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Rosewood and America in the Early Twentieth Century

by DAVID R. COLBURN

RACE relations in the Rosewood-Summer area had been reasonably harmonious for as long as most residents could remember, but all that changed forever on the morning of January 1, 1923. When James Taylor, a millwright at the Cummer Lumber Company in Summer, left home before sunrise to prepare the mill for its daily operations, all seemed normal. Later that morning, his wife, Fanny Taylor, answered a knock at the door. Within minutes of the encounter at the Taylor's front door, relations between blacks and whites were permanently altered. Claiming she had been assaulted by a black man, Taylor allowed others to say that she had been "raped." It was the one word that no one in the region wanted to hear, least of all the black residents of Summer and nearby Rosewood.¹

What actually happened to Fanny Taylor on that cold New Year's morning will remain forever sealed in history, but the events that followed her alleged attack will not. Within an hour, bloodhounds tracked the scent of the alleged attacker to Rosewood, three miles from Summer. Although Fanny Taylor never suggested that her attacker was a resident of Rosewood, the community would be permanently damaged by the events that unfolded during that first week of January 1923.

Over the course of the next few days, innocent residents of Rosewood would be murdered for allegedly hiding the man who attacked Fanny Taylor, even though the man was never found in the town. The wrath of the white mob remained undiminished by

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1. Maxine D. Jones, David R. Colburn, R. Tom Dye, Larry E. Rivers, and William W. Rogers, *A Documented History of the Incident Which Occurred at Rosewood, Florida, in January 1923*, Report submitted to the Florida Board of Regents, Tallahassee, Fla., December 22, 1993, pp. 23-27.

these events, however. Women and children were forced to hide in the Gulf Hammock Swamp for fear of losing their lives. Before the week was out, the mob returned to plunder and burn down the town of Rosewood and drive all the black residents from it forever.²

For many Americans in the late twentieth century, Rosewood became a defining event in American race relations during the era following World War I. Florida's decision to compensate the black survivors of Rosewood in 1994 and the rendering of the events of Rosewood in the popular film of the same name by movie director John Singleton in 1997 shaped the public's understanding of racial conditions in the 1910s and 1920s. But the historical reality is that Rosewood constituted but one such event in an era of extraordinary racial anxiety and conflict. Why had American race relations turned so violent in this particular period? And why did these developments lead to the destruction at Rosewood and to racial violence in other areas of Florida?

The years from 1913 to 1917 had been, ironically, a period of remarkable reform. In that four-year period, President Woodrow Wilson pushed through Congress a plethora of reform measures that built upon and enlarged the progressive initiatives of President Theodore Roosevelt at the turn of the century. Concerned about the consequences of an unfettered industrialism on the nation and the American people, Wilson curbed its worse excesses through tariff, banking, and antitrust legislation, and by expanding social justice programs for working men and women and their children.³

Despite its achievements progressivism had begun to show its age by 1917, virtually exhausted by four intense years of reform. Increasingly, the president and the public turned their attentions to the worsening conflagration in Europe. The sinking of the *Lusitania* with the loss of many American lives, along with the subsequent destruction of numerous other American merchant ships by the German navy, focused American attention on European developments. In response to the escalating number of attacks against Americans and their property, the nation declared war against the Central Powers in May of 1917.⁴

2. Ibid., 28-53. Also see Michael D'Orso, *Like Judgment Day: The Ruin and Redemption of a Town Called Rosewood* (New York, 1996), 1-13.

3. The best single volume on Wilson's progressive record is Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917* (New York, 1954).

4. Ibid., 252-82.

Although the war stymied further reform as the nation concentrated its energies on mobilization, these years also fostered a spirit of cooperation and national unity as the public rallied behind the war effort. The war, in fact, was ballyhooed in the United States as the triumph of this nation's democratic institutions over the venal rule of Europe's royal households. And Americans from all segments of society seemed to welcome the war effort as an opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of its way of life over that of a decadent Europe.⁵

In spite of the rhetoric and apparent national unity of the war years, however, all was not well within the fabric of American society. By fostering unity, the patriotic fervor of the war years also glossed over and suppressed difference. Moreover, despite government efforts to bring all Americans together in the struggle against German barbarism and its anti-democratic institutions, government and private sector leaders did almost nothing to offset racism and discrimination in American society or to include African Americans in war mobilization. The superiority of the American way of life was not so obvious if one looked below the surface and especially if one talked to black Americans. Racial and ethnic tensions were widespread, and no amount of rhetoric could hide or diminish them.⁶

