

THE OKLAHOMA COMMISSION TO STUDY THE TULSA RACE RIOT OF 1921

Eddie Faye Gates

Excerpted from *Riot on Greenwood**

Editor's note: On May 31–June 1, 1921, what would become known as “the worst race riot in American history” took place. A young black man was accused of assaulting a white female elevator operator, and it was rumored that he would be lynched. Racial tensions quickly mounted, and Tulsa’s Greenwood District came under attack by white rioters, who burned thirty-five blocks of north Tulsa to the ground. Ten whites and twenty-six blacks are known to have been killed. Many more deaths went unconfirmed.

The Oklahoma State Legislature authorized a commission in 1997 to research this devastating event. After three and a half years of intensive research, the commission found what had been hinted at for four decades. There had been a pattern of deliberate distortion of facts regarding the riot and even the destruction of vital documents and a subsequent coverup.

The 169 living black survivors that I interviewed between 1997 and 2001 ranged in age from 80 to 108. Unfortunately, all the centenarians have passed on, including 104-year-old Tulsan Lillie Skelton Rice and 104-year-old Mabel B. Little. The survivors live all over the United States, and one lives in Paris, France. Oklahoma has the largest group of survivors, followed by California and Illinois. The political, economic, and social status of survivors varies. Some lead well-to-do vibrant, active lives in their communities despite advancing age. Others are not well-off and lead subsistence lives. One was evicted from her Tulsa home during the Christmas holidays in 2001.

The world has finally heard about the survivors of the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 thanks to print and electronic media coverage generated by the commission’s study.

Representative Don Ross (D), District 73, Tulsa, was the driving force behind the commission’s creation. As a fifteen-year-old student at Tulsa’s Booker T. Washington High School in 1956, Ross first heard about the riot in a history class taught by the revered W. D. Williams. Once planted, this seed was destined to blossom when the time was right. Known for his pit

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bull tenacity in the pursuit of equality and justice for all people, especially for the oppressed, Ross did not rest until the facts of this worst race riot in the history of our nation were made known to the world. He knew that there would be denial, delayed acknowledgments, anger, frustration, and conflict let loose as a result of this study, yet he doggedly pursued it.

Ross himself had been in denial as a fifteen-year-old when he first heard Mr. Williams's accounts of the riot. It was only after the teacher brought to school bulging scrapbooks and photograph albums containing eyewitness documentation of the riot that the skeptical student was convinced. Ross made a pledge in his heart that someday the whole city, state, nation, and world would know about this riot, too.

The Tulsa black community was grateful to Representative Don Ross and Senator Maxine Horner (D), District 11, Tulsa, for co-sponsoring House Bill 1035, which created the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. Ross and Horner, and the other three members of the Black Caucus of the Oklahoma legislature, were behind the resolution that created the law establishing the commission. But that vocal caucus, as dedicated as it was, couldn't have gotten the bill through alone. The majority of the state legislature sensed the importance of addressing that long-ago injustice, and they recognized how significant such a study was to the black people of Tulsa. They understood the need for acknowledgment, repentance, reconciliation, and closure. They knew about such movements worldwide. And so, with this law, they opened up their state's history to the world—sort of the opening up of a can of worms! But they did it, and for that act of courage, I thank them.

In my summation of the riot commission, you will see that I was not pleased with all the responses of the legislature to the commission's recommendations—especially regarding reparations for survivors and descendants of survivors—but for tackling the issue of the riot head-on, I give the legislature praise.

HB 1035 was an excellent bill—clear, concise, detailed, focused. Because of that, the task of commissioners was made easier. We knew exactly who we were, how we were appointed, what we were to do, when we were to do it, how we were to do it, and why we were doing it. We commissioners took our work seriously.

The meetings of the commission, held quarterly at the beginning of our research in 1997 and then escalating to monthly meetings and even to special called meetings near the end, were always vibrant, exciting, and well attended, especially when national and international media were present. When the *Sixty Minutes* crew from New York descended upon north Tulsa in 1999, there was standing room only at the riot commission meeting!

As much as it meant to commissioners to have our hard work appreciated by the national media, riot experts, consultants, historians, etc. whose faces we recognized at our meetings, nothing warmed our hearts more, or stirred us to work harder, than the loving, beaming faces of the survivors themselves, or their devoted descendants. They were the reason the commission had been formed, and they were the reason for our hard work. They kept us motivated; just the sight of them rejuvenated us!

In some of the newspaper accounts of our riot commission meetings, and in some of the other research and writings now available about the riot, scholars, historians, and authors often concentrated more on divi-

siveness between commission members than on the content of our research. Although we were a racially and geographically diverse group of people, and although we had legitimate cultural differences, we were thoughtful of one another and carried out our research in an atmosphere as harmonious as could be under the circumstances. There was no bitterness or hatred between any of the commissioners. One day after an especially difficult commission meeting when we were discussing the issue of reparations, one of the most conservative members of the commission, one of the white legislators, came over to me and said, "I love you, little lady. We may differ in our opinions regarding the riot and in the ways we believe best for dealing with riot issues, but I am sincere in my efforts, and I know you are sincere in yours." We hugged each other and I replied, "I love you, too, and I know that what you just said is true."

