

Tampa Bay Times

The last house in Rosewood

Owner is ready to move but worried about drawing attention



When Fuji Scoggins, 84, moved into the three-story Victorian home on the road to Cedar Key, she had no idea about the history of the house -- or the hero who once lived there. {MARTHA ASECIO RHINE | Times}

By **Lane DeGregory** *Times staff*

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ROSEWOOD — The house went on the market at the end of May — a three-story Victorian with stained-glass windows, surrounded by 35 acres. But there's no sign in the yard.

A state plaque is out on the road to Cedar Key, where tourists stop to take pictures. And others drive by, shooting holes into the metal marker.

“We aren’t advertising it much locally,” says the owner, Fuji Scoggins. “We don’t want any trouble from the neighbors.”

When she and her husband moved there 40 years ago, they didn’t know about the history of the home, what the former owner did — or the town of 300 African Americans that a white mob torched into oblivion.

They had no idea that their house was the only remnant of Rosewood, Fla.

“Not until that reporter came around,” says Fuji. “Then, all of a sudden, we had TV crews and people from all over jumping the fence.”

On a hot, humid afternoon, she sinks into a red rocker on her screened porch, tired from sweeping cobwebs, trying to get the place ready to show. “I’m 84,” she says. “I just can’t take care of it anymore.”

Her daughter and son-in-law are the Realtors. They wrote two separate listings: one for those who might want a big, old home with lots of land; the other for the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The first listing describes a place “surrounded by majestic oaks, pecan trees, fruit trees.”

[The second](#) says, “This is a property that should be preserved and the historical significance should never be forgotten.”

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For years, Fuji hated the house.

It was too far out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by dense woods of palms and palmettos and cypress swamp. The only neighbors were the hogs, deer and turkeys her husband loved to hunt.

Plus, the home was too big for just the two of them.

“Please,” Fuji kept begging her husband, “let this place be for vacations. Let’s keep our house in Ozona.” But he refused.

They had moved in during the winter of 1978; left her grown children a two-hour drive away.

On weekends, he sold honey to travelers heading into Cedar Key. And she waited tables at seafood restaurants in the tiny downtown, nine miles away.

“I know everyone here,” says Fuji, who was born in Japan. “Everyone is always nice.” Except that one time, her son-in-law reminds her. Her smile fades; her shoulders stoop. She doesn’t like to talk about that.

She doesn’t really like to talk about Rosewood, either. “So much sadness.”

But if you beg her, she will tell you what she knows. No, what she heard. No one really knows the whole story. For 60 years, no one talked about it.

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In early 1982, *St. Petersburg Times* reporter Gary Moore drove up to Cedar Key, searching for a story.

He didn’t know to ask about Rosewood. But soon people started wondering, whispering: Had he heard about what happened here?

Moore spent months tracking down survivors, finding newspaper clippings, dredging up deeds. He hiked miles through tangled marshes and found tracks from the abandoned railroad.

And, of course, he knocked on the door of the only house around, which sat off the south edge of State Road 24.



St. Petersburg Times reporter Gary Moore started reporting on the Rosewood Massacre in early 1982.

Click here to [read Gary Moore's article](#) as it appeared in the Floridian section of the *St. Petersburg Times* on July 25, 1982.

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Fannie Taylor was white, 22, with two small children. She and her lumberman husband lived in Sumner, a few miles west of Rosewood. On Jan. 1, 1923, she woke her neighbors, screaming that a black man had broken into her house and attacked her. Her husband gathered a group of men, who followed a tracking dog to the railroad.

Which led to Rosewood.

“The story of what happened next,” Moore wrote, “is a maze of conflicting tales ... ”

Some said the intruder had escaped from a chain gang. A black woman who washed Fannie’s laundry said Fannie had a white lover, who had hit her that morning. There was no black man. Just a story to explain a black eye.

But no one stopped to ask questions. Or wait for the sheriff.

The hound raced into an open house and sniffed some shoes, Moore wrote, then ran back out and stopped at a row of wagon tracks. Had the homeowner harbored that fugitive? “Who was in your house?” the white men demanded. When the black man said, “Nobody,” the mob tied him to a Model T and dragged him down the dirt road.



Then they hunted down the wagon owner, cut off his ears and hand, hanged him in a tree and shot off his face.

All week, killings continued. The mob grew to more than 300, drawn by newspaper headlines of a “negro assaulter.” Black families huddled in their homes and barricaded the doors. Some shot back.

So the white men poured kerosene on all the houses and set them ablaze, forcing black women and children to flee into the swamp. Some shivered for days in the dark, wet and cold, waiting for the shooting to stop.

Others escaped to the only house still standing, the one owned by the white storekeeper. Wright hid some people in his attic, some in a secret closet in the master bedroom. He lowered others into his deep well out back.

