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Rosewood: A Massacre, the Movies and the Obligations of Memory : It Took 70 Years, a Cast of Contentious Heroes and the Art of the Deal, but Justice Came at Last to the Black Survivors of a Racial Rampage in Northern Florida.

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Minnie Lee Langley was 9 years old when the world as she knew it came to an end. She had been born into an uncommonly independent African-American community on Florida's upper Gulf Coast just before World War I. Langley lived with her grandparents, and her prosperous extended family had a fine two-story house nearby, with a piano in the parlor and books on the shelves.

But in one week in 1923, all that was gone. On New Years Day, and for six days afterward, white men primed with moonshine and bent on vengeance flocked to the tiny town after a black man in the adjacent community of Sumner had been accused of assaulting a white woman. At least 8 people were killed, and the homes, businesses, schools and churches of an entire town--Rosewood, population 200--were leveled.

Langley barely escaped. Half-naked, she fled with her family into the swamps. There they watched while Rosewood blazed. "We seen the fires burning," she recalls, "that fire just leaping over the railroad." To her young eyes it was like Judgment Day.

Eighty-one now and yard-rake thin, childlike once again with age, Langley is transported back to that place when she speaks of it, her voice strained yet steady. She remembers watching as a white man saved her uncle's life, wrestling him away from a lynching party. She can still see her 32-year-old cousin, Sylvester Carrier, as he pulled her into a closet under the stairway in the Carrier house. Cousin Syl told her to duck and propped a rifle on her shoulder. "When the crackers burst the door open," she says, "he shot the first one that came in."

But "the crackers" didn't stop coming, some from miles away, some from out of state. Days later, in the swamps, Langley remembers, "they were hunting for us. Anybody they saw in the woods, they just shot them down. They didn't care who they were killing." Langley's grandfather would die in the carnage; her family was separated. She lost everything.

For almost 70 years, the events that Minnie Lee Langley can recall so vividly lay half-buried. Whitewashed news account drew national attention for a time, even making the front page of the New York Times. But no one, black or white, was ever indicted for any crime. A local all-white grand jury interviewed 35 witnesses but claimed there was a lack of evidence of wrongdoing.

The survivors scattered quickly--to Tampa, Jacksonville, Gainesville, Miami and beyond--too afraid, battered or cynical to try to reclaim their property and their lives. Those who could bear to speak of it passed down the story, telling their children about the terror and their losses.

Local whites told their own version of the massacre behind closed doors, and there was talk of grisly souvenirs--body parts--kept in Mason jars and showed off from time to time. "I've seen them," claims Robin Raftis, a writer and former editor of a small north Florida weekly newspaper. "Penises, testicles, fingers, even a toe. You name it, they jarred it."

But when it came to outsiders, the victims and participants joined in a conspiracy of silence and shame. Rosewood had become a forgotten chapter of Southern history. Then last winter, the forgotten was finally officially remembered. Minnie Lee Langley and a handful of other survivors sat in a hearing room in the Florida state capital in Tallahassee, and testified to what had happened to them and to Rosewood in 1923. Two months later, Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles signed into law the Rosewood Claims Bill. In an unprecedented act of Southern contrition, the bill set aside more than \$2 million in reparations for Langley and other survivors.

The struggle to bare the secret, to dig up the buried past, to bring Minnie Lee Langley and the others into that hearing room to gain a measure of belated justice is a story almost as compelling as the Rosewood saga itself. In it, the survivors stand with tragic dignity, but around them swirl ego clashes, competing self-interests, suspicion and charges of racism on all sides. As the survivors tried to tell their tale, and officialdom tried to figure out what to do about it, a small group of men slugged it out on the sidelines to see who would be the hero of the contemporary drama.

Los Angeles was burning. A jury had just acquitted the four police officers who had beaten Rodney G. King, and racial tensions were erupting there and across the nation. In Miami, police were out in force as producer Michael O'McCarthy nervously drove through an African-American neighborhood looking for Lee Ruth Davis. O'McCarthy thought it ironic: After having spent a year off-and-on searching for Rosewood survivors, he'd finally found one--was on his way to see her--and the backdrop was this new conflagration of race and justice denied.

Like most Floridians, and the rest of the world, O'McCarthy would have never heard of Rosewood had Gary Moore, a journalist with the St. Petersburg Times, not passed through the nearby town of Cedar Key in 1982 and asked local residents why the area was all white. Shocked and intrigued by the answer, the reporter spent the next two years exploring the question full time.

