

From the Archives: Remembering Rosewood



Willie Evans, 100, center, the oldest survivor of the Rosewood Massacre of 1923, receives a visit from his niece Altamese Wrispus, from bottom left, Sherry Dupree, with the Rosewood Forum, Dr. Marvin Dunn, who is making a documentary involving anti-black violence in Florida and Evelyn Williams, Evans' grand-niece, on July 14, 2007, at Heritage Park Health and Rehabilitation in Dade City. [Times (2007)]

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Willie Evans couldn't see his visitors, but he seemed to enjoy all the fuss being made around him at the nursing home.

Everyone was eager to ask him questions. He was alert and answered in one-word sentences.

Evans, 100, is one of two known survivors of the 1923 Rosewood massacre.

He was 16 when a white mob attacked the small, black Levy County community and killed about eight people. Some residents fought back; others fled into the woods.

According to family lore, Evans escaped carrying a 7-year-old boy who had been injured in the attack.

In the years after the Rosewood massacre, Evans and some of his relatives settled in Lacoochee, and he worked at the nearby Cummer sawmill.

In 1948, he moved with his wife and son back to his birthplace, Sanford, where he remained until he moved back to Lacoochee to live with a niece eight years ago.

He entered the nursing home near Dade City this spring.

Over the years, Evans has said little about what happened to him that January day, his relatives said. His son, Donnell Evans, 69, never heard the name Rosewood until some family members began lobbying for reparations in the early 1990s. For 70 years, that was the legacy of Rosewood - silence and fear.

With Evans' age and failing health (he's blind from glaucoma and has diabetes), time is running out to preserve his memories of life in Rosewood.

That's what brought two historical researchers to his nursing home recently.

Sherry Dupree is an instructor at Santa Fe Community College and a member of the Rosewood Heritage Foundation, which helped put together a Rosewood exhibit; Marvin Dunn, a retired Florida International University professor, is researching the history of racial violence in Florida.

Both came with questions to which they knew most of the answers.

They were hoping Evans would confirm names and places from his life in Rosewood. He did.

There were bloodier racial incidents in Florida's history, but Rosewood stands out as one case in which the state tried to compensate the victims and their descendants.

The sad events of January 1923 were covered extensively by newspapers throughout the country but afterward, the massacre slipped from the public memory. Many Floridians first learned about Rosewood in a St. Petersburg Times story written by reporter Gary Moore in 1982.

In the 25 years since, more people have come to know about Rosewood, thanks to the John Singleton movie *Rosewood* and the state's 1994 settlement that paid out \$150,000 each to Evans and eight other survivors and set aside scholarships for descendants of those who lost so much at Rosewood.

The Rosewood Heritage Foundation has been active in keeping the story alive. (Mary Hall Daniels of Jacksonville is believed to be the other Rosewood survivor.)

The descendants of Rosewood pledge never to forget.

This weekend, folks from the Carrier, Evans, Robinson, Goins, Edwards, Bradley and Coleman families will gather in Bartow for the annual Rosewood Family Reunion.

Willie Evans is one of the families' last links to that tragic story. He isn't well enough to join them.

To hear his story, they will have to visit him at the nursing home. When prompted, he'll provide a few nuggets. He'll even sing a song in his throaty whisper:

"Come by here, my Lord, come by here."

It's the kind of song Evans would have learned as a young boy in Rosewood. In his old age, it still brings him comfort.

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