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National Museum of African American History and Culture

"Profile of a Race Riot" (1971) by Ed Wheeler

Extracted on Apr-23-2024 09:38:43

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PROFILE OF A RACE RIOT

A sickly gray pall hung over the northern horizon, and sweating men and women trudged disconsolately through the June heat down Main Street, watched by a thin crowd of cruious [[curious]] spectators, and by nervous National Guardsmen.

The men marched with heads bowed low, hands held in the air, "in submission to the white man's authority," said one account, but the women marched with a haughty pride that began to fade as they saw the hostility etched in the faces of those who watched the bizarre parade.

These were Black men and women. Refugees from the Little Africa War.

Behind them, under that gray pall of smoke, 503 homes and scores of businesses lay in ashes, the remnants of what had been three days before "The Negro Wall Street," Greenwood, Tulsa's Little Africa.

1921.

It was a sultry June 2, the temperature near 100. Two days of the worst racial warfare in the nation's history had ended, All of Tulsa, Black and White, wondered how it had happened.

A White secretary looked from her office window and wondered "How long are such outrages going to be allowed?"

She watched the pitiful parade. "They are homeless," she wrote, "most of them innocent of any wrongdoing, or even wrong thinking, helpless, dumbly wondering why this should be."

And, she continued, "The whites here are much more to be blamed than the Negroes. It is largely an element of hoodlum white boys craving excitement and looking for an opportunity to start a race riot..."

A newspaper reporter watched the same parade with a different reaction. "They were," he wrote, "the innocent, sufferers of the overt act committed last night by a misguided, insolent, younger faction of their own race, whom they themselves would probably disown. They will not return to their homes they had Tuesday afternoon, but to heaps of ashes, the angry white man's reprisal for the wrong inflicted on him by the inferior race.."

The Negro refugees were marched to McNulty Park, site of the city's baseball stadium. "It was decided it would be best to herd them in the open air," a newspaper reported; "and the ball park seemed to be the only place available for the purpose."

Near Owasso, that same day, there was another march. Negroes in mule wagons, on foot, in crowded pickup trucks, in any conveyance that could be found, were moving north, out of Tulsa, most never to return.

And it is said, in many a boxcar moving out of Tulsa, were the bodies of others slain in a wild night of shooting, looting and burning.



Eventually, Greenwood was rebuilt, but in the ghetto that was the result, the scars of 1921 remain, to this day.

Just how did it all come to happen?

May 31, 1921 is mostly just a memory today. The young blacks and whites struggling now for civil and moral rights for minority groups likely know little, or nothing, of events that day and following, the reconstruction that took place, the grief and sorrow that blanketed some of the city, the help that was sometimes tendered, or the hate evident in the attitudes of some that "them niggers got what they deserved" that also must have been in evidence.

What was it like in Tulsa then?

There had been a race riot in 1919, but things were calm on the surface two years later. A productive and thriving community of 15,000 lived north of the tracks, but in nothing like the prosperity of whites cashing in on Tulsa's oil boom. Segregation was total with separate groups living apart except when a black man or woman crossed the tracks to go to work, or a white "slummed" in the "cesspool" of "niggertown" as one Tulsa paper called it.

There is not much doubt there was outright hostility in Tulsa between blacks and whites, particularly among the young.

Negroes who had fought in World War I came home with their own ideas about equality, and expressed them. Some of the older men in Little Africa were wary. They feared the racism they knew existed south of Archer Street. One wealthy Black snorted at these young veterans as men "thinking they could whip the whole world."

Young Tulsa whites looked jealously at the success of the Negro Wall Street, and spurred by newspaper campaigns urging a general cleanup of vice in the city, particularly alleged dope peddling and such among the Blacks, were itching to go out and "clean up Niggertown."

The Tulsa Tribune had been carrying on a loud campaign for weeks. The city, it was said, was controlled by a vice ring and black and white men alike were engaged in the nasty traffic Blacks reading the screaming headlines saw in them a threat to their community. An anonymous warning pamphlet reportedly scattered in Little Africa heightened this fear.

A spark was about all that was needed.

THE FOLLOWING STORY WAS WRITTEN BY ED WHEELER

CREDENTIAL NOTES

ED WHEELER IS THE AUTHOR OF NUMEROUS ARTICLES ON MILITARY, POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE IN LOCAL, STATE AND NATIONAL PUBLICATIONS. THE WRITER AND NARRATOR OF "THE GLICREASE STORY," HEARD MONDAY THRU

FRIDAY ON KVOO RADIO AT 10:45 PM, HE IS ALSO THE RECIPIENT OF THREE NATIONAL GEORGE WASHINGTON MEDALS FROM FREEDOMS FOUNDATION AT VALLEY FORGE, PENNSYLVANIA FOR WRITING IN THE FIELD OF AMERICAN HERITAGE AND HE HAS ALSO RECEIVED THE AMERICAN LEGION AUXILIARY'S "GOLDEN MIKE" AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN RADIO SCRIPT WRITING.

EDUCATED AT TULSA CENTRAL HIGH, TEXAS A&M, THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA AND THE UNIVERSITY OF TULSA, HE SERVES AS THE INTELLIGENCE OFFICER FOR THE TULSA-BASED INFANTRY BATTALION OF THE OKLAHOMA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD'S 45th "THUNDERBIRD" INFANTRY BRIGADE.

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