Moore's first painstaking account of the massacre, written with Faulknerian flourish, laid out how Rosewood had come to vanish. He told of the purported assault, which blacks insisted had been carried out by a white man. He told of the blood-lust that possessed the mob as it rampaged through the town, killing black people indiscriminately. And he told of Sylvester Carrier's courage in fighting back when his home was besieged, which so infuriated the white attackers that they took the violence to another level. The story inspired a "60 Minutes" segment in 1983 and was optioned for the movies. But then it sank again into obscurity.

O'McCarthy, an independent producer who'd toiled without great success in Hollywood, first heard of Rosewood in 1991, four years after returning to his home state. At the time he was packaging TV movies about serial killers. At 48, O'McCarthy was starting to thicken around the middle, his dark hair turning gray. But he retained enough of his youthful good looks to take modeling assignments. It was a good thing, too--his movie earnings needed the help.

When he learned from a producer colleague that the Rosewood film project had fizzled, O'McCarthy drove immediately to the Gulf Hammock, the region of swamp and forest where Rosewood once had stood. A green highway sign marked the spot, but all he saw was a trailer park, cow pastures and a restored Victorian house, which had been left standing in 1923 because its owners were white. Rosewood's other structures had been reduced to scattered brick foundations hidden by overgrowth. The red cedars that gave the town its name crowded the landscape, as if trying to reclaim the land.

O'McCarthy headed into Sumner, where he asked questions at a general store, and then on to Cedar Key, nine miles west. He sensed a reticence whenever Rosewood was mentioned. "It was like incest in the family," he says. This was no mere historical event, he realized. People who participated in the violence still lived in the area, he was warned, and asking about Rosewood could be dangerous.

From Moore's article and a transcript of the "60 Minutes" episode, O'McCarthy came up with a list of Rosewood survivors. When he returned to his home in Miami Beach, he began working the phones. He would have to find people with first-hand knowledge of the massacre willing to sell him the rights to their stories.

He tried to enlist the help of civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition and the Southern Poverty Law Center. Their resources and reputations could only boost his efforts, and there was another important consideration. O'McCarthy knew that the first Rosewood movie had fallen through partly because it was a period piece. If these organizations were willing not just to investigate Rosewood but to take it on as a cause, it would give the story a contemporary framework and the narrative of a crusade, which, he figured, would make a movie much more salable.

Not that O'McCarthy was being entirely mercenary. He was a former political editor of the L.A. Free Press who had befriended Black Panthers and protested the Vietnam War. In 1982, he was the national spokesman for a veteran's hunger strike designed to bring attention to their issues. From his perspective, the unresolved crimes of 1923 mirrored unresolved issues of the late 20th Century--problems of race, sex and class. "If you mix these elements together," he says, "it sets off a kind of nuclear reaction, it triggers all the madness in every participant's mind."

At first, every organization he contacted for help turned him down. "Your objectives are laudable, and we believe the truth should be pursued," an NAACP executive wrote in late 1991. "Unfortunately, our limited resources both in financial and staff terms rule out our active participation."

On his own, O'McCarthy wasn't having much luck tracking down cooperative survivors. He couldn't afford to devote full time to the project, and, like the residents of the Gulf Hammock, the victims of Rosewood weren't always anxious to talk--they feared reprisals or simply didn't want to dredge up the painful past. Gary Moore offered him one good lead--a Tampa family directly related to Sylvester Carrier. But Moore also warned O'McCarthy that the family was contentious--one aged survivor had run him out of her yard rather than talk to an outsider about what happened. McCarthy decided to stay clear of them.

Finally, about a year after he began working on the Rosewood project, O'McCarthy turned up Lee Ruth Davis. He heard that she was living in Miami, and he made contact through the simplest of research tools--the phone book. When he called, she sounded ready to step forward, almost as if she'd been hoping someone would ask her about what had happened in 1923. Davis welcomed O'McCarthy to her modest house, offered him iced tea and then proceeded to describe her experience in the horrifying detail of first-hand experience.

Davis was 8 years old in 1923. Her father, forced to flee, left her and three of her siblings in the care of John and Mary Wright, a white family who saved many women and children. Mary Wright treated the young ones as if they were her own, feeding them, calming them. But the children panicked one day while left alone during the rampage and fled, taking refuge for a while in the swamps. "This is a terrible story," Davis would say in a sworn statement in 1993. "It is the first time in my life that I see people with guns. . . . We all got down on our bellies and crawled. I don't know how far we crawled on the stomach. We tried to keep people from seeing us through the bushes."