Indeed, the war years saw black Americans further tyrannized by a renewed racism which was fostered, in part, by the policies of the Wilson administration. Although President Wilson had expressed a desire to recruit black voters into the Democratic Party, he allowed his cabinet officials, half of whom were southerners, to pursue policies that further dispossessed black Americans at the federal and state levels. In the Postmaster General's Office and in post offices throughout the South, for example, blacks found themselves removed from office and replaced with white southerners. The president remained notably silent as his party turned its back on black citizens.⁷

The coming of World War I offered few opportunities for blacks to improve their lot despite their commitment to the war effort and their demonstrations of patriotism throughout the duration of the conflict. Nor did the pledge of the United States to make the world

5. See John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New York, 1965), 194-233.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era*, 63-66.

“safe for democracy” seem to have any special meaning for black citizens who continued to encounter racial violence and oppression at home. Still, many blacks believed that if they persevered and continued to make sacrifices on behalf of the nation, white leaders would be forced to recognize their contributions and take steps to improve their place in society.⁸ Such was not to be the case.

In the midst of war mobilization and the social and political upheaval that accompanied it, the nation not only turned its back on its African American citizens, but whites in nearly every section of the country took legal and extra-legal steps to make sure that blacks remained second-class citizens. Racial fears sparked much of the hostility and violence against African Americans, and the victimization of blacks permeated domestic developments in the United States during and after World War I.

From individual lynchings to sustained violence against entire black communities, whites in both the North and South lashed out against black Americans in a ferocious and often calculated manner during the years 1917 to 1923. Aided by a federal government that refused to intervene to protect the life and property of black citizens, whites took whatever steps they felt were necessary to keep blacks in their place. From Chicago to Tulsa, to Omaha, East St. Louis, and many communities in between, and finally to Rosewood, Florida, white mobs, often in alliance with law enforcement officials, made clear their determination to deny blacks the rights and privileges accorded whites. Much, but certainly not all, of the violence in the South took the form of individual lynchings. By contrast, racial tensions in the North typically erupted into lawless outbursts by white mobs against entire black neighborhoods.⁹ Rosewood more closely paralleled the violence in the North.

8. John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 4th ed. (New York, 1974), 335. Also see David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York, 1980).

9. In Chicago, law and order was suspended for thirteen days in July 1919 as white mobs made foray after foray into black neighborhoods, killing and wounding 365 black residents and leaving another 1,000 homeless. In June 1921, the 11,000 black residents of Tulsa were burned out of their homes and businesses. Over a thousand residents were left homeless and forced to live in tents in the winter of 1921-22. See Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago, 1967); Scott Ellsworth, *Death in the Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge, 1982); also see Elliott Rudwick, *Race Riot in East St. Louis, July 2, 1917* (Urbana, 1982) and William M. Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York, 1970).

What had happened to the public's commitment to make the world "safe for democracy"? black citizens asked. And why, after many blacks had fought overseas and others had contributed to the war effort at home, had white citizens turned against them with such fury?

The roots of white America's violent outburst can be traced to the prewar period when black Americans began to flee the South in record numbers to escape the oppression of segregation and the economic havoc created by the boll weevil's devastation of the cotton economy. They were also drawn north by the promise of freedom and economic opportunity. The labor shortage created by immigration restrictions drove labor agents from northern industries and railroads into the South during this period in search of black workers. Over 40,000 black Floridians joined approximately 283,000 African Americans from other southern states in the migration to Chicago and other midwestern and northeastern cities. The Pennsylvania Railroad alone brought twelve thousand African Americans to work in its yards and on its tracks, all but two thousand of whom came from Florida and Georgia.¹⁰

While economic opportunities and the promise of freedom influenced the decision of black southerners to migrate, most went north because of the mounting racial violence in the South. A dramatic increase in the number of lynchings, reaching nearly sixty per year in the early 1910s, was a graphic indication of escalating racial tensions and fears. The threat of death and mob violence had become sufficiently widespread that the average black citizen no longer felt safe in the South. As one study of the black migration notes, both whites and black believed that lynchings were "one of the most important causes" and that the fear of the mob had greatly accelerated the exodus. One black man wrote from Georgia that "our people are Leaving the south in Large Numbers, for we want to be in a country where there is peace and happiness and where our wives and daughters will be respected." A Florida woman added, "Negroes are not so greatly disturbed about wages. They are tired of being treated as children; they want to be men."¹¹

10. Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 350.

