

# Rosewood: The last survivor remembers an American tragedy

theGRIO REPORT - Robie Mortin was the last person alive with a living memory of Rosewood the north Florida black town that was consumed in racial rage this week more than eight decades ago...

THEGRIO STAFF

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*This week marks the anniversary of one the most tragic events in black history – the Rosewood massacre – the result of rape accusations made by a white woman against a black man, which led to violent riots and the murder of several innocent African-Americans in January of 1923. To commemorate this event, historian Dr. Marvin Dunn interviews the last survivor of Rosewood and sheds new light on the event that still haunts African-Americans.*

She was the last person alive with a living memory of Rosewood the north Florida black town that was consumed in racial rage this week more than eight decades ago. She was eight when it happened and her memory was as clear as a bell. Robie Mortin and I were friends. I met her well into her nineties living in an assisted living complex in West Palm Beach where what was left of her family settled after the event.

“I was in third grade,” she once told me. “I could read and write. I remember everything;” like playing in her aunt Sarah Carrier’s yard every Sunday after church, like the plum trees that grew in her yard, like getting apples at Christmas and dancing and playing games on Emancipation Day; and the night the mob burned the town down.

Mortin had never gone back except for a short visit when the governor and state officials dedicated a historic marker on Highway 24, but that was not to touch the ground, to smell the woods or to go to the old graveyard where her mother is buried. But in 2008 she allowed me to take her back twice and she showed me everything.

We walked the railroad bed where the rails had been moved many years ago but the raised rail bed still runs true through the woods like a green tunnel; to the place where the Masonic lodge stood which was the building in which she attended school; and to that graveyard that not only holds her mother's bones but those of many Rosewood pioneers and victims. Her aunt Sarah who was killed during those terrible days is there. So is her uncle, Sam Carter who was the first person to be killed in the massacre. She lived in his house.

She recalled the cold night the mobs came. The moon was full and bright; so bright you could see shadows at mid-night. "My daddy told us to get up and put on all of our heavy clothes. He said the people were shooting and they had to get out of Rosewood."

A lot of people had to get out of Rosewood that night. Mortin and her aunt Polly, Sam Carter's mother, were fortunate. They made it to the train depot from which they escaped to Chiefland about twenty miles away. Many others spent several freezing nights hiding in the dank woods trying to avoid the mobs.

Rosewood had been the perfect storm for racial violence. All of the usual suspects applied, an alleged sexual attack by a black man on a white woman, a black man with an attitude and lots of friends who had guns, economic jealousy because many blacks in Rosewood were doing better than the back woods whites who lived around them and the killing by blacks of a white law enforcement officer.

It had all been a lie. Mortin had heard the stories over the years. The white woman, Fannie Taylor was having an affair and almost got caught when her lover beat her one morning while her husband was at work. Fannie said a black man did it and that was all it took. Over the following week hundreds of white men descended upon Rosewood vengeance in mind and torches in hand. Sylvester Carrier would emerge as the hero of the moment. He gathered up his family and hunkered down in his mother's large two-story home. He was a Mason.

"Almost all of the men out there were Masons", Mortin recalled. The night the mob came to the Carrier House an unknown number of heavily armed black men were waiting. Some were hidden in the woods. It was a gathering of Masons. When it was all over eight people were dead including Sylvester and his mother Sarah, Robie's aunt.

She and Sam Carter's mother moved to Riviera Beach which had become home to many Rosewood survivors.

"The old black cemetery in Riviera Beach is filled with Rosewood folks," she once told me. In June of 2010 she joined them. On my way to Rosewood I had seen her the day before she died in a hospice facility in West Palm Beach. No one else was left who could remember what happened that desperately cold night in 1923.

What she left behind was a loving family and a many grateful friends, including me.