Not only did Davis sign her rights over to O'McCarthy the evening they met, but she also agreed to speak out in any other forum necessary to win recompense. And she gave him what would turn out to be another crucial lead: the phone number of her cousin, Minnie Lee Langley. Langley was one of the few people still alive who had been in the Carrier house when Sylvester fought back. Now O'McCarthy had a human link to that pivotal part of the story, and one who like Davis was very willing to talk. By the time he was done interviewing Langley, he had "a picture that was very concrete and very clear and at the same time filled with conjecture, mystery, lies, deceit--it had all the things that we think of in Southern history having to do with the races."

All that remained was for him to somehow get the wheels of justice rolling, to get these women represented in a court of law and to get them a measure of justice they had so far been denied. Once again, O'McCarthy's incessant networking on Rosewood paid off. He wrangled an introduction to Steve Hanlon, a lawyer who was making a name for himself representing underdogs in high-profile cases at Holland & Knight, Florida's largest law firm and one of its most prestigious. When Hanlon agreed to represent Davis and Langley pro bono, it appeared for the first time that O'McCarthy's crusade in behalf of the survivors--and his movie--wasn't just a pipe dream.

But there was one other thing: O'McCarthy believed he'd improve his film's chances of being made if its hero were white. Hanlon would have fit the bill. But O'McCarthy had already decided to make himself the hero. He planned to model a character after himself, a white knight out to uncover the secret of Rosewood.

Arnett Doctor is angry. A stern and religious man with a gray goatee, a shaved, square head and a withering glare, he all but simmers in a perpetual state of rage. Perhaps it stands to reason. The 51-year-old retired Tampa businessman grew up in the shadow of Rosewood--his great-grandfather was Ed Goins, the second largest landowner in Rosewood and owner of a turpentine still that supplied up to 50 jobs. Sylvester Carrier was his uncle, and Minnie Lee Langley his cousin. His mother, Philomena, was in the Carrier house the night of the attack, and her grandmother, Sarah, did not survive it.

Although Doctor has done well in life, he fumes about how much further ahead he would have been had Rosewood been left in peace. "My great-grandfather was the major employer in Rosewood and his sons and his daughters were fairly well educated people, and then this atrocity occurred and bango! My mother and her brother and her sister--no education. My mother's generation was cut off. All of a sudden my mother had to start scrubbing floors."

Well before O'McCarthy ever heard of the massacre, Doctor had had the idea that the "Rosewood Family"--the survivors and their descendants--should seek redress from the state of Florida. In 1985, Doctor presented the notion at his family's annual reunion.

"I made an information packet and passed it out," he says. "Most people threw it away." His own mother had made it clear that she preferred her family not to mention Rosewood. She had been the one who'd chased Gary Moore out of her yard. Doctor decided to honor her wishes as long as she was alive.

She had been dead almost two years when Doctor first heard of O'McCarthy in early 1993. The producer was steadily trying to generate interest in his movie and the Rosewood issue, and he appeared with Langley and Davis on "The Maury Povich Show." On national TV, O'McCarthy did what comes naturally to a Hollywood producer--he simplified the story. While he didn't exactly say that the two women with him were the sole survivors of the massacre, he implied that any others were scattered with the wind, their whereabouts unknown and unknowable. Langley and Davis, it was clear, were meant to be the beneficiaries of the legal case, and--along with O'McCarthy--the stars of his film.

Doctor's sister Yvonne fired off an angry letter to Cousin Lee Ruth, criticizing the "lies" that had been told on the air. Playing on the survivors' old fears of white reprisals, she warned: "You know Lee Ruth, we all have to be careful, because you never know to whom you're speaking and in fact, to whom they are acquainted. There is still alot (sic) of hate crimes being committed today."

Doctor contacted Holland & Knight after the telecast, demanding that his group be included in any legal action. Doctor's Rosewood family would become the decisive majority in the legal machinations.

Sometime later, Doctor and O'McCarthy had a single telephone conversation. Circling each other warily, they discussed the possibility of Doctor's group coming into the movie deal. But the two men couldn't reach an agreement. As Doctor explained later, he had already written the producer off as someone out to "bamboozle" the survivors and make a buck.

While O'McCarthy continued struggled to keep his movie on track, Doctor began to conduct his own negotiations with Hollywood. Slowly, O'McCarthy was being frozen out of a process he had set in motion.

