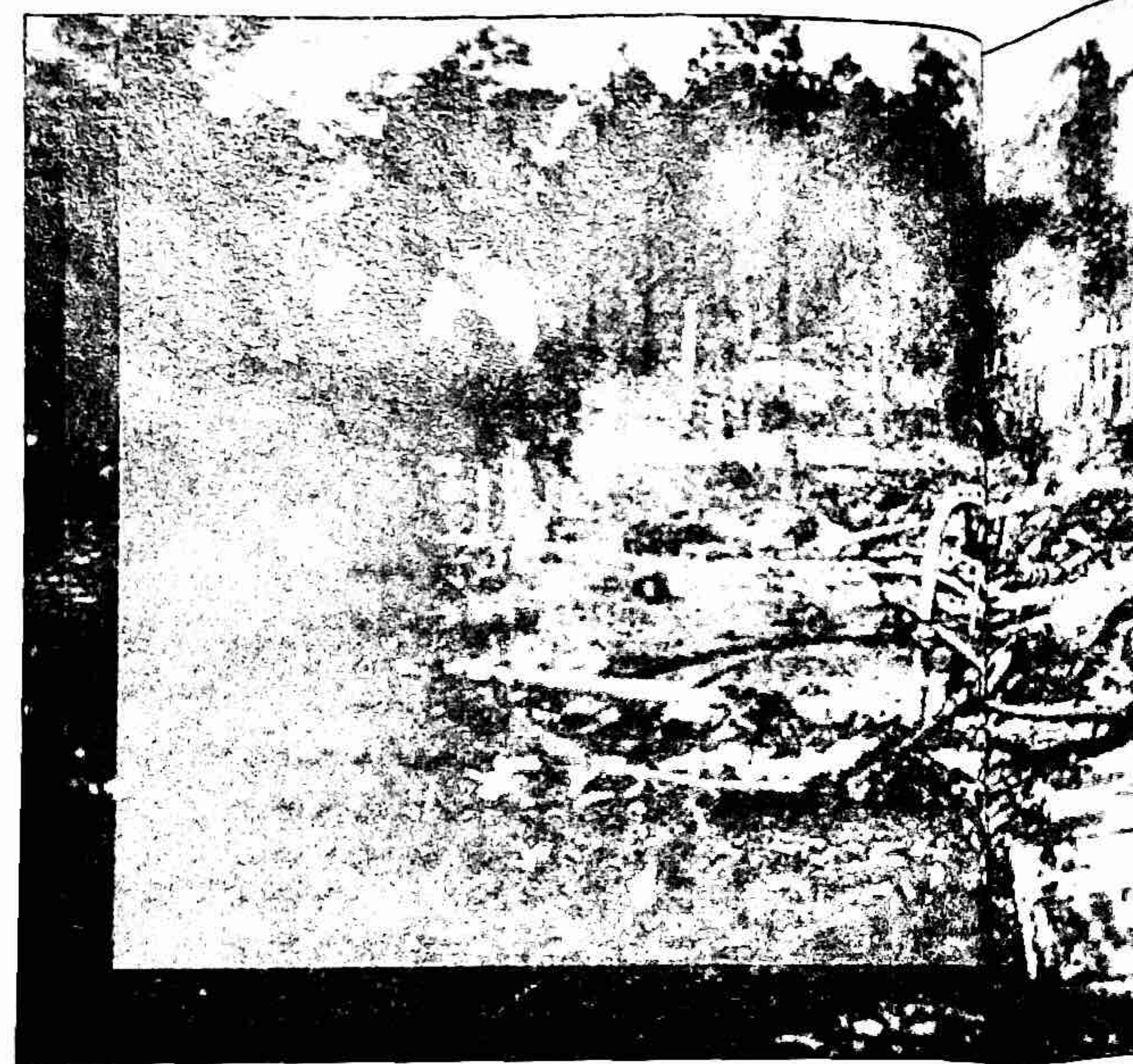
I remember that at some point we stayed on somebody's farm. Some black person's farm. When we got back to Tulsa after two days, we were herded into the fair-grounds, and I recall that I was very, very hungry, and there was a soup-line — a line of blacks — for beans. They were in a cauldron. I ate a lot of beans. I also recall that for years thereafter, I couldn't eat any dried beans at all.

