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ARCHIVE

Beyond Rosewood

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An entire black community was wiped away in a week. People were murdered. Buildings turned to ash. Children were left wading in the swamps, hiding out from a mob of angry whites.

Then there was silence.

The ugly secret was hidden away in Florida's swamps for decades, seldom spoken of by its survivors, forgotten by the history books, unknown to the world.

Then a reporter stumbled across it and started dragging it out of the muck.

Seventy years after the town of Rosewood was erased, there was to be justice.

The state would pay the survivors. Authors would write about what had happened. A film by a famous director, to open next month, would bring the tale to its widest audience yet.

Light finally would be shined on the hidden shame.

But light brings its own complications. For those who already had survived a massacre. For others, whose ties to Rosewood came much later, by chance or circumstance.

Then enters money. The ingredient that can change whatever it touches.

Said Steve Hanlon, a lawyer who represented the Rosewood Massacre victims in their quest for compensation: "I knew that money and families don't mix well. We all talked about it beforehand. We said, this is going to be a mixed blessing."

A town on fire

Shrieking, Fanny Taylor ran from her house in the white community of Sumner the morning of New Year's Day 1923.

The 23-year-old married woman, weeping and bruised, said a black man had attacked her. Later, some people would claim Taylor was having an affair with a white man who assaulted her, then blamed a black man to cover it up.

Whatever the truth, Taylor's story sent an angry crowd of white men, led by dogs, to the nearby black community of Rosewood, east of Cedar Key.

By nightfall, the mob had killed a black man named Sam Carter.

A few days later, still searching for the alleged attacker, the mob _ some say it now included Ku Klux Klansmen from neighboring towns _ returned. When the gunfire was over, at least six blacks and two whites were dead.

As black residents fled the swampland around Rosewood, their houses were torched. All that remained of Rosewood was the home of John Wright, the town's only white resident.

The black residents escaped to new cities and started over, fearful to speak of Rosewood.

"No family is monolithic"

Robie Mortin buried her pain away deep. She might have taken it to her grave. She did not tell anyone, not even her own children, about that chilling first week of 1923.

She was 8.

She can still hear her father's panting in her ears. He ran 2 miles home from his job at the sawmill and ordered Robie and her sister to put on every piece of clothing they could find. Then he whisked the girls off to the train depot.

Her father had heard about the murder of Sam Carter. To little Robie, he was Uncle Sammy.

The train ride out of town spared Robie Mortin's life, and changed it entirely. She would not see her father again for two years. She stayed with an older sister in Chiefland, then moved to Florida's east coast, where she still lives.

"My grandmother told me never to mention the name Rosewood. And we never did. They might have come looking for us," Mortin said.

Then, after so many years, other people started talking about it. State officials even.

"Before, nobody would say it. They wouldn't say it happened. At least now, they were saying: yes, it happened. That helps the hurt."

But for Mortin, now 81, there is new pain, too.

Relationships between some Rosewood survivors and their relatives have strained. Disagreements arose over state compensation payments, the book deal, the movie contract.

A few members of the group that represent the survivors _ the Rosewood Family Advisory Committee _ split off into their own group. The second faction took a name so similar _ the Rosewood Family Advisory Committee Inc. _ that some relatives did not know which was which.

"This especially saddens me because this family has gone through enough," said Greg Galloway, an Orlando entertainment lawyer who negotiated movie deals for survivors. "They have been hurt by outside forces for 70 years. They don't need to hurt each other."

Mortin is among a group of five Rosewood survivors represented by another lawyer who says his clients are disenchanted with the Warner Bros. film that is scheduled for release Feb. 21.

Richard Ryles, a West Palm Beach lawyer, said his clients say they got almost no chance to participate in the film. Their movie contracts were presented like a used car deal, "take it or leave it." And, so far, they have not been allowed to see the movie.

"With our request to get a screening for this movie that will profess to portray their lives, I have gotten the Hollywood shuffle," said Ryles. "I can't get an answer." Ryles said he is so disturbed that he has contacted former NAACP director Benjamin Chavis, civil rights activist the Rev. Al Sharpton and the Rev. Jesse Jackson with his concerns.