Given the seriousness of the issue of race in any culture or nation, it is no wonder that some committee meetings were tense. Race is the most divisive of all issues.

Black commissioners did not come to the table with axes to grind; we did not come with agendas to promote our individual causes, nor with overblown egos and desires to grandstand.

We did come to the table as experts on race, due to our training and personal experience. We did come as a marginalized group whose history had been neglected in the nation. We intended to use this opportunity wisely, to fulfill our state-mandated task of leaving a record of the riot that would clear up misconceptions and would lead to long-overdue reconciliation and healing.

The issues that generated the most debate at commission meetings were: (1) reparations; (2) the role of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma generally and in Tulsa specifically; (3) questions regarding airplanes and/or a conspiracy in the destruction of the Greenwood District in the riot; and (4) reliability of black primary sources.

REPARATIONS

All of us commissioners knew that reparations was a touchy issue, and we worked hard to learn as much about the subject as we could. We did thorough research, and we compared and contrasted reparation examples in history and found a wide range of views on the subject. In addition to studying the materials that we found ourselves, we studied those that our legal consultants and scholars provided for us. Al Brophy's legal materials grounded us in the legal aspects of reparations, and we drank in Dr. Ed Linenthal's speech before the committee about dealing with massacres, riots, and reconciliation and healing.

Among the local programs on race, reconciliation, and reparations that some commissioners attended were:

1. The University of Tulsa's American Inns of Court, Council Oak Inn Tulsa Race Riot Part II Program: "Fashioning a Remedy," in which lawyers presented pro and con arguments regarding reparations.

2. National Conference Dialogue programs on "Race and Reconciliation."

3. Oklahoma State University-Tulsa programs on "Racial Profiling."

4. The Metropolitan Tulsa Urban League program "Reframing the Dialogue on Race."

Dr. Vivian Clark-Adams and I also served on reparations panels at Tulsa Community College, Langston University, Oklahoma State University-Tulsa, Southwest Missouri State University, Springfield, Missouri, and the State University of New York, New Paltz.

As a result of the media descent upon Tulsa for riot and reparations information, and of my travels, I now have a deeper understanding of the reparations issue. I have found that there is a wide range of views regarding reparations. Some people, and culpable entities, believe a total, sincere commitment to reparations is necessary if there is ever to be a repairing of damages caused by past violence; others believe that "a dash of cash" and mumbled apologies suffice. The fear that support of reparations implies an acceptance of personal responsibility for past wrongdoing causes many to shy away from advocating reparations.

THE KU KLUX KLAN

There was a lot of bickering and nitpicking between commissioners and others over what constituted a Klansman and what role the Klan played in the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. Some people, mainly some whites, supported the theory that the Tulsa riot was a "white ruffian" riot devised and carried out by that group without the knowledge and consent of the leadership of Tulsa or Tulsa's "good and decent" citizens; others (mainly blacks) felt that evidence showed that the city's leadership not only had prior knowledge of the riot, but also participated in it.

My examination of the Ku Klux Klan rolls at the University of Tulsa's Special Collection at McFarlin Library clearly showed that many Tulsans—doctors, lawyers and judges, teachers and preachers, businessmen and bankers, as well as musicians, entertainers, undertakers, brick masons, garbage collectors, farmers, and working-class persons—supported the Klan at the time of the riot.

AIRPLANES AND CONSPIRACY

For a long time, Tulsa has lived under the stigma that it was the only American city to be bombed by its own military. The riot commission was able to refute that error. Dick Warner of the Tulsa Historical Society did extensive research on the airplane subject. Other military experts also provided information and materials for the commission. By examining records, Warner was able to establish approximately how many airplanes were in Tulsa at the time of the riot, who owned them, and who flew them.

At the same time, the commission was able to refute the claims of some (mainly whites) that no airplanes dropped anything during the riot. According to the evidence, airplanes did drop something on Greenwood. But what they dropped were not World War I-type military bombs. The commission report refers to the items dropped as "incendiary devices."

Regarding the conspiracy theory and the role of the leadership in the "bombing" of Tulsa's black community, black commissioners and the black community in general firmly believe that there was collusion between leaders and mobsters during the riot, especially regarding assaults that involved devices dropped from the air. The bottom line is that "poor white

ruffians” don’t own airplanes and don’t have the luxury of taking flying lessons!