11. See Florette Henri, *Black Migration Movement North, 1900-1920: The Road From Myth to Man* (New York, 1975), 49-58 (quotations); Tuttle, *Race Riot*; Ellsworth, *Death in the Promised Land*; also Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 349-50, 369-70; and Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings* (Urbana, 1995).

The codification of segregation in the 1890s and early 1900s did not fully relieve white anxiety. Moreover, the emergence of the “New South” and the economic and social transition that many leading whites sought for the region during the first two decades of the twentieth century heightened tensions among many rural and urban whites, especially those in the working classes. Many among this group feared they would lose economic and social status as their region embraced northern industrialism. Indeed, during this period many whites were forced off the farms and into cities to find work. These new wage earners worried that they were losing status to blacks and that the region was abandoning the racial, political and cultural values that had defined it and which had furnished them a special place because of their whiteness. The apprehension among whites in the region surfaced in race relations and in contacts with other minority groups. In Atlanta, Georgia, in the 1910s, pencil factory manager Leo Frank was falsely accused of raping and killing a young woman and then lynched because he was a Jew. Native whites resented all that Frank—a successful, urban, Jewish businessman—represented.¹²

Recruiting efforts directed toward blacks by northern businessmen, and especially the suggestion that someone would actually desire their services and be willing to pay a decent wage for them, was a new and welcomed development for black southerners. Not only was there work in these midwestern and northeastern cities, but the pay was dramatically higher than what an African American could make in Florida and in other southern states. Moreover, blacks could also vote and move about freely in the North. One black southerner wrote that “Duren the month of April and may when the Tax Collector who dutie it was to have the [Voter] Regester book in ever district so the collrd could regester he fail to do so. then when we ast him to do so he head them to Read Certain things and if they Miss a ward he could turn them down. therefore our people Could not Vote in this Last Election.” Many African Americans thought they had found the promised land in the North, and they wrote to their relatives and friends encouraging them to follow in their footsteps. One black man from Chicago told a friend in Hattiesburg: “I should have been here 20 years ago.

12. Leonard Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case* (New York, 1968).

I just begin to feel like a man. It's a great deal of pleasure in knowing that you have got some privilege My children are going to the same school with whites and I dont have to umble to no one. I have registered—Will vote the next election. . . ."¹³ However, all was not as well as this man and others initially believed.

In Florida and the South, the response of whites to the massive departure of black residents was two-fold. At first, white southerners ignored or expressed satisfaction with this exodus. For many years, up through the first decade of the twentieth century, white Floridians, for example, had seriously discussed sending local blacks to a foreign country or to a region in the western United States. Napoleon Broward, while serving as governor of Florida from 1905-1909, proposed that Congress purchase territory, either foreign or domestic, and transport blacks to this territory where they could live separately and govern themselves.¹⁴

As the migration escalated throughout Florida and the South in the years 1910 to 1917, racial tensions increased in both the North and the South. The migration combined with hardening racial stereotypes, the emergence of the second Ku Klux Klan, and the gradual build-up in preparation for World War I to amplify racial fears and personal insecurities in ways the nation had not witnessed since the Reconstruction era. African Americans viewed the migration as an opportunity to escape the oppression in the South and to secure freedom and opportunity in the North. White southerners worried that the migration was creating unrest and dissatisfaction among those who stayed behind. Northern whites expressed anger at the large black migration and its impact on housing, neighborhoods and jobs. The use of blacks as strikebreakers in the North and the rapid expansion in the membership of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in both regions during the years from 1914 to 1920 added to white concerns. Northern whites blamed blacks for the loss of jobs and income, while southern whites denounced the inte-

13. See John Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (Urbana, 1977), 186-89 (first quotation); William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War* (New York, 1982), 51-76 (second quotation); Henri, *Black Migration*, 60.

14. David R. Colburn and Richard Scher, *Florida's Gubernatorial Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Tallahassee, 1980), 221.

