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LOCAL

Rosewood history for sale

John Wright House said to have hidden blacks fleeing racial terrorism in 1923

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Sherry Dupree, 71, founder of the Rosewood Heritage Foundation, talks with Gregory Dichtas, 59, whose mother-in-law owns the John Wright home in Rosewood, outside the historic home that is the last known remaining structure from the original Rosewood community. In 1923, a mob of whites burned the town of Rosewood over seven days of violence. At least six blacks were killed after a white woman said she had been assaulted by a black man. The home was owned by a white merchant named John Wright, who was able to keep the mob from burning his home where he reportedly was hiding many blacks from the community. [Brad McClenny/The Gainesville Sun] The Gainesville Sun

Traveling down State Road 24 in rural Levy County, nearly 10 miles from Cedar Key, a visitor can find a white two-story house nearly 100 yards from the road.

It is easy to miss if you aren't looking for it, but it's the only visible home along the mile-long strip of road that runs through Rosewood.

Inside the home lives Fujiko Scoggins, an 84-year-old Japanese woman who survived the Battle of Saipan during World War II. She bought the home in 1977 for \$90,000 with her then-husband Doyal Scoggins, a retired Air Force major.

They liked the house for its appearance and quiet surroundings, but knew nothing of its history.

“He just knew it was an old house,” Fuji Scoggins said sitting in her red rocking chair.

Five years later the story of the Rosewood Massacre surfaced, a deadly race riot that ended with homes being burned down and at least eight people killed — six of them black — though it could be more.

The home at 6251 SW SR 24, more widely known as “the John Wright House,” is one of the few remaining original structures — if not the last — from the week of mob violence in January 1923. That makes it one of the few markers of the small town that was once a thriving community of black homeowners.

It is believed that Wright house was used to shelter blacks hiding from the turmoil unfolding, as they escaped to other towns on a nearby train. People hid in the surrounding woods, homes, wells and swamp, sometimes using dogs to transfer written notes back and forth.

Since the deadly events were reported in 1982 by Gary Moore, a journalist for the St. Petersburg Times, the home hasn't been up for sale, until now.

Scoggins said the 35-acre property is just too large for one person and her age keeps her from keeping it as clean as she would like. Her daughter, Connie Dichtas, and her husband Gregory, both real estate agents, are selling the home. They said they want to ensure the new owner appreciates its significance as a location as one of the more well-documented atrocities African-Americans endured in Florida.

The price? \$500,000.

"I'm hoping it educates this area, that they understand what happened here was a terrible thing, and that hopefully it would bring an end to some of this prejudice and hatred that we see still today," Connie Dichtas said.

Built in 1901, the four-bedroom, two-bath home has much of its original structure still in place. The wooden porch is covered with cracked green paint; the foundation is held up by logs and bricks; hand-carved pillars with arching designs support the second-floor balcony. It features a wooden stairwell covered with newer blue shag carpet that leads to the second floor, where the balcony is only accessible by window. The floor inside is mostly wood planks, though parts are covered with carpet.

The home is surrounded by cedar and pecan trees and has blueberry shrubs. Wild hogs and deer occasionally roam the area.

But with all its attractive features, the sale isn't something the family wants to widely publicize in the area.

The Dichtas said placing a "for sale" sign out front would be fruitless, and that they fear of attracting deceitful people with hidden motives.

"We're afraid somebody will destroy the house to try to prevent the exposure of the information," Gregory Dichtas said.

Levy County Commissioner John Meeks said county residents often get painted with a broad brush and that it isn't fair. He said he doesn't think the sale of the home would be problematic and that its history should add to its value.

"Unfortunately, in all walks of life, the actions of a few are projected on many," he said. "What happened there was a tragedy. I can't defend anybody involved in that."

Asked if there should be more to remember the tragedy, Meeks said some things need to stay in the past to allow communities to move forward as one.

"It's not something I'm proud of, it's not something Levy County should be proud of," he said. "I can promise you, nothing like that will happen today."

The family says they've encountered at least one veiled threat recently.

One Sunday morning, as they prepared to leave for church, a neighbor approached the home and insisted they not try to sell the property to a black person, Gregory Dichtas said. The woman indicated there were "plenty of guns in the community" and that the sale of the home would be an issue if the new owner wasn't white, he said.

Scoggins used to welcome busloads of students of all ages to visit and learn the history of the home. But as she got older, she said, the adventures became too much to handle.

A large sign outside the home, paid for by the state, often attracts passersby. It is the only memorial to the Rosewood Massacre in the town. Scoggins said the sign has been vandalized, pulled down multiple times and shot at.

"I don't know how many posts it went through," she said. "It wouldn't even last a week. They replace, it was gone again."

Sherry DuPree, the director of the Rosewood Heritage Foundation, used to help with the educational tours in the area beginning in 1994. In the early years of the tour, she said she remembers being harassed while parked by the sign as a red truck drove by.

"I knew what it was and I was trying to get (the kids) back in the bus," DuPree said. "They came by hollering "niggas go home" and other slants that they said."

She said a gang of motorcycles also once circled the bus to intimidate the group. Now, area deputies will escort or scope the area before the tour bus visits the town.

"It didn't last long, but the few minutes it did last it was frightening," she said. "In the beginning, it was quite difficult to run those tours in this area."

She suspects the memorial vandals were locals who "don't want any remembrance of Rosewood."

Cedar Key Police Chief Virgil Sandlin said some of the details of vandalism may be exaggerated and that none have occurred in recent years. He said he remembers some area residents being offended when the Legislature awarded \$1.5 million in reparations to victims and their families, but any new threats would be news to him.

DuPree said she wants the state to step in to preserve the property and its history, though, so far, there has been no assurance that will happen.

“I think it will open the eyes of people that are unaware,” she said.

Scoggins said artifacts have been found around the home, some of which include silverware, pots and cans, and that the train tracks are a five-minute walk into the woods behind the home. She said she plans to move closer to her daughter and son-in-law once the property is sold.

The family is hopeful that someone will make a mini resort or bed and breakfast out of the property to educate locals and tourists, something they say is much needed in the isolated community.

“I hope it brings people together, that would be healing,” Connie Dichtas said. “This country needs a lot of healing.”



We visit the Rosewood home, speak with its sellers,