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PEOPLE ARE STILL TAKING SIDES, THIS TIME OVER HOLLYWOOD'S VERSION OF 1923 ATROCITY

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Wilson Hall has no intention of seeing the movie "Rosewood"—he knows the real story all too well.

Hall, now 82, was 8 years old during that first week of January 1923, when white mobs stormed into the west coast Florida town of Rosewood, lynched an undetermined number of its black citizens and torched its homes, forcing families such as Hall's to flee into the freezing nearby woods and swamps.

Hall recalls waiting in the cold with his mother, two sisters and two brothers for a harrowing 24 hours—2 a.m. to 2 a.m.—until they boarded a train for Gainesville, Fla., where his uncle lived. They left behind everything—his late father's 300-acre plantation and grocery store, a previously thriving black community—for years of searching garbage dumps for food. The memory still burns.

"I was one of the kids that didn't sleep much and didn't forget much," Hall says coolly from his home in Hilliard, Fla., where he owns a dance club.

But Hall isn't skipping director John Singleton's ("Boyz N the Hood") movie just to avoid reliving painful events. What he doesn't want to experience is Hollywood's version of his past, with added fictionalized episodes and characters such as a black gunslinger who fends off the mob on horseback.

"I would like the story of Rosewood to be told like it was, not some jackass riding out of the woods shooting at somebody," Hall says.

The video player is currently playing an ad.

Even before its release, "Rosewood" has stirred strong emotions among many Florida residents, both black and white. Some welcome the film for spotlighting one of the state's—and nation's—most shameful episodes. Others wish the whole incident would stay in the past.

Yet it is unlikely to do so now that the movie is opening nationwide Friday.

“By our not passing on what happened in Rosewood earlier, we have allowed the legacy of Rosewood to repeat itself,” says Arnett Doctor, 54, whose mother witnessed the violence firsthand. “Now that we’re talking about it and exposing the inequities of the past, it is allowing a healing process to happen and stopping the probability of those atrocities reoccurring in the future.”

The original atrocities followed the cry of a married young white woman, Fannie Taylor, that she was assaulted by a black man on New Year’s Eve 1922 in her home in Sumner, which neighbored the primarily black Rosewood. Although Taylor’s white lover is considered a more likely suspect, the movie and historical accounts agree that the local authorities concentrated their hunt on an escaped black convict named Jesse Hunter.

The sheriff and a growing mob followed bloodhounds into Rosewood and tore a young man from his sickbed to question him about Hunter. After being dragged by rope from the back of a car, the man identified a blacksmith named Sam Carter as having helped Hunter escape.

Carter apparently failed to provide the mob with any useful information about the escaped prisoner and became the first Rosewood casualty, fatally shot by one of the gang, dismembered and hanged. The following night the mob moved to the home of Sylvester Carrier, who previously had warned off some white men who had made lewd comments to his sisters.

Gunmen shot Carrier’s dog on the front lawn, then his mother, Sarah. When a pair from the mob tried to enter the house’s front door, Sylvester Carrier shot them to death, triggering a massive shootout that he may or may not have survived.

The retreating whites spread word of a black uprising, and during the next few days hooligans poured in from across Florida to destroy the town— while police did nothing and Gov. Cary Hardee went on a hunting trip.

The town was wiped out except for the home of John Wright, a white store owner who is said to have sheltered many blacks and arranged for the escape train. A historical commission hired by the state a few years ago concluded that the final death toll was six blacks and two whites, though others—including the “Rosewood” filmmakers—believe the number to be higher.

The nation’s major newspapers, including The New York Times and Chicago Tribune, reported the Rosewood violence, yet talk of the incident then disappeared for six decades. White Floridians weren’t exactly pushing to teach the tragedy in schools, and many survivors later expressed shame that they were driven from their homes.