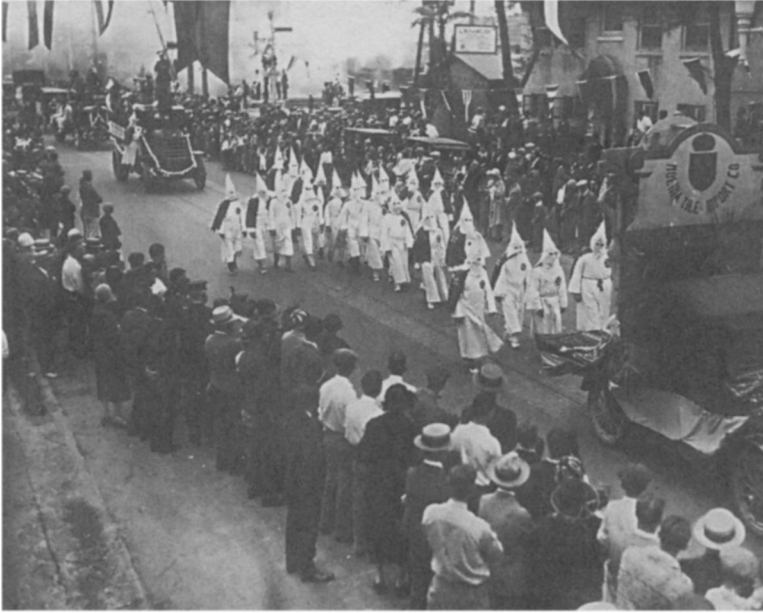
grationist efforts of the NAACP for raising black expectations and for promoting racial unrest in the region.¹⁵

Underscoring much of the racial hostility were stereotypes and misconceptions that pervaded white America. In his study of the race riot in Chicago in 1919, William Tuttle notes that whites believed that blacks "were mentally inferior, immoral, emotional, and criminal. Some secondary beliefs were that they were innately lazy, shiftless, boisterous, bumptious, and lacking in civic consciousness."¹⁶ Many of these assumptions were a carryover from the days of slavery. Newspapers reinforced these attitudes by publishing stories that highlighted black crimes and immoral behavior and by seldom reporting positively about the daily lives of black citizens and black families. Because few whites in the North had very limited, if any, personal contact with blacks, their racial attitudes were shaped by what they read or what they heard.

These depictions of blacks as less than human, and white fears in both North and South about racial integration, helped spur the revival of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia in 1915. In that year, the motion picture *The Birth of a Nation*, based on Thomas Dixon's book *The Clansman*, kindled great interest in the activities of the first Klan among whites and sparked the revival of the second Klan. Despite complaints from Harvard University President John Elliott, settlement house leader Jane Addams, and Booker T. Washington that the movie was inflammatory, and despite protests by whites and blacks against it in many northern cities, the film won a widespread following among many whites. Moreover, Dixon undercut the protests by persuading his friend, President Woodrow Wilson, to stage a private screening for himself, Mrs. Wilson, and the cabinet members and their families. Wilson lauded the film, which he said was "like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." The president's endorsement effectively purged the opposition. Whites flocked to see the movie. In

15. Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 348-53; also see George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge, 1967), especially 143-218.

16. Tuttle, *Race Riot*, 104. Also see David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: the First Century of the Ku Klux Klan, 1865-1965* (Garden City, NY, 1965) and Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York, 1994).



Members of the Ku Klux Klan march in the Fiesta of the American Tropics Parade in Miami, December 31, 1925. *Photograph courtesy of the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.*

New York City alone, it ran for forty-seven weeks and enjoyed sell-out crowds for much of this period.¹⁷

By portraying the Klan in heroic and romantic terms and alleging in its dramatic conclusion that the Klan had saved southern civilization from a cowardly and conniving black population, *The Birth of a Nation* proved instrumental in resurrecting this secret and violent organization in all parts of the country and in demeaning an entire generation of blacks. Although the movie grossly distorted the reality of Reconstruction, it coincided with white concerns about the black migration and the growing hostility toward racial and ethnic difference in American society. Wherever the movie was shown, race relations deteriorated and racial clashes frequently occurred.¹⁸

17. For a more detailed account of the impact of *The Birth of a Nation*, see Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 22-27.

18. *Ibid.*, 26-27.

