

# Chicago Tribune

NEWS

## THE SHAMEFUL, HORRIFIC STORY OF ROSEWOOD IS REVISITED

By **CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

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Like Judgment Day:

The Ruin and Redemption of a Town Called Rosewood

By Michael D'Orso

Something terrible happened in the little Florida town of Rosewood in 1923—something so terrible that for years nobody talked about it.

It started with a lynching and ended with the town burned to the ground, its middle-class black residents killed or run off. Rosewood was gone, but the memory of that town burned through the years in the hearts of those who had lived there.

Seventy years later, amid great anguish and tumult, the State of Florida finally recognized the terrible wrong that had been done. Now comes a magnificent story of Rosewood and the man whose dogged determination brought redemption.

Arnett Doctor is the son of a Rosewood survivor who was so traumatized by what her family had lost that she never spoke of it. And she insisted no one else speak of it. As matriarch of the Rosewood survivors, she got her way.

But her son learned about Rosewood anyway. And in 1987, he started researching in earnest.

Rosewood was a town of about 200 people, all but one family black. When a white woman in a nearby town said she had been raped by a black man, a mob of armed white men headed for Rosewood. For a week they ravaged and burned the town. Newspaper reports from the time listed eight dead: six blacks and two whites. But reports of mass graves filled with black bodies persisted through the years. No one will ever know the true number of the dead.

But the property records couldn't be clearer: Land that had been owned by black men and women was sold for taxes to white men and women. The black families of Rosewood lost all they'd spent their lifetimes earning.

Michael D'Orso, a Virginia newspaperman, is a storyteller with a sure feel for human nature. He doesn't varnish his characters, and in the process he makes the reader care deeply about them.

Not all the blacks are saints: Some of them latched onto the Rosewood case out of greed. Not all the whites are villains: Even at the time of the massacre, white men and women hid black people from the mob and sent a train down the line in back of town to rescue black women and children hiding in the woods and swamps.

But the people of Florida, whose leaders never lifted a hand to stop the massacre, owed the people of Rosewood a debt. And in 1994, with the nation's newspapers and TV stations looking on, the Florida Legislature owned up to the state's sins and paid out \$2 million in reparations to Rosewood's survivors.

No amount of money could redeem their losses, but those losses and their suffering were permanently etched into the state's annals.

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