Mortin came forward later than most of the survivors. After confirming her story, the state awarded her \$150,000. But the movie deals, which have reportedly paid about \$30,000 to other survivors, were completed when she came along.

"They cut me out of it," said Mortin from her Riviera Beach home. "I have no idea why. I'm just not anybody at all."

But officials from the movie said most survivors _ everyone they knew about _ had crucial parts in making the film.

Director John Singleton, of *Boyz n the Hood* fame, interviewed several survivors before the screenplay was written.

What's more, said Galloway, survivors were invited to the set while the movie was being filmed in Florida last year. They also will be invited to a screening before or after the film opens, Galloway said.

One family member has seen a rough cut of the film. He also was on the set daily. Arnett Doctor, a Spring Hill resident whose now-deceased mother was a young girl in Rosewood, was the movie's paid consultant.

Doctor also was a leader on the state compensation case and chaired the family's association. His license plate reads "RSEWOOD."

Today, he is pushing to build a memorial and educational complex in Rosewood. "Rosewood has totally consumed my life," he said.

Not all the survivors appreciate Doctor's efforts.

Wilson Hall, 82, survived the massacre and now lives in Hilliard. He is a soft-spoken man, but not when it comes to Doctor.

"He has turned the whole thing around to himself," Hall said. "He's up there doing the movie and he wasn't born at the time."

Doctor, who is in his 50s, said the criticisms do not faze him.

"We all knew from the very outset, there would be divisions," he said. "My family is not monolithic. No family is monolithic.

"There are people who want to advance their own agendas. That's sad."

Doctor will not say what he earned as consultant to the movie. He said he has not gotten rich off Rosewood, though. He was better off financially, in fact, before this all began, he said.

Digging for news

Gary Moore wandered north from St. Petersburg on a spring day in 1982, in search of a story.

A writer for what was then the St. Petersburg Times' Sunday magazine, Moore got all the way to Cedar Key, still looking for a topic.

There, Moore asked locals about a "gloomy atmosphere" he sensed.

One person told him there were no black residents. When he pressed that point, he got an angry reply: "I know what you're digging for."

Seductive words to any reporter.

After weeks of reporting, Moore, then 31, told thousands of Times readers about the Rosewood Massacre.

It was a tale that had received newspaper coverage for a week in 1923, then vanished from view. Moore's article, published July 25, 1982, shocked even some Florida historians.

But the story's publication would be only the start of Moore's tie to Rosewood.

A few months after the story ran, Moore was fired from the Times. He remembered it this way: An editor was describing his career to a student journalist, and Moore surreptitiously tape-recorded the conversation. Then Moore played the tape for the amusement of his newsroom colleagues.

"Gary had no respect for institutions, which made him a really good journalist," said Judy Sedgeman, the former editor who recalled losing three nights of sleep when she had to fire Moore.

Moore always had been a wanderer. He had spent eight months walking across the United States, writing about his journey for a Boston newspaper. Then he walked through Central America.

With his freedom from the Times, Moore pursued the story of Rosewood. He persuaded television's 60 Minutes to follow the story in 1983, but, for the most part, the story went nowhere. Moore wrote a book, but could find no publisher.

"I could not interest anybody in Rosewood," Moore recalled, "Anybody, anywhere."

Moore moved between jobs, living out of his car at one point.

Meanwhile, a tabloid TV-tipster/screenplay writer/model named Michael O'McCarthy heard of Rosewood.

O'McCarthy found two of the massacre survivors and brought them to the law firm of Holland and Knight. Ten years after Moore's account was published, the story took off.

Hanlon, the firm's pro bono lawyer, took the survivors' case to the state Legislature to press for compensation. After months of testimony, study and lobbying, the \$2-million bill was a national first.

Newspapers all over the country published stories about a massacre in Rosewood, Fla.

Today, Moore shows a visitor a tall stack of documents: A 1992 Miami Herald story about Rosewood; a state-funded study of the massacre by professors from Florida State, Florida A&M University and the University of Florida; a book, Like Judgment Day, written by a Virginia newspaper reporter and published by the Berkley Publishing Group.