Shortly after Hanlon met with Doctor, the Rosewood survivors' legal strategy was set. They decided to get a bill introduced in the Legislature modeled after the federal act that had awarded reparations to Japanese Americans placed in World War II internment camps.

By early 1993, the claims bill was ready to be filed. It asserted that state officials had known about the massacre yet did nothing to stop it, and it called for erection of a memorial and for the payment of restitution to survivors and their children. But the sponsors missed a deadline for filing the bill. It would have to wait another year.

Meanwhile, opposition to the idea of reparations was growing. It was all well and good to have considered reparations for two survivors, but where would it stop? As the number of known survivors grew, opponents grumbled that restitution might bankrupt the state. And what about other historical injustices and other claims, from Seminole Indians, the descendants of lynching victims, and who knew what else?

All along, many north Florida whites had been quick to trivialize the violence as the work of “rednecks” who “let booze get the best of them.” Others repeated the stories handed down by their parents--that the trouble at Rosewood had been caused by armed blacks fighting a guerrilla war against stalwart whites. The claimants, it was said, were liars with dollar signs in their eyes.

Even those who believed the survivors’ side of the story weren’t sure that payment was necessary: “The people lost their land because they didn’t maintain it and pay taxes,” reasoned Robin Raftis. “It was their choice not to come back.”

In the face of such contention, and under pressure to do something despite the bungled bill filing, Florida House Speaker Bolley L. Johnson in 1993 authorized a study to establish the details of the massacre and to determine what blame, if any, could rightly be laid on the state.

As five historians opened their investigation, the age of those who could have witnessed or been involved in the event lent a sense of urgency to the task. Many of Gary Moore’s original sources were dead and gone. Lee Ruth Davis had died in August of that year.

The study team faced further difficulty when they approached Moore in hopes of gaining access to taped interviews now a decade old. Moore, who had been unable to get a book deal based on his research, reportedly demanded \$10,000 in exchange for letting the government listen to his interviews. The investigators balked; and Moore kept the tapes to himself.

Nevertheless, the team soldiered on, talking to witnesses and studying contemporary accounts, finally confirming basic facts of the slaughter: that the alleged assault was the catalyst, that it was whites who started the killing. Various sources had put the number of people killed anywhere from seven to 200. The study could find documented evidence of only eight deaths. It acknowledged, though, that the number could be higher.

The report found that Rosewood may not have been a black heaven on earth, as some survivors have portrayed it, but it had been a stable community of 25 to 30 black families with three churches, a Masonic hall, a baseball diamond and some businesses.

Lives had indeed been saved by heroic efforts, including the actions of John and Mary White, and of white conductors who stopped a train that ran through the swamp so that blacks hiding there could board it and be taken to safety.

The property the victims left behind--the land and belongings--ended up being acquired by some of the white landowners, including the Wrights. There was no evidence the blacks were ever compensated.

Grisly murders and mutilations had certainly taken place--including the unprovoked killing of Minnie Lee Langley's crippled grandfather, James. During a lull in the shootout at the Carrier house, he had helped her and others escape into the swamp. He was later caught by the mob, taken to the graves of his family members and shot to death, execution style.

One thing that didn't hold up was the often-told tale of Sylvester Carrier's survival. Langley claims to have heard his retreating laughter in the woods as she hid upstairs, and Arnett Doctor has always asserted that Sylvester survived into the 1960s, that he was spirited away from the carnage at the Carrier house in a coffin by black Masons. But the evidence turned up by the state indicated that Sylvester was dead on the first floor of the house when the mob finally took it.

Most important, the study did lay a portion of the blame for the violence squarely on the state. Five days into the disturbance, before the town had been burned to the ground, Gov. Cary Hardee had considered calling out the Florida National Guard. Instead, he accepted the local sheriff's word that everything was under control.

Despite confirmed reports of deaths, and with a mob of between 200 and 300 armed white men still roaming the countryside, Hardee went hunting. That inaction, said the study, allowed the steamrolling rampage to culminate in the total destruction of Rosewood.

The report concluded: "Rosewood was a tragedy of American democracy and the American legal system."

On the heels of the study, legislative sponsors last December sought \$7 million in compensation for victims. The claims process provided just the forum O'McCarthy had wanted. Before the Legislature could consider the bill, a government fact-finder, would hold hearings and then make a recommendation.

