

Tampa Bay Times

OPINION

Column: As the last Rosewood survivor dies, let's remember our duty to address injustice



A -- REWIND -- Copy of Jan 20 1923 Rosewood riot photo. (On January 1, 1923 onlookers examine the charred ruins of a black village. A group of whites rampaged after an unsuccessful search for a black man accused of raping a white woman. The mob burned virtually every house and building in Rosewood, a community of about 120 nine miles east of Cedar Dey. Six blacks and two whites died and survivors fled through woods and swamps. The town ceased to exist. (Historic Photo, Millenium Rewind Special) LABSCAN

By **David R. Colburn, special to the Tampa Bay Times**

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Mary Hall Daniels was a child of 3 when a white mob destroyed her home and the predominantly African-American community of Rosewood in Levy County in 1923. The last survivor of what came to be known as the Rosewood massacre, Mrs. Daniels died on May 2 at the age of 98. Her passing has raised concerns among many that our knowledge and understanding of Rosewood and the pervasiveness of racial violence in Florida's history might well be lost with her.

The tragedy at Rosewood during the first week of January 1923 not only highlighted the prevalence of racism in America, but also subverted the nation's commitment to democracy and to a fair and impartial judicial system. The black community was destroyed after a false allegation of rape against a black man who was never identified. Several residents were also murdered by a white mob. Others were driven from their property forever.

Black citizens throughout the nation asked what had happened to the nation's commitment to make the "World Safe for Democracy" when it entered World War I in 1917. Didn't Rosewood and other acts of racial violence and discrimination usurp this promise?

The white response to this question was unambiguous. The editor of the *Gainesville Daily Sun* underscored the views of other whites when he proudly proclaimed in December 1922, on the eve of Rosewood, that he was a member of the Klan. He even singled out the organization's many noble qualities.

Ruthless and inhumane actions against black citizens became the accepted response in the South and increasingly in the North when they protested segregation. During the period from 1918 to 1927, Klan members and lynch mobs nationally took 454 lives, 416 of whom were African-American. In Florida, 47 black citizens were lynched during the same period. It was open season on African-Americans, with any violation of southern racial codes sufficient to warrant torture and execution.

Indeed, Florida was among the worst states for violence in this period. In addition to the 47 blacks who died by lynching, the highest per capita rate in the nation, whites destroyed the town of Ocoee in November 1920 when two black men attempted to vote. In Perry, four black men were murdered for allegedly killing a teacher.

In the 1980s, when the events of Rosewood finally came to light from this dark and distant past, it sparked a state and national campaign to compensate survivors for the loss of their property and the damages they suffered. State legislators Al Lawson and Miguel DeGrandy formed a cross-party, cross-cultural alliance — between a Democrat and a Republican and an African-American and a Cuban-American. Joining them was Gov. Lawton Chiles, five state historians and Florida's leading law firm, Holland &

Knight, which gathered the historical and legal documentation detailing the history of Rosewood.

The legislative investigation turned on the testimony of Leslie and Ernest Parham, two white residents of Sumner, adjacent to Rosewood, where Ernest delivered ice frequently. Both asserted that the residents of Rosewood were good people, owned their property and were law abiding. Ernest emphasized to the state commission that "They did not deserve what happened to them."

In spring of 1994, Gov. Chiles and the state Legislature agreed to compensate each of the survivors. Nine survivors shared \$2 million in what remains the only racial incident of its kind in the nation's history in which a state acknowledged its complicity and in which survivors were remunerated.

Why should we worry about Floridians forgetting this era after the state took the extraordinary step of compensating the victims? First, the story of Rosewood was covered up for seven decades by whites who denied any knowledge of or participation in the town's destruction. Second, there were many other horrific events in Florida and the nation that are seldom referred to in history books. Third, Florida's population has changed so dramatically since the survivors' compensation that few know of Rosewood today.

So, yes, we are in danger of forgetting this tragic past. But moving forward on race requires that we hold on to our history and continue to honor the victims of Rosewood and other racial violence. The nation's new lynching memorial in Montgomery, Ala., is an important step. Researchers with the Equal Justice Initiative have identified the lynchings of more than 4,000 U.S. citizens between 1877 and 1950, including 19 in Alachua County and eight in Levy County, home of Rosewood. The memorial consists of hanging columns arranged by counties, each with the names of victims from that county. Each county can bring home a duplicate column to display. Another possibility could be building something simple and powerful, echoing the feeling of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

We owe it to all victims of racial violence; to all survivors; and to the future, to acknowledge past injustices. Mary Hall Daniels' life spanned the tumultuous period from Rosewood's destruction in 1923 to the apology and compensation from the state in 1994. Let us pledge to her, and the other residents of Rosewood, that we will never forget their history — and ours.

David R. Colburn is director of the Bob Graham Center and professor emeritus of history at the University of Florida.