

The New York Times

1923 Horror Haunts Book and Films

By [Dinitia Smith](#)

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The first thing survivors of the "Rosewood massacre" remark on is how cold it was at night, how there was ice on the swamp and frost covered the palms. Up to then, Rosewood, Fla., had been a prosperous mill town on the Gulf Coast with about 120 residents, mostly black, and three churches and a Masonic hall known for the roses that grew around it. For years its inhabitants had lived peacefully alongside the white residents of neighboring Sumner, Fla. Then, on Jan. 1, 1923, a white woman from Sumner accused a black man of attacking her.

The woman's accusation, which many believe to have been a lie, set off a week of shootings and burnings, as whites from Sumner rampaged through Rosewood. By the end, at least six blacks and two whites had been killed, many wounded and the town burned to the ground. Only one house remained, that of the Wright family, white storekeepers who had, incidentally, often helped their black neighbors.

For nearly 60 years, the story of Rosewood lay mostly hidden in the memories of its traumatized survivors and their descendants. Local papers at the time referred to it as a "race riot." Then a reporter for The St. Petersburg Times told the real story in 1982. Subsequently the survivors pressed the Florida Legislature for compensation from the state. And in 1994, the assembly awarded each of nine survivors whom it considered eligible \$150,000 in compensation. Additional awards were made to family members and descendants.

Now the story of Rosewood is drawing attention from publishers and producers. This year, a book about the killings, "Rosewood, Like Judgment Day," by Michael D'Orso, was published by Berkeley Books. Tomorrow night, "The Rosewood Massacre," a documentary by David Tereshchuk jointly produced by ABC News and the Discovery Channel, will be broadcast at 10 on Discovery. And a movie based on the event, John Singleton's "Rosewood," starring Jon Voight and Ving Rhames, is scheduled for release by Warner Brothers on Feb. 21.

For the seven living survivors of the massacre and their relatives, it seems that every new wave of attention brings its own set of problems.

When the Florida State Legislature awarded compensation, some families found themselves torn apart by conflict over who should share in the money. Now family member is pitted against family member again as some witnesses complain that they are being shut out of a film about their lives, although Warner Brothers paid most of them \$25,000 each for the rights to their stories.

The producer of the television documentary, Mr. Tereshchuk, meanwhile laments that he was handicapped in making his film because he could not interview witnesses, who were under exclusive contract to Warner Brothers.

Only two of the survivors could be reached by telephone for comment. Some are in nursing homes, and some are too frail, their relatives said, to be asked to remember and discuss the week of horror.

Richard A. Ryles, a Florida lawyer who said he represented five of the survivors -- Dorothy Goins Hosey, Arnett T. Goins, Wilson Hall, Margie Hall Johnson and Robie Mortin -- argued that they should be allowed to view the film before it was released. "All we asked was to see the movie beforehand," Mr. Ryles said. "If they're going to exploit these peoples' characters, at least give them the honor of seeing this in advance."

Editors' Picks

Warner Brothers and Mr. Singleton, the film's director, denied that they had shut out any of the survivors, pointing out that they had invited them to the movie premiere. About 60 of the survivors' relatives appear as extras in the movie. And a descendant of one of the witnesses to the massacre, 13-year-old Benea Osley, has a speaking role as Philomena Goins Doctor, who was her distant cousin.

Meeting the survivors was "my inspiration," Mr. Singleton said from Los Angeles. "We went out of our way to get all the survivors to the set. Some of them came. I feel a sense of triumph and strength at having an opportunity to make a picture of this scope."

But Wilson Hall, a retired maintenance worker who said he was "between 81 and 82" and lives in Hilliard, Fla., said: "They completely ignored me. I would like to know what kind of story it is before it ever hits the screen."

Mr. Hall was 8 years old when the rampage occurred. His mother hid her children in the swamp at the edge of the town, and he vividly remembers the cold and the terror. "We were there a day and a night," he said. "We couldn't build too many fires," for fear of discovery. "We just wrapped ourselves around each other the best we could."

