

The Last Holdout: Survivor's History Lesson

By Charles Flowers

RIVIERA BEACH - The late afternoon sun glistens off the garbage in an unmarked cemetery Robie Mortin is trying to save. It strikes a silver Isley Brothers compact disk stuck in the sandy soil. Too scratched to play, the CD sails back to the pile, a chrome relic of another civilization. There are remnants of weapons here - a rusty knife, and young men with cell phones that make you wonder if it's safe to leave your car unlocked. But no one seems troubled by the visitors to the graveyard. It is a moment of respect that stands eerily in place next to years of desecration.

People are buried here at a place known to the locals as Sugar Hill. They include local pioneers and, strangely more people who survived one of the bloodiest racial massacres in Florida's history - Rosewood - than are known to be buried in Rosewood itself.

The corpses in both places have two things in common: They had black skin. And they are not resting in peace.

Robie Allenetta Robinson Mortin won't let them.

"You don't just dig up nothin' and not put it back the way it was," she says. "They can at least bury them back again."

Robie (her first name sounds exactly like the former name of the stadium where the Dolphins and Marlins play) is 84. As a child, she lived through the Rosewood Massacre of 1923. As an adult, she has survived a compromising Legislature and avoided a con-artist cousin who shook down other survivors for a piece of their settlement cash. Now Robie Mortin wonders if she can survive her very fractured Rosewood "family," and see a fitting memorial built.

"I want closure," she says urgently, from the center of a story that won't end, on a path in a cemetery where few of the living visit. "Aunt Sarah was my grandmother. And Sam Carter, the man they lynched was my Uncle Sammy."

Names are missing from many of the stones. Some of the vaults are broken. Robie believes it's because the drug addicts in the Riviera Beach neighborhood cracked them open looking for valuables. We do find a few with names: Percy, John and Earl Monroe. This Earl Monroe is no relation to the former New York Knicks basketball star - "Earl the Pearl" - of the same name, although his niece Marie Monroe, says there was a family resemblance.

Palm Beach County was one of the places Rosewood victims fled after the violence destroyed their town in 1923. There, they found work and new lives. Marie Monroe has a list, proof of the diaspora that wound its way from the rifle fire and burning of Levy County, over to the Atlantic Coast and down to the westernmost, black side of Riviera Beach. The men built the bridges to Palm Beach that women like Robie Mortin crossed to clean the houses of the Pulitzer's and the Kennedy's. One by one, all except Robie died. There are as many as a dozen Rosewood survivors buried here, many in unmarked graves.

"Everything in there was bodies," says Ms. Monroe, a working mother who attends Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton.

Besides the Monroe brothers, the list includes Florence Goins Dixon, three members of the Hayward clan -- Robie's father Nathaniel Robinson, sister Esther and Mary Cuffy -- the sister of prominent Riviera Beach woman Tency Barnes, known only as Miss Tiny, and the woman who could fill a monument with her secrets - Gertrude King Carrier. All came from Rosewood.

Gertrude was the wife, and, if the state's documented history of Rosewood is to be believed, the probable widow of Sylvester Carrier, leader of the black resistance at his mother Sarah's home. Since that night in January '23, Sylvester has grown to mythic portions.

Even now, after reams have been written about him, after Don Cheadle has played him in a movie, his whereabouts remain unknown. Did he die in the fire at the Carrier home, when a white posse looking for a suspected assailant fired through the window and killed his mother, and he, in turn, killed at least two of them?

Two bodies were recovered inside the home, and one was certainly Sarah's. The other, thought to be Sylvester by the white authorities, was buried with her. But many black survivors and their descendants believe "Cousin Syl" as he was called, survived Rosewood, changed his name and lived his life out like some piano-playing Br'er Rabbit, laughing in some secret woods at the men back in Rosewood he had fought and fooled. Surely, wherever he gave it up, Sylvester Carrier would be a man worth knowing.

An 'Indian-Looking' Woman

Robie gleaned few clues from Gertrude, a long, black-haired woman described as "Indian-looking" by other Rosewood survivors. If Sylvester lived after Rosewood, he and Gertrude were never reunited. Gertrude died a Johnson, Robie will tell you. She remarried a man with that name in Riviera.

For most of her life, Sylvester Carrier's role in defending Rosewood almost single handedly through the all-night siege was not discussed. To spare her four children from growing up full of hate, Robie says she did not pick at the hurtful memories of her childhood, nor did Sylvester's one-time wife, Gertrude.