The hearings, held late last winter, were extraordinary--one by one, the elderly survivors told their stories. Minnie Lee Langley was among them, as was Wilson Hall, whose father had owned a sugar cane mill, grist mill and smokehouse and operated a small store. After his family was forced to flee, Wilson, age 7, was eventually reduced to scavenging on garbage trucks. Opposing the claim were several whites whose fathers had been involved. They insisted that Hall, Langley and the others were lying.

As in a court of law, Hanlon went head-to-head with Assistant Atty. Gen. James Peters on the issue of whether the state had a moral obligation to compensate the victims. Although Chiles supported compensation, Peters questioned the thoroughness and accuracy of the study. He argued that even if the state had not taken proper action to halt the carnage, the events were too old for the current government to be held accountable.

Ironically, his cause was aided by Gary Moore. It had been Moore's article that first publicly attached the word "massacre" to what happened in Rosewood. Now he appeared before the fact-finder, Richard Hixson, to bitterly blast the researchers' findings.

In his own writings, Moore had always emphasized the gaps in the available record, the distortions and myths that were propagated over the years by both blacks and whites. Since the appearance of his original story, he had become, if anything, more enamored of the notion that there was no knowable truth. It was in everybody's interest to embellish what happened, to say the town was more prosperous than it was, to exaggerate the number of deaths, to make this person or that more heroic than anyone possibly could have been. Only his tapes held the truth. And, since government researchers had not listened to the tapes, the bill under consideration merely endorsed the myths of one Rosewood faction, he said.

In the end, Hixson recommended payment, saying the state had a "moral obligation." But he greatly scaled back the amount. In April, the bill passed the House 71-40 and the Senate 26-14.

The \$2.1-million bill awards \$150,000 for emotional trauma to each of four specifically named survivors--Langley and Hall along with Arnett Goins and Willie Evans. Other survivors have until Dec. 31 to apply for compensation. In addition, money is being set aside to compensate families who lost property and to fund scholarships for the descendants of victims. Relatives of the survivors cheered and hugged after the victory, even though the bill awarded much less than they had requested. In his comments after the bill passed, Doctor didn't mention O'McCarthy at all. Just as the producer, in some of his statements to the press, had portrayed himself as a crusading white knight, Doctor has implied that he, Arnett Doctor, had been the catalyst or that Lee Ruth had contacted Hanlon on her own. The producer had become the invisible man. While joyous Rosewood survivors and their supporters celebrated, O'McCarthy, while pleased with the bill's passage, fumed over being left out. "I guess I was the wrong color," he says.

Rosewood, in the parlance of Hollywood, has become "hot." Stories on the massacre and restitution have been featured on national television, in numerous newspaper articles and in Esquire magazine. Suzanne DePasse, producer of "Lonesome Dove," purchased an option on O'McCarthy's rights and story package a year ago, but never went into production with it. At press time, O'McCarthy's agent at Creative Artists Agency was preparing to pitch it elsewhere. "I've put it into the hands of the two most powerful entities I know: God and CAA," says O'McCarthy, who has been plugging away on other TV and commercial projects with moderate success. At least two other Rosewood movies are said to be in development.

After 71 years of bearing the burden and the pain of Rosewood alone and in obscurity, a handful of survivors has finally gotten recognition from the state and the world at large that they suffered a great injustice, endured a terrible loss.

But the depth of that loss, and the advanced age and health of the victims, makes the victory cause for muted celebration at best. For Minnie Lee, her years in Rosewood were a time of innocence, the last truly contented time of her life. She had planned to go to school to become a nurse. Her grandmother, with whom she lived after her mother died in childbirth, was going to help her.

But after the massacre, her plans were derailed. She spent three or four days in the cold, swampy woods, staying out of sight of the gunmen. Her grandmother, Emma, who was slightly wounded in the siege on the house, got separated in the tumult.

Langley was one of the lucky ones picked up by the train conductors. She remembers them gently lifting her up into the stopped car. Of those who helped her toward the end of the ordeal, she says now, with a smile: "Some of them were too good to be white."

Word of the massacre had reached her relatives in Gainesville, 46 miles away, by the time the train arrived. She found them waiting at the station. She eventually was reunited with her grandmother, but Emma died within a year. Family members consider her an uncounted victim. Minnie Lee had to leave school to take a job. She worked most of her life in a brush factory. She cries, still, when she talks about what happened.

“I’ll tell you the truth: After what happened to my grandmother and my grandfather, it took my life,” she says, “because I loved them.”