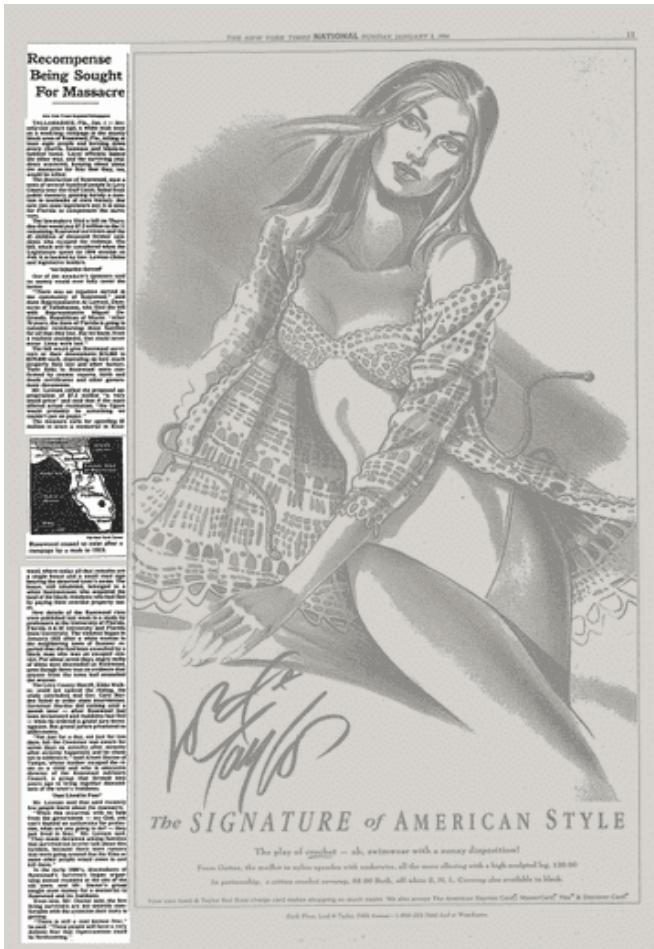


The New York Times

Recompense Being Sought For Massacre



Credit...The New York Times Archives

See the article in its original context from
January 2, 1994, Section 1, Page 11

Seventy-one years ago, a white mob went on a weeklong rampage in the mostly black town of Rosewood, Fla., killing at least eight people and burning down every church, business and black-inhabited home. Local officials looked the other way, and the surviving residents scattered, keeping silent about the massacre for fear that they, too, would be killed.

The destruction of Rosewood, once a town of several hundred people in Levy County near the Gulf Coast, faded from public memory, gaining barely a mention in textbooks of state history. But now two state legislators say it is time for Florida to compensate the survivors.

The lawmakers filed a bill on Thursday that would pay \$7.2 million to the 11 remaining Rosewood survivors and the 45 children of deceased former residents who escaped the violence. The bill, which will be considered when the Legislature opens its 1994 session on Feb. 8, is backed by Gov. Lawton Chiles and legislative leaders. 'An Injustice Served'

One of the measure's sponsors said no money would ever fully cover the losses.

"There was an injustice served in the community of Rosewood," said state Representative Al Lawson, Democrat of Tallahassee, who filed the bill with Representative Miguel DeGrandy, Republican of Miami. "After 70 years, the State of Florida is going to consider reimbursing those families for all that they lost. But we know, from a realistic standpoint, that could never occur. Lives were lost."

The bill would give Rosewood survivors or their descendants \$15,000 to \$270,000 each, depending on how much property they lost and other factors. Their links to Rosewood were confirmed by census reports, birth and death certificates and other government documents.

Mr. Lawson called the proposed appropriation of \$7.2 million "a very small price" and said that if the state offered actual restitution, "the figure would probably be something we couldn't put on paper."

The measure calls for spending \$1 million to erect a memorial in Rosewood, where today all that remains are a single house and a small road sign bearing the deserted town's name. The house, still inhabited, belonged to a white businessman who acquired the land of the black residents who had fled by paying their overdue property taxes.

New details of the Rosewood riots were published last week in a study by professors at the University of Florida, Florida A & M University and Florida State University. The violence began in January 1923 after a white woman in the neighboring town of Sumner reported that she had been assaulted by a black man who was an escaped convict. For about seven days, angry mobs of white men descended on Rosewood, even though there was no evidence that anyone from the town had assaulted the woman.

The Levy County Sheriff, Elias Walker, could not control the rioting, the study concluded, and Gov. Cary Hardee failed to order state intervention. Governor Hardee did nothing until a month later -- after Rosewood had been devastated and residents had fled -- when he ordered a grand jury investigation. But grand jurors presented no indictments.

"Not just for a day, not just for two days, but the Governor was aware for seven days as atrocity after atrocity after atrocity happened, and he chose not to address it," said Arnett Doctor of Tampa, whose mother escaped the riots as a child and who is executive director of the Rosewood Advisory Council, a group that formed nine years ago to bring together descendants of the town's residents. 'Just Lived in Fear'

Mr. Lawson said that until recently few people knew about the massacre.

"When this occurred, with no help from the government -- my God, you can't depend on authorities for protection, what are you going to do? -- they just lived in fear," Mr. Lawson said. "They made decisions among families that survived not to ever talk about this incident, because there were rumors that were going around that the Klan or some other people would come in and kill them."

In the early 1980's, descendants of Rosewood's survivors began organizing annual reunions at the site of the old town, and Mr. Doctor's group sought state money for a memorial to Rosewood and its residents.

Even now, Mr. Doctor said, the few living survivors are not entirely comfortable with the attention their story is getting.

"There is still a real intense fear," he said. "These people still have a very definite fear that repercussions could be forthcoming."