"I never talked to my Aunt Gert about Rosewood," she says. "Grown-ups just didn't talk to children in those days." Robie Mortin remembers her boundaries, the walls between an adult and child. Whenever the subject of Rosewood came up, Gert would shoo Robie away like a fly. Until 1994, when the Legislature passed the Rosewood Bill, which paid her and eight other survivors \$150,000 each, Robie also hid the scars from her own children.

The memories come up at odd times, as when a visitor remarks about the expansive kitchen in her little house west of Dixie Highway.

"I'm from Rosewood, Florida," Robie says with emphasis and a certain Nell Carter-kind of attitude. "I got to have me a big kitchen."

Despite no definite proof, she believes that Sylvester lived. Journalists from New York to London have sought her answers. One of them produced a photograph alleged to be then-Levy Sheriff Bob Walker holding Sylvester's rifle after the shootout that produced half of the documented dead (eight) during the week of violence in and around Rosewood. Though denounced as fake, the photo raises a question: If it

was Sylvester's gun, why wasn't it burned, as he and Sarah were alleged to be in the fire that razed the home that night?

Whoever the second charred body found in the Carrier home was, it was not "Big Baby" Evans, as depicted in the 1997 Warner Brothers movie Rosewood.

"I know Big Baby. He's been in my house many times," Robie Mortin says.

That is not the only error in the John Singleton-directed film.

"They massacred us twice," she says. "Once at Rosewood. And the second time in that movie."

This much is clear: Robie Mortin is like the people she came from - stubborn, strong, and silent no more.

'Things That Need Saying'

Like most public high schools in South Florida, Olympic Heights in Boca Raton is bursting at the seams. It has an open design, and so when Robie Mortin arrives at lunch-time, the youth of America is sprawled out in groups along the walkways. Robie rides to a portable classroom in a golf cart while her son Allen walks with this reporter through clumps of these curious teenagers. The kids throw an occasional greeting or "what's up?" look our way. But they are, reassuringly, more interested in food and sex than in us, who are neither. So we make it unmolested to the portable, which resembles a freight car in both size and feel.

Robie was invited by teacher Bob Cochrane, who has developed a sociology course around events like Rosewood, using materials provided by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Their program is called "Teaching Tolerance." Robie has lived a life of tolerance.

Cochrane has planned ahead, which means we are early. He offers lunch at the Boca Ale House. Robie has lived long by eating two meals a day, and she does not change now. As she sips an iced tea in the darkened booth of this yuppie bar, parts of her story begin to spill out. She stops herself.

"There's been enough said about the massacre that happened at Rosewood," she says, using the ancient phonetics.

She will talk, instead, about scholarships (Florida set aside \$500,000 for scholarships in 1994, with priority given to descendants of the massacre). She will try, but the other will come out, too.

"There is some things that need saying, and anywhere I get a chance, I'll say them."

When she returns to the classroom, the students of Cochrane's sociology class are shouldering into the freight car. They are joined by Curtis Sherrod's 11th Grade political science class. Cochoran's bunch is studying prejudice. Robie Mortin can say plenty about prejudice. But it is envy that she believes was the root cause of the Rosewood Massacre.

"By the time I came along, Rosewood was the most beautiful place you could see in the country," she begins. "Every house was white, and picket fences were in. Nice, pretty picket fences. They kept that place clean."

Rosewood of the 1920s was also morally clean. There were "no dope houses or jooks in Rosewood. None of those dirty places." There were three churches, and Robie went to school with other children in the Masonic Lodge. The men played baseball on Sundays, and everyone celebrated Emancipation Day with a barbecue. The women made soap and quilts communally.

"It was a love town," she says. But then, on a cold New Year's morning, with her husband at the lumber mill, Fannie Taylor emerged from her home in Sumner bruised and beaten.

Nearby, stood Sarah Carrier and her daughter Philomena, silent witnesses to the man - the white man - who got away.

Mrs. Taylor said a "nigger" was responsible for her bruises. This is a word Robie uses advisedly. It meant something different in 1923 than it does today. These students, black and white, do not seem shocked by it.

"I blame the deputy sheriff," Ms. Mortin says. "Because that lady never dropped a name as to who did what to her. 'Just said a Negro, black man. But when the sheriff came along with his posse and everything, he put a name to the person: Jesse Hunter. No one knew who that person was in the house with her, but she did. And she allowed this lie to go out, and cause the whole town of Rosewood to be destroyed.