The second Klan spread rapidly throughout the South and into many northern communities as well. Often allied with local police and sheriff's departments—indeed many police and sheriff's deputies moonlighted as Klansmen—the Klan sought to intimidate blacks into quietly accepting segregation and abandoning their aspirations for equality. Throughout this period, the Klan enjoyed a legitimacy in many areas of the country that it had not experienced previously. Prominent political and economic leaders in communities from Indiana to Florida belonged to the Klan. In an editorial in the *Gainesville Daily Sun* in 1922, the editor noted that he was a member of the Klan and praised the organization's many noble qualities.¹⁹ The Klan often conducted publicly advertised parades through the center of southern communities, much like those festivities that occurred on Memorial Day and the Fourth of July, with Confederate flags flying and large, boisterous crowds of whites cheering Klan members in full regalia.

World War I heightened racial concerns among whites at the same time that it sought to rally Americans behind the war effort. The spatial and social dislocation that took place during the mobilization efforts for World War I enhanced contact between whites and blacks in ways which whites, especially those from the South, were not comfortable. In particular, the arming and training of black soldiers in the South, where most of the training bases were located, increased fears among white natives about the potential for armed insurrection. The army worried particularly about where to train the predominantly black 92nd Division and eventually decided to train the unit in the North. But many other black troops, especially in support units, received their training or were stationed in the South. Skirmishes between whites and blacks often occurred in southern communities when black soldiers came to town and failed to follow southern social customs, and the threat of more serious violence seemed omnipresent. German propaganda added considerably to white anguish by encouraging African Americans to lay down their arms or turn them against their real enemies—southern whites. In August 1917, the worst fears of whites materialized when armed black soldiers killed seventeen white residents of Houston, Texas, following a prolonged period of harassment of black troops.²⁰ For many whites, Armageddon had arrived.

19. *Gainesville Daily Sun*, December 30, 1922.

20. Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 336-40.

During the war years, racial confrontations escalated and rumors of pending racial assaults circulated to such an extent that conditions boded ill for race relations following the war. Clashes frequently occurred in many southern communities between black soldiers and local whites, although none was as severe as the incident in Houston. At East St. Louis, Illinois, black competition for white jobs during the war years ignited a fierce race riot on July 2, 1917, in which nine whites and thirty-nine blacks lost their lives, and black homes were indiscriminately torched. Over three hundred buildings in the black section of town were destroyed with a value above \$500,000. Shouts of "Burn 'em out!" were heard throughout the melee and would become the battle cry of white mobs during this period.²¹

Compounding white anxiety and hostility, rumors circulated in 1918 that black soldiers had been warmly received in Europe and had their way with white women in France. White militants back home warned other whites that black veterans would no longer be content with black women when they returned from Europe. Such claims by militants tapped into one of the great fears of southern white men. Southern culture had been constructed around a set of mores and values which placed white women at its center and in which the purity of their conduct and their manners represented the refinement of that culture. An attack on women not only represented a violation of the South's foremost taboo, but it also threatened to dismantle the very nature of southern society. The sexual concerns trumpeted by white militants also constituted part of the sexual lore that had developed around slavery and the alleged bestial nature of black men. Within this culture, white men had the responsibility to uphold the honor of that society and to protect white women from the alleged depravity of black men.²²

These cultural and racial concerns thoroughly permeated Florida during this era. As the massive exodus of African Americans from Florida's northern counties continued during the war and the postwar years, Governors Park Trammell (1913-1917) and

21. Rudwick, *Race Riot in East St. Louis*, 41-57.

22. Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 346-47, 361; William Harper, "Memoir on Slavery," in *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860*, ed. by Drew Gilpin Faust (Baton Rouge, 1981), 118-19. Also see Glenda E. Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 1996) and Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the South Since Emancipation* (New York, 1984).



