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LOCAL

Remembering Rosewood

Racial terrorism erased a prospering black town, forgotten for nearly 60 years

Andrew Caplan andrew.caplan@gvillesun.com

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A cabin in Rosewood burns in this photo from a traveling display memorializing the 75th anniversary of the Rosewood Massacre. The display came to the Thomas Center in Gainesville in 2009.

The Rosewood Massacre smolders in infamy, a weeklong annihilation of an entire town and the slaughter of several of its black residents in rural Levy County.

It is established as one of the most barbaric injustices black people endured in Florida in the last 100 years, yet some people deny it ever occurred.

During the first week of January in 1923, the town of Rosewood was burned to the ground as a number of black people defended themselves from an angry white mob. More than 100 black people lost their homes or family members and sought refuge in other nearby cities.

“They were met with not just resistance but obliteration,” said archaeologist Edward Gonzalez-Tennant. “It’s a pattern that has emerged again and again.”

According to a 2015 report from the Equal Justice Initiative that reviewed lynching in 12 southern states, Florida has had the most lynchings per capita between the late 1800s through mid-1900s. At least six black people and two whites died in the racial terrorism at Rosewood.

For decades, researchers like Gonzalez-Tennant, as well as survivors and their descendants, have attempted to piece together specifics of what unfolded that week in Rosewood and why.

Gonzalez-Tennant, a professor of anthropological archeology at the University of Central Florida, recently published a book titled “The Rosewood Massacre: An Archaeology and History of Intersectional Violence” that explored why the event stayed hidden for nearly 60 years and if history is bound to repeat itself.

He said racism is alive in America today, but instead of widespread violence, it is hidden in different forms.

“There are not just happen chances that black men are incarcerated more than white men,” he said.

Fueling the fire

Leading up to the Rosewood Massacre, the country was very much racially divided, as Jim Crow laws were in full effect. Schools were segregated for whites and blacks. Black people couldn’t vote and earned less money than whites.

Hollywood itself was a “racist machine,” Gonzalez-Tennant said.

D.W. Griffith's film "The Birth of a Nation" was released in 1915, reinvigorating white supremacy. The racist film features white actors in blackface and depicts blacks as ignorant, lustful and aggressive. The Ku Klux Klan is touted as the hero.

After the release, World War I ended, a war in which black people fought and died for the United States but held no role in its democratic process.

Soon followed the Tulsa race riot of 1921, caused by a white mob, which resulted in the desolation of a town with at least 39 deaths, though the American Red Cross estimated 300 dead and 800 injured.

A year later, a black man in Perry was burned alive at the stake. And in Gainesville, a large KKK rally was held on New Year's Eve.

"All these things put together show us that those first five years after the war are pretty racially tensed throughout the nation," said Steve Noll, a University of Florida professor who teaches Florida history among other courses.

Making a massacre

On Jan. 1, 1923, a day after the KKK rally, Sumner resident Fannie Taylor, a married 22-year-old white woman, said she was assaulted by an unknown black man. Rumors swirled that she was also raped, though it's unclear if that was true. Some claim a white man beat her. The attacker was believed to be hiding in Rosewood, a thriving predominantly black community of about 150, just one town over.

A group of white men and women, led by county officials, sought out the mysterious black man and stumbled upon Sam Carter, who wasn't suspected of the crime but was tortured, shot in the face and hung anyway.

"We hang him from a tree as a sign that this is what we do when you don't give us the answers we want," Noll said, referring to the thinking of the posse.

The mob then reached the Carrier household, which was sheltering more than a dozen frightened black people from the racist gang. The mob was met by Sarah and Sylvester Carrier, who were armed. A gun fight ensued, killing both Carriers and two white men from the mob, Poly Wilkerson and Henry Andrews.

The next day the mob began burning all the homes in Rosewood, forcing families and young children to scatter into the woods. James Carrier, Mingo Williams and Lexie Gordon, all black, were killed in the process.

The official death toll was eight, though that figure is highly contested, Noll said. Historians speculate the number could be as high as 27. There is also a rumored unmarked gravesite with more than 100 buried bodies, but Gonzalez-Tennant said it's highly unlikely.

News quickly traveled that blacks were murdering white men, causing more than 100 other whites from around the state to help burn down what was left of the town.

Those who escaped death hid in the woods, the swamp, wells or were helped by some white homeowners. The most notable white homeowner that intervened was John Wright, as famously depicted in John Singletary's 1997 film "Rosewood" by Jon Voight.

Refugees then escaped by a train, operated by John and William Bryce, to areas all over the state, including Gainesville, Bronson and Hilliard. Noll said that blacks lost rights to their property soon after to whites, as taxes went unpaid.

A grand jury was formed to decide who was responsible for the destruction and deaths, but no one was charged and event was soon forgotten.

"It's the South in 1920s," Noll said. "They're not going to prosecute anybody. It was business as usual."

Remembering Rosewood

For more than 60 years the tragedy stayed buried. Noll says it's because victims were scattered throughout the state. Some, he said, were reluctant to talk about the event openly.

"It's such a repressed event that people don't talk about it at all," Noll said.

That was until 1982, when The St. Petersburg Times published a story that detailed the tragic events. Ed Bradley of "60 Minutes" then invited survivors out to the area to speak with them about the injustices they endured.

What's left of the town isn't much and some feel the history is withering away, as there are no more living survivors. What is believed to be the last standing structure from 1923, the Wright House, is still visible from State Road 24 and for sale. The only memorial to the tragedy is a small sign in front of the home.

"Rosewood is only remembered because a small handful of individuals pushed to get it remembered," Gonzalez-Tennant said. "I think a lot of people who are buying properties out there are unaware of what had taken place."

Noll likewise stays busy educating his students about the history. He is part of a weeklong tour every summer that takes high school students around the state through the area. He said some students are shocked to learn about Rosewood and what little is left.

He said the subject should be in textbooks and taught in schools to give students a better understanding of the nation's history.

"The story is important because it tells us America isn't living up to its ideals," he said. "The fact we can't talk about it today tells us that it's still a problem."

Gonzalez-Tennant recently received a \$45,000 grant from the state to do archeological work in Rosewood and Sumner. He said he hopes to do remapping of the landscape to determine how many structures there were and where, but he's received push back from some landowners.

"People out in the country just want to be left alone," he said.

He said he often gives speeches to talk about the tragedy and sometimes is met with Rosewood deniers. He hopes that his research can prove those people wrong.

"I'm hopeful that more and more people are willing to accept this happened and acknowledge that," Gonzalez-Tennant said. "And just acknowledging that, in Levy County, is huge."



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A photograph of a Rosewood family is part of a traveling display on the Levy County town that came to the Thomas Center in Gainesville in 2009.