"They didn't find Jesse Hunter, but noticed that here's a bunch of niggers living better than us white folks. That disturbed these people. When people get upset, you never know what they are going to do. They were mad, and when my Uncle Sammy came along with his horse and wagon, they say, 'You was the person who took this man away, right? Where did you take him?' And he knew nothing about nothing. He was coming home from his job at the Goins' turpentine still, knowing nothing about nothing, and he was tortured and lynched and hung. He was left there all night. I've heard people say he was left there all day and all night."

The next morning, when Robie's father went to work at the mill in Sumner "all he saw was groups of (white) men and everybody had a shotgun."

Robie's father was Nathaniel Robinson, and she says he played a key role in rescuing many black families from the countryside, and driving them to safety in Gainesville. Her own family escaped first by car to Chiefland, some 20 miles north of Rosewood. Then the family began a two-year gypsy life in rural Florida. She says they were afraid to light anywhere for long. When they landed in Riviera Beach, they found the fragments of a Rosewood community. Her father showed up soon afterwards. Robie had not laid eyes on him for two years.

"My grandma didn't know what my Uncle Sammy had done to anybody to cause him to be lynched like that," she says by way of explanation. "They took his fingers and his ears, and they just cut souvenirs away from him. That was the type of people they were."

She only knows of the mutilation by hearsay, but there is plenty of it in Levy County concerning Sam Carter's parts. His shotgun-to-the-throat shooting was witnessed by some who still reside there. One ancient white man, Ernest Parham, recently died in Orlando at the age of 93. But not before testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Parham, age 18 at the time of Rosewood, said simply: "They blew that man's head off."

After that, Carter could feel no pain. But where his mutilated body was removed to is a matter of some debate. So are the mass graves Robie believes are filled with the bodies of children and adults who died in the days and nights immediately following Carter's lynching, as the blood scent attracted a festering mob from as far away as Georgia.

"Monday was the day they discovered Rosewood," Robie Mortin told the children. "Tuesday, they made up their minds they were going to destroy it. They went down there at night and started shooting into peoples' houses, and running the people away, and people was scattered everywhere. Children. Babies. It was just awful what happened to those people.

"And then Wednesday, that was the looting day. They came down there with horses and wagons. And they filled up."

By then, her father had sent Robie and her two sisters on a train to Chiefland. But she remembers this detail from her late cousin Lee Ruth Davis, who was first interviewed in the Seminole Tribune in 1993.

"Lee Ruthie said they just took everything," Robie recalls. "They even took the chickens, and they were running down the screaming pigs."

The students ask about what happened then, and the pain only seems to deepen when there is form to the Rosewood skeleton.

"I can talk about this now," Robie says, "but I've seen the time when I couldn't. Because most of my immediate family was lost. There was only three of us left: my two sisters and my grandma. That's all I had. Even though they took away everything we had, they didn't leave us nothing. Our children were scattered everywhere. Our families were scattered everywhere. Nobody knew where everybody was."

A Code of Silence

There was more pain to come. Families at the end of the rail line where many of the women and children escaped did not always welcome the refugees. They feared they might bring more trouble. To cover the trail, many parents told their children never to speak of it. At least one, Philomena Doctor, whipped them if they did. Robie remembers Philomena and Lee Ruth nearly coming to blows over the code of silence at a family reunion.

A notarized letter was sent by one of Philomena's children, Yvonne Doctor, to Ms. Davis in February 1993, after Ms. Davis, who was within months of her death, appeared via satellite on the Maury Povich Show.

"You know Lee Ruth," it says, "we all have to be careful, because you never know to whom you're speaking and in fact, to whom they are acquainted," Ms. Doctor's letter stated. "There is still a lot of hate crimes being committed today. Like the old saying goes, 'easy come, easy go.' I would never try to sell out or lie on my family members for a dollar."

The letter, copied to "Rosewood Family Members" went on to warn Mrs. Davis: "We are not going to stand by and let this continue to open old, old wounds..."

Like soldiers in a veteran's hospital who argue over the severity of their injuries, giving points to loss of

face or limbs, some Rosewood survivors play a cruel game of "top this." As Robie herself says of one deceased woman, "she wasn't really down in Rosewood." Upon further review, it is revealed that this woman was married to a man who was nearly lynched, lost three family members, and was herself brutally raped when she went to see about it. Still, she wasn't "really" there.

Arnett Turner Goins, another of the five survivors still alive, worked 45 years as a bootblack in St. Petersburg after he and his family lost everything to what he called "the riots." His family lost hundreds of acres of land, a turpentine still and other business property. But did they lose any more than the Bradleys, the Robinsons or the Halls, or other Rosewood families?