All of them, Moore said, are flawed.

Some accounts, Moore said, have exaggerated the number of people killed in the massacre. Others have exaggerated the town's original prosperity and size.

Moore's critics say he is just bitter.

"He basically took the position that he knew more about Rosewood than anyone else," said John Pancake, a former Miami Herald editor, now at the Washington Post.

"I think the exact scope of what happened at Rosewood is difficult to know," he said. "But what's pretty clear is that a really bad thing happened there."

Hanlon, the lawyer who took Rosewood before the state Legislature, said he had once sought Moore's help. He even hoped for the reporter's testimony before the Legislature. Then he met Moore.

"He thought everybody was in a conspiracy," Hanlon said. "I thought, I can't put this guy on. I have no idea where he is going to go."

"What the guy did . . . 15 years ago was really praiseworthy, but he had gotten to the point where it seemed to consume his life and it affected his perception and his judgments," Hanlon said.

"Gary Moore believes he is the sole repository of truth on Rosewood. Nobody else could ever think about it, talk about it or, certainly, ever write about it."

Moore said he is merely fighting for truth.

"I could never prove that I'm not a sorehead on this subject except to hope that the evidence I'm presenting is enough to prove these inaccuracies."

Moore, now 46 and living in Jacksonville, has rewritten his book manuscript about Rosewood.

There are still facts to check and recheck, he said. "One could never get to the end of it. It involves peoples' memories."

"We can't help

what went on'

Christy Thompson and her husband found peace in the swatch of Levy County woods they bought in 1972.

Their trailer sits off a side road, protected from two-lane State Road 24 that leads tourists to Cedar Key. The loudest sounds came from bugs, dogs and, once in a while, the fire of a hunting rifle.

Then the story of the massacre came out.

The small, green state marker that had always been near the Thompsons' lot suddenly became important. It reads "Rosewood."

Cars began pulling up to the Thompsons' for a glimpse of a town that vanished. They bore license plates from Maryland, Michigan, New York. Their occupants would climb out and walk onto the land. Some acted as if Thompson weren't there, even when she would call out, "May I help you?"

"We've had humpteen dozen people come through here," Thompson said, one hand on her hip, the other still aiming a water hose into a pen of barking dogs. She has had writers, tourists and people who never would state their business. Not long ago, a bus load of school children pulled up.

Thompson feels intruded upon.

"Everybody wants to come see it," she said, shaking her head. "Every Tom, Dick and Harry, every newscaster, everybody wants to come down here. They come and they point to a tree and say: 'Oh, this was the hanging tree and this is the Rosewood riot cemetery and so on.'

"But they don't know that. No one knows."

In part, she is right. There are few clues left of Rosewood. Only one house, John Wright's old place, still stands. Other traces, a few shards of broken china, an old pot, could be from the 1920s community, or maybe not.

There is an eerie gap in the shade trees that cover this land. The long, straight path once held the railroad line that carried people out of Rosewood.

A few steps from Thompson's place, there is a cemetery, covered in brush. Some people say Sam Carter was buried here. Some claim all the massacre victims were dumped here in a mass grave. But only two headstones are visible, both for people who died before 1923.

Thompson and her husband, Wesley, had heard "a little" gossip about the massacre even before Gary Moore came along in 1982. Most locals knew of it. They seldom discussed it.

"It's not right what happened," Thompson said. "But you won't never really know the whole truth. Or how it did happen."

It is the looks she gets from visitors, she said, that injure her.

"Sometimes, there's a feeling I get. A feeling that, because I am white, that they think I was partly responsible for what happened.

"We didn't do this," said Thompson, 47. "We can't help what went on then."

She is reluctant to speak to reporters anymore. Last time she did, she said, her words were twisted. She told a writer that one of her dogs disliked hippies and black people, she said. "He turned it around to say that we didn't like hippies or black people."

Thompson has no intention of seeing the film when it opens next month. "I've had enough of this," she said.

She has her own idea.

"Everybody else is profiting off of this," she said. She wonders if she could charge \$100 per person to come on her land.