



The Final Call | NATIONAL NEWS

Rosewood massacre haunts memory after nearly 85 years

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ROSEWOOD, Fla. (AP) - "I was eight-years-old when this whole thing happened, home with our father in bed asleep, less than a mile from where they hung Uncle Sam," Robie Mortin remembers. "It was New Year's Day, 1923."

Robie Mortin is 92, and what she calls "this whole thing," historians call the Rosewood Massacre. On that day 85 years ago, a 22-year-old white woman named Fannie Taylor told the Levy County sheriff that a Black man had assaulted her. Soon a mob of between 400 and 500 people was searching the woods around Rosewood, a community of about 30 Black families east of Cedar Key. Suspicion had fallen on Jesse Hunter, a Black man who recently had escaped from a chain gang.

He was never found, but after seven days of violence, six Blacks and two Whites had been killed. The homes, stores and churches of Rosewood lay in ashes, and the surviving residents had fled through the woods. Ms. Mortin's uncle, Sam Carter, was the first to die.

A 1993 investigation that the state commissioned during a debate over proposed reparations to the Rosewood survivors called the violence "a tragedy of American democracy and the American legal system."



Historic photo of Rosewood massacre survivor Robie A. Mortin, as she helps unveil the Rosewood historical marker at a dedication May 4, 2004. *Photo courtesy, RosewoodFlorida.com*

Rosewood is little more than a historical marker at the side of State Road 24 now, but Robie Mortin is still very much here. Her mind is sharp, and she's not afraid to speak it. Even though she spent 13 years in Okeechobee after her late husband's retirement and now lives in a West Palm Beach apartment building, she still considers herself a lifelong resident of Riviera Beach and still owns a home there. She would be worth a visit, even if she hadn't arrived in 1925 as a Rosewood refugee.

"My daddy got up that Tuesday morning, and he went to work, and this is when he learned all about this," she says.

"I want you all to get yourselves dressed," she remembers him telling her and her older sister. "Put on all your heavy clothes and everything because we got to get out of here."

"He didn't say anything about Uncle Sammy out there hanging in the tree," she says.

According to the 1993 report, Sam Carter, 45, allegedly had been seen with Jesse Hunter. When he failed to answer the posse's questions to its satisfaction, "his body was riddled with bullets and then hanged from a tree."



Tulsa, Oklahoma. June 1, 1921. Thirty-five blocks in the Greenwood district, then referred to as The Black Wall Street, razed during race riots. Photo: Tulsa Historical Society

Ms. Mortin, her sister Sedie, and her grandmother—Sam Carter's mother—flagged down a train in the woods and traveled to Otter Creek, where they caught another train to Chiefland. "The name of that train I never will forget," she says. "It was the Sunny Jim. Sunny Jim came east."

Ms. Mortin's grandmother went back to Rosewood long enough to see the destruction and conclude it was no place to live anymore.

"We had a car," she says, "and a gallon of gas at that time would take you a long, long way. We were on the highway about a week."

She traveled with her grandmother, her two older sisters, and a brother-in-law, living on rabbit and squirrel, sleeping beneath a tarpaulin by the side of the road until they reached the little town of Eau Gallie, just north of Melbourne, where her brother-in-law found work on the railroad.

Eventually, they found their way to Kelsey City, a new development that now is Lake Park. But Ms. Mortin still calls it Kelsey City. They settled just south of town and soon found that others from Rosewood had done the same.

"There was a big pineapple grove in there from the railroad all the way across the highway," she says. "There was section houses right on the railroad tracks. It was pitiful. There was nothing here but a bunch of poor folks that had nothing."

Her grandmother bought three lots for \$25 each, and they settled, and stayed. And Riviera Beach became a city.

“Now you’re supposed to pay your bills like everybody else, but when I first came we didn’t have to do that because there wasn’t anything there to pay for. No water, no electricity, no anything else. Outhouse? Oh, boy, you better have, because you sure didn’t have an inhouse at that time!”

In time, she found domestic work in Palm Beach and learned about rich people.

“I learned that some of them are nice and some are not, but it was a job,” she says. “I started out working for \$5 and ended up with the big money, \$89 a week.”

She was married twice, raised four successful children, buried one and lived to see the state grant \$2.1 million in reparations to the Rosewood survivors. She got \$150,000 of it, but it hasn’t changed her style.

“I didn’t never want to be rich,” she says. “Rich people have problems. I think you can have too much money. I do.”

And she still knows what happened that New Year’s Day all those years ago. The truth, Ms. Mortin says, is that Fannie Taylor was beaten by a White railroad man with whom she’d been carrying on for a while. He would jump off the train on its way to Cedar Key, visit with Ms. Taylor while her husband was at work, then jump back on when the train came back east.

“My Aunt Sarah worked for that woman and was right there when it happened,” she says. “Aunt Sarah was right there boiling clothes, working for her, and she always seen this man coming and going. But she wouldn’t open her mouth. She was afraid to say anything, and I don’t blame her.”

The official report found several other former Rosewood residents or their descendants who say the same.

On Oct. 5, the city of Riviera Beach rededicated one of its few institutions older than Robie Mortin: the newly renovated Sugarhill Cemetery on 30th Street, where the earliest bodies were buried sometime before 1920.

The loudest applause went to Ms. Mortin, who told the assembled dignitaries, “If anybody knows the history of Riviera Beach, I do.”

Now she wants to document the Rosewood survivors who settled here after fleeing the violence. “My daddy’s buried in Sugarhill,” she says, “and my oldest sister Esther’s buried there. I lost one of my little babies when she was just three-years-old, Annie Kate Smith, and she’s buried there. Oh, yes, when we got here, we met that cemetery there.”

—Ron Hayes,
The Palm Beach Post