A relative — a dear, dear cousin of mine from Texas — was visiting with my grandmother at that unfortunate time. He said that the rioters had urinated on the floor in my grandmother's home and on her Victrola. I remember this because this was the first time I heard the word 'urinated.'

fond of the neighborhood children and used to give them free candy and cookies whenever they came into his store. He hid several families in his house and others under a wooden boardwalk connecting his store to the train depot. Two brothers who worked as railroad conductors, William and John Bryce, brought a train into the Rosewood depot and took dozens of women and children to safety.

Jesse Hunter, the suspected assailant of Fannie Taylor, was never found. Eventually, the mob gave up and went about their daily lives. Yet the black town of Rosewood was reduced to rubble and abandoned.

"We lost everything," said one survivor. Homes, possessions, community: Nothing remained.



No one knows for sure how many people ultimately died in that week-long rampage. The newspapers named eight dead, but rumors of mass graves lingered in Levy County for decades. Many today still believe there are dozens of others who probably lost their lives.

Because the community dispersed after the riots, the survivors could never be certain whether their neighbors and friends had escaped or perished in the swamps. Other, more gruesome, rumors tell of body parts preserved in vinegar jars as mementos of the "hunt."

But perhaps the most intriguing rumor doesn't concern the number of dead or the fate of their bodies but the identity of Fannie Taylor's assailant. African American survivors and the children of survivors are adamant on one point: Taylor's assailant was not a strange black man but her white lover.

According to this version of events, the lovers had quarreled and he had beaten her. To save her reputation, Fannie Taylor invented the story of the black man. Her lover, meanwhile, fled to Rosewood and sought refuge with Sam Carter because Carter, like himself, was a member of the Masonic Order, a secret society whose members pledged themselves to brotherhood, charity and mutual aid. Carter had concealed the identity of the suspect in order to protect his fellow Mason and had paid for his loyalty with his life.

The visitor to Rosewood today will see a green town marker on Route 24, about 40 miles west of Gainesville. John Wright's home is still standing, and a walk through the woods eventually reveals a cluster of crumbled headstones overgrown with weeds. Aside from the highway marker, there is nothing else to indicate that there was once a town called Rosewood. ◆

Opposite page. The arson in Tulsa forced thousands of African Americans into crude camps on the hills surrounding the city.

Left. News of Rosewood's destruction appeared on front pages around the country, but the injustice of the event went unaddressed for decades.

IN CONTEXT

Rosewood Revisited

On April 8, 1994, 13 well-dressed African Americans, most of them elderly and frail, lined the spectators' gallery at the Florida House of Representatives in Tallahassee. Survivors of the Rosewood massacre, or children of survivors, they were there to witness an extraordinary moment in American history.

On that day, the Florida state legislature was to debate a reparations bill that would grant up to $150,000 compensation to each of the survivors and set aside a college fund for their descendants. If the bill passed, it would mark the first time in history that African Americans would be compensated for crimes committed against them as a result of their race.

Opposition to the claims bill was fierce. The Ku Klux Klan held rallies in Levy County protesting the bill. Many state senators and representatives also opposed it, as did a large number of ordinary white Floridians. Why hold today's taxpayers responsible for the crimes of an earlier era? they asked. Wasn't the legislature setting a dangerous precedent? Weren't there dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of similar events in Florida's history? There were 47 lynchings in Florida from 1912 to 1927 alone. What made Rosewood special?

Fortunately, the survivors had powerful friends on their side. The largest law firm in the state was representing them on a pro bono, or free, basis. Lawyers working on the case modeled their claims bill on the bill passed by the United States Congress granting compensation to Japanese Americans who had been unconstitutionally interned during World War II *(see p. 99)*. And Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles had announced he was strongly in favor of the compensation package.

Still, it was a tough fight. The state senate committee responsible for claims passed the bill by a three-vote margin. When it came to the final vote in Florida's House of Representatives, supporters urged the legislators, as one of the sponsors said, to "let conscience be your guide." Rosewood was special, they said, not only because eight people lost their lives, but because an entire town was eliminated, its inhabitants dispersed. The violence had gone on for a week, and while Rosewood burned, the governor had gone hunting.

Finally, the bill came to a vote, and when the votes were tallied, the bill had passed 71 to 40. While the Rosewood survivors in the spectators' balcony wept in gratitude, the legislators rose to their feet to applaud them — the men and women who had waited so long and so patiently to see justice served.