Doctor, whose grandmother was Sarah Carrier, says his mother, Philomena Goins, told him and his sister the story of Rosewood when he was 5 but instructed them to keep a lid on it. “It was at her insistence that we not talk about it outside the family,” says Doctor, who began speaking out about Rosewood after his mother died in 1991.

Gary Moore, a white St. Petersburg Times reporter, opened the information floodgates with a long 1982 Sunday magazine article about Rosewood’s demise. A spate of publicity followed, including a “60 Minutes” piece, and a movie producer named Michael O’McCarthy acquired the rights to two of the survivors’ life stories.

Ironically, it was O’McCarthy’s desire that his movie have a happy ending that led to Rosewood’s survivors receiving some real-life justice from the state. O’McCarthy contacted Stephen Hanlon from Florida’s largest law firm, Holland & Knight, and encouraged him and partner Martha Barnett to propose a bill to compensate the Rosewood survivors for their losses of property and livelihood.

O’McCarthy eventually disappeared from the picture after a conflict with other survivors, but he got his hearings and resolution, anyway—although Singleton chose to focus his movie on the events of 1923 and reduced the legislative action to a footnote before the end credits.

In 1994, the legislature approved a \$2.1 million compensation package, including \$150,000 each for the living survivors of the rampage (fewer than 10 were known), \$500,000 to be shared by survivors’ descendants and \$100,000 a year in college scholarships.

But if the bill represented a state coming to terms with its past, all wounds have not yet healed, and some residents expect the movie to reopen them.

“I ain’t going to see it,” snaps Christy Thompson, who doesn’t appreciate outsiders trespassing near her Rosewood home every time the incident gets publicized. “I’m tired of people looking at me like I’m the guilty party, when I didn’t even live here back then and didn’t have any kinfolk living here.”

Singleton, who was signed to direct the movie by producer Jon Peters, says his primary purpose was “to tell the story that hadn’t been told on as large a scale as possible.” The story struck him as especially relevant because it deals with “using black people as scapegoats to all of America’s problems.

“Fannie Taylor saying she was raped or beat by a black man when she didn’t want to tell her husband that she had a fight with her lover is directly relatable to contemporary things, like Susan Smith saying a black man took her car and took her children when she murdered her children.”

The director interviewed several survivors, including Hall, and worked with Doctor as a consultant. Sticking to the facts, he says, was “very important,” but he did take some dramatic license: He and screenwriter Gregory Poirier invented Mann (Ving Rhames), a

burly World War I veteran who rides into town before the rioting, and the first you see of John Wright (Jon Voight), he's cheating on his wife with a young black clerk in his store.

That affair was imagined, Singleton says, but adds with a chuckle: "You never know."

Such a suggestion incenses Hall, whose mother worked for Wright before the store owner helped the family flee by train. "That's a damn lie," he says. "How could they release something like that? This is history. This is something that should be taught. People should be ashamed."

Gary Moore also accuses the movie of distortions, including suggesting the death toll could have been anywhere from 40 to 150. Moore says no survivor placed the total in that range.

"It's not a documentary," Singleton counters. "It's entertainment, but it's informative entertainment. It's a different kind of movie that's really going to make people go wild."

Which is what Michael D'Orso, a Norfolk, Va.-based journalist who wrote the 1996 book "Like Judgment Day: The Ruin and Redemption of a Town Called Rosewood" (Boulevard/Warner Bros.), fears.

"I think it's irresponsible," says the author, whose book in paperback boasts an introduction by Singleton and is the official tie-in to the movie.

"It's one thing to chatter over cocktails about whether Larry Flynt cared about the 1st Amendment or whether Evita really wore that dress, and it's another thing to look at black bodies swinging from trees like Christmas ornaments while a black Clint Eastwood blasts away white race mob members right and left, which is what happens in this movie."

Doctor, however, defends the movie as "powerful, passionate and extremely entertaining."

"The essence of what happened at Rosewood is depicted on screen. It's not 100 percent accurate, and it is not intended to be," he says.

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