“If it hadn’t been for this house, we wouldn’t be here,” a survivor named Lee Ruth Davis told *60 Minutes* in 1983. “We wouldn’t have had anywhere to hide.”

Survivors said the storekeeper also helped persuade two white conductors to stop their freight train in Rosewood, in the early morning of Jan. 6.

After it was all over, officials reported that eight people had been killed — two white, six black.

Survivors counted up to 27 dead, said a dozen were piled in a mass grave in the woods. No one was ever arrested. No black families ever returned to Rosewood.



A mob of more than 300 white men torched the black town of Rosewood in January 1923, destroying churches, a school, Masonic lodge and at least 30 houses. [Times file]

“We didn’t talk about it,” survivor Minnie Lee Langley told *60 Minutes*. “Because I didn’t want my grandkids to know what the whites done to us.”

Wright, Moore wrote, "lived in the ruins of Rosewood till he died, served as undercover emissary to his dispossessed black neighbors who lived in secrecy in distant places, and for a while, kept a pistol on every table."

Ostracized by white townsfolk, Wright started drinking. One night, he passed out. They found him on his porch, frozen to death.

"For the longest time," Fuji said, "he didn't even have a tombstone in town."



When CBS reporter Ed Bradley filmed from Fuji's front porch, the story made international news. Survivors staged a reunion.

A decade later, the Florida legislature commissioned a report about what really happened in Rosewood. Researchers determined that officials had failed to protect residents. The state issued checks of up to \$150,000 each to 10 people who could prove they lived in Rosewood in 1923 and set up a scholarship for survivors' relatives. It was the first time a state had paid compensation to African Americans for racial injustice.

A book about Rosewood, *Like Judgment Day*, came out in 1996. Director John Singleton turned the story into a movie, starring Jon Voight as John Wright.

“That’s when the tourists really started coming by,” Fuji said. “We had busloads from as far away as California.”

In 2004, she watched Gov. Jeb Bush erect a historical highway marker at the end of her driveway. Within days, she saw truckloads of teenagers taking aim at the names of the victims. “They knocked down that sign many, many times,” Fuji said. “Sometimes, I got scared.”

She never read the book. Or saw the movie. “I was working double shifts,” she said. “I never had time.”

And in all those years, with all those reporters, historians and tourists, no one ever asked about the woman who lived in that house -- who had survived a different massacre.

The blasts were blinding, she remembers. For days, bombs rained down. “I saw a lot of dead people,” Fuji said.

She was 10 when planes attacked her island of Saipan, where Americans wanted to build a World War II air base. Her house was destroyed. Her parents and their eight children had to sleep on the beach. “I don’t know for how long -- until we were captured, and they put us in barbed-wire fences.”

She was so hungry, she ate maggots. So thirsty, she couldn’t spit. But when a U.S. soldier offered his canteen, she refused. “I was afraid of Americans. I thought it was poison,” she said. “So the soldier drank it himself, to show me it was safe. Then I drank and drank and drank.”

When her family was freed, they headed to Okinawa to find relatives. “There, things got even worse,” Fuji said. Bombs obliterated that island the next year. “We stayed forever in a shed,” she said. “The roof leaked, with all that rain.”

As a teenager, she lied and said she could read and write English, then dropped out of school to serve food on the Air Force base. She married an American, had a son with him. In 1957, for the first time, she saw the United States.

They landed in California, had a daughter. But Fuji’s husband suffered from his time in the war and had to be committed to a mental institution. A friend from church introduced her to another serviceman, Doyle Scoggins, who had grown up in Palm Harbor, Fla. -- and wanted to move back.

“I did what I had to do,” Fuji said. “I survived.”

In 2002 — five years after the Rosewood movie, two years before Jeb Bush dedicated the road sign — Fuji's husband told her he was leaving. He had reconnected with an old flame and would sell Fuji the house and property for \$100. "I didn't expect a divorce," she said. "I thought we got along real good."

For 16 years, she kept cutting the five-acre lawn with a push mower, scraping paint from the porch, chopping wood for the stove. She left her husband's framed photo on her nightstand and refused to take off her thin, gold wedding band. She never moved, she said, because "I never thought he was going to stay away."

Her children have been trying for years to get her to sell the house and move near them. They worry about her all the way out there. And they are scared she will be subjected to more prejudice.



In 2004, Rosewood survivor Robie Mortin came to see Florida Gov. Jeb Bush dedicate a highway sign to the victims of the Rosewood massacre. The marker sits at the end of Fuji Scoggins' driveway, on the only road to Cedar Key. [Times (2004)] [Times (2004)]

A while back, when Fuji was still waiting tables in the still mostly white town of Cedar Key, an older customer wearing a WWII ball cap kept glaring at her, snapping each time she approached. Finally, he hissed, "I hate your people."