BLACK PRIMARY SOURCES

If I had to categorize the contentious issues in order of seriousness, the role of black primary sources would be the number-one issue! All of us see things through the lenses of our own culture. And the culture that has told the history of our nation, and western civilization, is the predominant white culture; naturally, people of that culture, that race, will be more comfortable with their sources and skeptical of the unknown. Actually, there was no need to be skeptical. Black accounts, written by the people most familiar with the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, the people who lived through it, and those who came to the aid of the afflicted survivors of the ordeal, proved to be quite credible, reliable, and helpful in documenting and validating the events that occurred in Tulsa in 1921.

Black commissioners, as well as some white commissioners who had a strong background in civil rights issues and much knowledge of the black experience in America—people like Jim Lloyd, Bob Blackburn, and Pete Churchill—took a strong interest in the black source materials, much of it newly found. (Some of the black documentation source materials came from my research in Washington, D.C., and Maryland in late October and early November 2000. Any commissioner who came across black resource materials, or any other material that might be helpful in the commission study, gladly shared all such information with the entire commission.)

It was a powerful experience to actually see, touch, and feel those fragile documents dealing with one of the most stress-filled periods in U.S. history, the era of lynchings, race massacres, and riots. Pulling up information on the internet, or reading about history in libraries, etc. is no match for the hands-on handling of historical documents! Among the documents that I examined in Washington and in Maryland were:

1. African Blood Brotherhood (ABB) materials dating back to the founding of the organization and especially the materials pertaining to the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.

2. National Association of Colored Peoples (NAACP) materials—historical records, minutes, correspondence, etc. about the organization and its leaders.

3. Urban League materials—historical records, minutes, correspondence, etc. about the organization and its leaders.

4. The National Negro Business League—historical records, correspondence, including that from founder Booker T. Washington.

5. The Liberty League—historical records and correspondence.

6. American Labor Year Book documents.

7. Miscellaneous documents and materials related to the 1920s era, such as documents from insurance companies such as the Modern Woodmen of America, that had a history of dealing with blacks at that time.

The documents that fascinated me the most during this research in the nation’s capital were those of the African Blood Brotherhood, a self-help organization founded in desperation in New York City. The ABB was determined to protect black citizens, who were neglected by their local,

state, and national governments. ABB leaders traveled all over the United States, counseling and organizing local chapters. On more than one occasion, leaders had visited Oklahoma. A poignant letter, dated May 23, 1921, in the ABB collections shows what the racial climate was like in Oklahoma at that date. W. R. Smith lived at 641 North Third Street, Muskogee, at the time. He wrote the letter on company stationery: W. R. Smith, J. F. Thompson Manufacturing Confectioners, 223 South Second Street, Muskogee, Oklahoma, Telephone 4830.

In that hand-written letter, Mr. Smith poured out his heart and appealed for help:

We are appealing to you for aid in matter of lands allotted to the Freedmen of Okla. [Negroes of Indian blood] have been victims of the white man's exploitations and vicious conversions of land—minors and wards whose Guardians have sold lands of value and squandered the money. The courts indorse [*sic*] such activities.

Letters such as this, and others from Tulsa, Oklahoma, regarding the intolerable racial climate in Oklahoma at the time, brought members of the ABB to Tulsa before and after the riot. (Some black survivors say that a few got caught in Tulsa at the time of the riot.)

There was fear and suspicion on the part of whites toward black organizations and black leaders in the 1920s. And even in the era of the riot commission study, we again had to fight that battle about credibility and validity. After thoroughly examining the black documents and resources, and using the standards of historiography in which we had been trained (four of the black commissioners were trained historians, all with at least master's degrees and two with doctoral degrees), we found the black documents just as credible as white documents. We found 1920s black leaders and organizations just as credible as their white counterparts. Their goals seemed reasonable, not revolutionary. They were simply seeking their constitutional rights in their own nation.

THE STUDY'S AFTERMATH

Although the commission did deal with some touchy issues, our work had lasting positive results:

1. Worldwide focus on Tulsa and the riot: recognitions, apologies, tributes, plays, poems, songs, monetary contributions to survivors.
2. Outpouring of love, respect, appreciation to the 167 living black survivors, who became media celebrities; respect for and interest in the spouses and descendants of deceased riot victims.
3. Sincere appreciation for the riot commissioners' hard work and the final report documenting the Tulsa race riot.
4. Hunger, from local to international levels, for information about the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 and about racial conflict.
5. National print and electronic media focus on Tulsa and the resulting free public-relations boost for the city.
6. Riot-focused healing and reconciliation programs all over the nation, sponsored by political, economic, and social organizations, schools, churches, and entertainment organizations, etc.

In conclusion, all the team members of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 took our duties seriously. We studied hard, we thought hard, and we came to what we thought were the best conclusions possible based on the evidence that we found.

I feel that the commission was God-ordained. It was time for reconciliation and racial healing. It was time for justice.

To learn more about the commission or to read the full report, go to <http://www.tulsareparations.org/>.