"In the country, fire is something you can see," Wilson Hall testified. Now, five years after he uttered that simple description, and two years after his passing, we all see the houses of his little town burning in the eyes of this seven-year-old boy who fled in the middle of the night. Hall also said he quit school in the third grade and went to work "so that nothing would happen to my mother."

We hear the fire hissing in the stone cold silence of another Rosewood survivor who says he never, in 50 years of marriage, discussed the incident with his wife.

We feel the silent, smoldering cry for justice in the voice and presence of Janie Bradley Black, of Miami. We saw it in her clan five years ago, when nine women, aged 6 to 76, drove half the night to Tallahassee, fueled by coffee and black gospel music, for hearings on the Rosewood Bill.

They sat in the back of the room, saying nothing. Their moment of truth came when Wilson Hall said on the record that Nada Bradley, the father of Janie and four other South Florida travelers, lost his eye in the night of shooting at the Carrier home. He had never told that to his own children, and died with that secret on his lips.

A great collective and happy sigh came forth from the Bradley women. The reason they were happy that Hall said his cousin, then a teen aged boy, had been shot at Rosewood. It meant that no more could anyone say he wasn't there.

He was. And after an hour with Robie Mortin, so were the students at Olympic Heights.

A Living Memorial

Dressed in black, Robie Mortin moves through Sugar Hill cemetery, a living memorial to the event that framed her life. She does not come here often. She is not sure exactly where her kin are buried. When she first received her compensation as what she calls a "certified Rosewood survivor," she talked of traveling to Greece. But she found no one to go with, and seems rooted here. Her investment is mainly in the grand-children she cares for, whose arrival she anticipates with unabashed glee.

Meanwhile, Marie Monroe has joined Robie Mortin as a two-woman gang to preserve Sugar Hill from developers. Marie helps a friend whose grandfather is buried on the ridge write a letter to a West Palm attorney seeking permission to move the remains for an unstated purpose. The lawyer's letter reveals there are at least three other skeletons on the parcel, one named and two John Does.

"Don't they realize if they've got four bodies on that land that they might be building on a cemetery?" Marie Monroe wonders. She wonders, too, about a \$5,000 city-authorized radar study of the earth around North 31st Street.

"Not only do you have Rosewood survivors, but you have pioneers who built the city buried there," Marie Monroe says. "You don't build houses on peoples' graves. You protect it. If nothing else, you clean it up."

She points to other Palm Beach cities that use road crews from the Loxahatchee Road Prison, where she works while she pursues a degree in criminal justice. The inmates cut weeds and clean trash from roadways. Royal Palm, Wellington, Greenacres City and Lake Worth all "have had road crews or are in the process of getting them. Why not Riviera Beach?"

Marie Monroe is also keeping the issue on the front burner of on the Riviera Beach City Council. Newly-elected mayor Lenora Hurley voted to give the cemetery some protection. So did Councilwoman Cynthia Bechton.

"We took action to at least erect a memorial," Ms Bechton said. However, the issue of who owns the land is just one of the sticking points. A survey of the land, including the bodies beneath it, has been ordered, she said.

Maybe here is where a Rosewood Memorial should be, not up the road 300 miles in the tangled vines of history and hatred that entwine Rosewood, Florida.

Maybe both places.

There is already a memorial of sorts there - to the whites who most believe helped black people escape the Rosewood violence.

"That's nothing," Robie says. "We are not recognized. There should be something more. They should at least put up a memorial for the people who were massacred there."

There is also Rosewood Justice Center, headed by Arnett Doctor, and funded in part by donations to the premiere of the Rosewood movie. Doctor, who collected thousands of dollars from survivors for his dubious contribution to getting the Rosewood Bill passed, has declined to say what progress he has made toward a Rosewood Memorial. The wheels of justice grind slowly in Spring Hill, where Doctor moved after his Rosewood windfall.

Robie Mortin's son Allen just laughs at the thought of Arnett. Like Sylvester Carrier, he has attained a kind of mythical status as a slippery figure, admirable for his audacity if nothing else.

"You've got to admire him," Allen says. "He was the person who had access to the whole program: the money, the movie, and now the memorial. We've seen what happened to the money and the movie."

Next: Rosewood in Cyberspace. - Charles Flowers is a freelance writer from Fort Lauderdale who has reported on Rosewood since 1992. His Seminole Tribune articles have won awards from the Minority Press Association and the Native American Journalists Association.

<https://www.semtribe.com/seminoletribune/Archive/1999/May28/rosewood.shtml>