He said a man called Nada Bradley "would get food and bring it back to us." During the violence, he explained, "he wasn't killed; they just shot his eyes out."

Because of constraints under his contract with Warner Brothers, Mr. Hall declined to be interviewed for the television documentary. But Ms. Mortin, 81, who identified herself as a survivor only after the contracts with Warner Brothers had been signed, was interviewed by Mr. Tereshchuk. Ms. Mortin said that her uncle, Sam Carter, was the first to die in the carnage, his face shot off and his body mutilated.

"I was 8 years old," Ms. Mortin stressed recently on the telephone from Riviera Beach, Fla., where she now lives. "My father didn't tell us anything. My uncle was already hung. He hung there for three days.

"As soon as my father came home from work, he said: 'Get yourself ready. Put on all your warm clothes.' Nobody ate dinner. We tried to keep very calm. They tried not to let us know anything happened. He got us out Jan. 2, at 6 or 6:30 at night."

"I've never been as cold as I was then," Ms. Mortin said. "So many of our people suffered. So many people suffered in those woods." The children were later put on a train for Chiefland, Fla.

Ms. Mortin said she was angry at Arnett Doctor, 53, a distant cousin of hers and the son of the late Mrs. Doctor. Mr. Doctor has been a leader of the survivors' group, helping to bring their cause to the Florida Legislature and to negotiate the agreement with Warner Brothers.

"They didn't recognize me as part of the Rosewood survivors," Ms. Mortin said. "He figured he didn't want nine people to divide the money with."

Mr. Doctor said he had been unaware of Ms. Mortin's complaints. "Warner Brothers and I were not in a position to go back and renegotiate our contract," he said by telephone from Orlando.

As for the contention that the survivors were left out of the film, Mr. Doctor said: "I made it known to them through the mail that the survivors would be eligible to come to the movie set. If no one contacted me, I could only assume they didn't want to place themselves in those high-pressure situations."

"Each time the survivors went to speak before a legislative body and an investigative body, there was always a physical price that had to be paid," he added.

The making of two films, a documentary and a dramatization, on the same subject in a short span of time created some indirect competition.

Mr. Tereshchuk, a British-born journalist who has produced nearly 50 films for television news and documentary programs, was able to interview only one survivor,

Ms. Mortin, in person. He purchased film of others, Minnie Lee Langley, now dead, and Wilson Hall, from the history department at the University of Florida, which had interviewed them earlier. Mr. Tereshchuk also conducted interviews with historians, lawyers and other figures in the case.

Operating under ABC News guidelines, which forbid almost all forms of dramatic re-creation, Mr. Tereshchuk could not use actors to re-enact the events. To evoke the survivors' terror and their flight through the woods around Rosewood, he used shots of the trees overhead.

"The entire community was wiped out," he said of the town. "There were no family albums, nothing left of the place."

Working with a budget of about \$150,000, Mr. Tereshchuk tried to evoke the physical reality of Rosewood, which was about 30 miles southwest of Gainesville, with a single photograph of a house burning to the ground during the rampage and with shots of architectural details typical of the time.

In the feature film, which is not yet available for screening, Mr. Singleton and the screenwriter Gregory Poirier were able to take some dramatic license. For example, they created a composite character, Mann (played by Mr. Rhames), a World War I veteran who is drawn into the events. In the real Rosewood a number of whites came to the aid of their black neighbors; "in our picture the Wright family is the only white family" that helps the victims, Mr. Singleton said.

With a budget reported at \$36 million, the producers, Jon Peters and Tracy Barone, were also able to recreate the vanished town, moving half a dozen turn-of-the-century frame houses to the film's location at the Royal Trails Ranch in Lake County. For a few months last summer it was as if the tiny, thriving town of Rosewood existed once again.

Ms. Mortin said her life was ruined by that fateful week in 1923. "Our birthright was taken away from us," she said. "My grandma told me not to say a word. My grandma said never to look back. We weren't supposed to talk about Rosewood."

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