

BLACK HISTORY NOTES

Researched by James E. DuBose

The Rosewood Massacre

Something terrible happened in the small, black, Central Florida town of Rosewood in 1923. For years, no one wanted to talk about it. It started with a lynching and ended with the entire town being burned to the ground, its middle-class black residents killed or chased into the swamps.



Rosewood was dead, but the memory of that town burned through the years in the hearts of those who lived there. Although the few black survivors of what became known as the “Rosewood Massacre” had avoided discussing the incident, Arnett Doctor, the son of a survivor, learned about what really happened in Rosewood when he began to interview senior citizens about the town’s history. Nearly a century ago, Rosewood was a self-sufficient town of about 200 black people. The massacre of blacks started when a white woman in a nearby town claimed to have been raped by a black man. A mob of armed white men headed straight for Rosewood. For a week, the white men ravaged and burned the black town of Rosewood in what was characterized as a race riot. Newspaper reports from the time listed eight dead— six blacks and two whites. But reports of mass graves filled with black bodies persisted throughout the years. No one will ever know the true number of the dead. Survivors hid for several days in nearby swamps and were evacuated by train and car to larger towns. Although state and local authorities were aware of the violence, no arrests were ever made. But the property records could not be clearer. Land that had been owned by black men and women was confiscated and sold for taxes to white buyers. The black families of Rosewood lost all they had spent their lifetime earning.

Not all whites actively participated. But most did nothing to stop the slaughter of blacks. A few did rescue some blacks who were hiding in the woods and swamps. The larger white community collectively chose to put the event behind them, even after the white woman who claimed she was raped by a black man later confessed to having lied. There had been no justice for the black people of Rosewood and pressure was applied to stop the Rosewood Massacre from becoming a public issue.

Sixty years passed before the story of Rosewood was revived in major media during the early 1980s. This was followed by survivors of the massacre and their descendants organizing to sue the state for failing to protect them. Then in 1993, the Florida Legislature commissioned a report on the events. As a result of their findings, Florida became the first U.S. state to compensate survivors and their descendants for damages incurred because of racial violence.

In 1994, with the nation’s newspapers and television stations looking on, Florida’s nearly all white legislature took an historic giant step and voted to pay \$2 million in compensation to the black Rosewood survivors. Although no amount of money could redeem the losses blacks suffered in the Rosewood incident, reparations from the state of Florida at least acknowledged and apologized for some of the suffering and lack of justice for blacks.

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