



LOCAL

Kathleen High students learn overlooked Fla. history

Sara Drumm The Ledger



The Ledger

Florida historian Sherry Dupree talks about the Rosewood massacre to students at Kathleen High School in Lakeland Sept 4.

LAKELAND — Kathleen High students this week learned about an overlooked bit of Florida history: The 1923 massacre at Rosewood, a town in Levy County founded by black laborers.

Sherry DuPree, a representative for the Rosewood Heritage Foundation, spoke to students Friday about Rosewood and racial conflict leading up to and following the attack.

Jon Culbertson, a social studies teacher at Kathleen, said he learned about Rosewood over the summer. He met DuPree and asked if she would present at the school.

“It's such a controversial subject, but the kids need to know about it,” he said. “It's a piece of Florida history that a lot of people don't want to touch.”

The violence in Rosewood started after a white woman from Sumner, Fannie Taylor, said on Jan. 1, 1923, that a black man had assaulted her. White vigilante groups formed to track down the man they thought was responsible.

The conflict intensified when black men in Rosewood returned gunfire and killed two white men. More vigilantes came, and they ultimately burned almost every building in the town.

Meanwhile, women and children fled into the woods, hiding for several cold January days until they were able to board a train and leave.

There are conflicting accounts of the Rosewood massacre — how many people were killed, who was telling the truth about the cause. Black survivors believe Fannie Taylor's attacker was actually a white man with whom she'd been having an affair. The death toll is often said to be six black people and two white people, but some accounts say there were mass graves of black people.

Newspaper accounts from the time have different details and slants.

No one was arrested.

Rosewood is now just a historical marker on State Road 24, near Cedar Key, about an hour west of Gainesville.

Survivors' memories weren't shared publicly until a St. Petersburg Times reporter, Gary Moore, learned about Rosewood and wrote about it in 1982. In 1994, the Florida Legislature passed a claims bill allotting \$2.1 million for those whose families were impacted by Rosewood — 71 years later.

Culbertson said he is glad the school and social studies department supported the presentation of history that is not normally discussed in schools. He hopes students will take away the message that racism and racial conflict still exist in today's society, but they are the ones who can help that change.

DuPree, who often presents at high schools, said she hopes students will share the history with others and take time to learn more on their own.

“I hope they take an honest look at history,” she said.

And while a lot of progress has been made, DuPree wants people to know there are still problems that need to be addressed.

Francisco Nelson, a senior at Kathleen, said he had not heard about the history DuPree told them about, and it hit close to home.

“What shocked me is that these things happened in local areas,” he said.

DuPree also noted violence against black communities in Ocoee, outside Orlando, and Perry, near Tallahassee.

Justin Andrews, also a senior, said he finds it interesting it took so many decades for people to learn about and acknowledge the massacre. He said he sees related problems even now, as national conversations turn to issues rooted in racism, like public display of the Confederate flag.

Alma Miguel, a senior, and Chelsy Murphy, a junior, said they appreciated the chance to learn about something they had never heard of.

“I want to go home and research it some more,” Murphy said. “I think this should be brought up more.”

Mario Jenkins, an assistant principal and former history teacher, said he learned about Rosewood during a Florida history class at Florida A&M University. He thinks it is good historical background for Florida students.

He said he wants to recognize how far the country has come and build a positive message on the inerasable foundation that exists.

“It's important for students to understand those things that shaped our history, both good and bad,” he said. “The purpose of history is to learn from it.”

—Sara Drumm can be reached at sara.drumm@theledger.com or 863-802-7547.
Follow her on Twitter @saradrumm.



The Ledger



The Ledger