Fuji stepped back, dropped her head, then looked up — and looked him in the eye. "I understand," she remembers saying. "I'm very sorry that you feel that way. But war is war. It's not the people."

She said she didn't cry. But he did.

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The historic house includes four bedrooms, two baths, stained-glass windows and a wrap-around porch. Its owner is willing to sell all the furnishings with it. [MARTHA ASENCIO RHINE | Times]

Word got out five years ago: Fuji was thinking of selling her house. Neighbors heard that a group of African Americans wanted to buy it and turn it into a shrine.

Soon, one dropped by with a warning: You don't want another riot around here.

That same year, 2013, a black council member in nearby Bronson reported that someone had thrown a Ziploc bag into her yard, with a rock and leaflet from the Traditionalist American Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Four other African Americans found the same threats on their doorsteps.

And at Cedar Key School, for the first time anyone could remember, a black student was elected to the homecoming court. But the mother of the white girl who was chosen as his partner refused to let her daughter ride in the car with him.

“People are trying to keep things quiet,” says Greg Dichtas, Fuji's son-in-law. “There's still a lot of discrimination around here.”

“I thought it was over,” says Fuji’s daughter, Connie Dichtas. “Shouldn’t that all be in the past?”

“But around here, it’s still an open wound.”

The last house in Rosewood still has its original floor-to-ceiling windows, which Wright climbed out of to stand on the porch and fire at the mob. The horse-and-buggy wallpaper still blankets the foyer. In the covered well, where the children hid, clear water still bubbles from the ground.

All four bedrooms, and two baths, are still decorated with the furniture Fuji inherited when she moved there. If the next buyer wants it, she says, it’s theirs.

Fuji’s son, John R. Smith, hopes a university turns the house into an educational campus.

Her son-in-law fears someone might want to build a campground on the property or, worse, a Stuckey’s.

Last month, just before listing it, he met with historian Sherry DuPree, who runs the [Rosewood Heritage Foundation](#). She is writing grants, talking to the state’s humanities council, trying to raise money to buy the house. “Every culture has its own Rosewood,” she says. “We need to keep the word alive, to protect this place and prove this town existed.”

Her group can’t afford the \$500,000 asking price. But they can’t afford to forget.

“We paid an architect to study that land. We could have a nice garden, buildings for classrooms and research,” she says. “Maybe even a small hotel.”

She knows not everyone would welcome the idea.

“But if those walls could talk, they would tell the story of cultures working together, a white man opening his doors to save his black neighbors.”

Edward Gonzalez-Tennant, an archaeology professor at the University of Central Florida, wants the home to be put in a public trust, repaired and turned into a museum. “It would be important to have it cover the history of Rosewood,” he says, “not just the riot.”

As neighbors were knocking on Fuji’s door, and historians were weighing in, the last survivor of Rosewood died in Jacksonville last month. Mary Hall Daniels was 3 years old when the mob killed her relatives and burned down her town. When she died at age 98, more than 350 people came to her funeral.

“Events like Rosewood live on in the minds and hearts of survivors and their descendants even after almost 100 years,” DuPree says. “We’re just trying to get the word out, to keep the story alive.”

Fuji sits quietly rocking, nodding as her son and son-in-law discuss the possibilities. She says she doesn't really know what the best future for her house would be. But she hopes someone steps in to save it soon.

“Whatever happens,” she says softly. “I just want it to go peaceful.”

Senior news researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this story



After her husband left, Fuji Scoggins kept up the sprawling house and yard alone. At 84, she still climbs the three stories of steep stairs every night to go to bed. [MARTHA ASECIO RHINE | Times]

Click [here for information about the Virtual Rosewood Project](#).

Click here to [read Gary Moore's article](#) as it appeared in the Floridian section of the St. Petersburg Times on July 25, 1982.



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As an enterprise writer, I seek stories about people in the shadows. Some put a face on news events and current issues. Others shine a light on people's private struggles and triumphs. Many are narratives, focusing on helpers and hope. I grew up in Washington, D.C. during the Watergate era and decided I wanted to be a journalist when I was six years old. I have worked at newspapers across the East Coast and have written for the Times for more than 20 years. In 2009, I won the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing for a story about a feral child. I teach around the world and host WriteLane, a podcast about non-fiction storytelling. In 2023, the University of Chicago Press published an annotated anthology of my Times stories: "The Girl in the Window" and Other True Tales. I'm married to my college crush, a drummer, and we raised our two sons in the tiny waterfront town of Gulfport. When I'm not talking to strangers, I enjoy camping at music festivals, going to the beach at sunset and playing with our two energetic puppies. I'd love to hear your story, or someone's you think I should share.