Governor Sidney Johnston Catts (1917-1921) helped to perpetuate and intensify the nativist and racist atmosphere in Florida during the 1910s and 1920s. *Photograph courtesy of the Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.*

his successor Sidney Catts (1917-1921) initially ignored it. Trammell, who had been the state's attorney general prior to becoming governor, was no friend of black Floridians. During his attorney generalship, he had disregarded the lynching of twenty-nine blacks and did the same when another twenty-one were lynched during

his governorship. The leading spokesman of nativism in Florida, Catts had been elected on a platform that was anti-Catholic and anti-black. Once in office, he publicly labeled blacks "an inferior race," and he refused to condemn two lynchings in 1919. When the NAACP complained about the lynchings and the governor's failure to take action against the lynchers, Catts denounced the organization and blacks generally, declaring that "your race is always harping on the disgrace it brings to the state by a concourse of white people taking revenge for dishonoring a white woman, when if you would . . . [teach] your people not to kill our white officers and disgrace our white women, you would keep down a thousand times greater disgrace."²³

Catts reversed himself, however, when New South business leaders, especially those in the lumber and turpentine companies, began to complain that the continued out-migration of blacks was having a devastating effect on labor availability and labor costs in Florida. Newspapers and businessmen in the state echoed the Columbus, Georgia, *Enquirer Sun* which observed, "the black laborer is the best labor the South can get, no other would work long under the same conditions." Catts suddenly pleaded with blacks to stay in Florida, and called for unity and harmony among the races. Few black citizens were persuaded, however.²⁴ Moreover, policies by local officials seemed to run precisely counter to the governor's call for peaceful race relations. Officials in Jacksonville, for example, warned labor agents against recruiting local blacks, charged them a \$1,000 licensing fee for recruiting black citizens, and on occasion threatened their lives to discourage them from persuading more blacks to leave. Despite the efforts of state and local officials, the migration continued to escalate as a silent protest against racial conditions in Florida and in the South generally.

With the end of World War I, racial concerns about the black migration and returning black veterans coincided with the resurgence of nativism. Whites expressed concern that their society was being overrun by people who had very different values and political beliefs than they did. Author Madison Grant captured their concerns best in a book entitled *The Passing of the Great Race*, which was originally published in 1916 and then reissued in 1921 and

23. Colburn and Scher, *Florida's Gubernatorial Politics*, 222.

24. Henri, *Black Migration*, 72; Colburn and Scher, *Florida's Gubernatorial Politics*, 222.

1922 because of its widespread popularity. Grant believed that the superior Nordic race was in danger of being overwhelmed by the increasing numbers of inferior peoples, especially immigrants from southeastern Europe and blacks. Fearing the destruction of American civilization, Grant saw miscegenation as the great evil and urged that laws be strengthened to preserve the Nordic race.²⁵

The massive wave of immigration prior to World War I along with the migration of African Americans in the nation's cities spurred nativist opposition. The second Ku Klux Klan, in particular, owed much of its success to fears about ethnic and racial difference and competition for jobs, and the organization played upon American concerns by attacking both blacks and immigrants indiscriminately. Books like *The Passing of the Great Race* provided a persuasive intellectual defense for immigration restriction and racial separation.²⁶

Despite mounting political support for legislation to limit the impact of ethnic and racial groups, domestic developments continued to create social havoc as the nation reconverted to a peacetime economy. Urban workers, for example, complained bitterly about hourly wages and working conditions which had remained unchanged during the war years, and many walked out on strike when management refused to negotiate. The particular involvement of recent immigrants in the labor unrest and in the Socialist movement in 1919 and 1920 led many to believe that American institutions were being subverted by ethnic and racial militants. Emotions ran so high in some communities that residents convinced themselves that Communist labor groups, with allies in the NAACP, were plotting to overthrow the United States. Evangelist Billy Sunday sensed their concerns when he told an audience, "If I had my way . . . , I would stand them [Communists] up before a firing squad and save space on our ships."²⁷

The continued migration of black southerners and the expansion of black neighborhoods into white residential areas further magnified racial concerns in the North. In Chicago, where the black population had expanded from approximately 30,000 in 1900 to 109,000 in 1920, and where competition for housing and

25. Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 149-57. Also see Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (New York, 1916).

26. Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 149-57.

27. William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago, 1958), 66.

jobs was understandably intense, a peaceful beach scene on July 27, 1919, turned ugly when whites stoned a black swimmer who allegedly crossed over into the white area. Racial confrontations erupted throughout the city on the following day with both groups arming themselves and attacking one another. By the second day, two armed camps had formed, and whites assaulted the black residential area on the south side of the city. For thirteen days, Chicago was literally without law and order as the violence went back and forth, with black residents mostly on the receiving end. Over 38 people were killed, another 520 wounded, and 1,000 people lost their homes in one of the nation's worst race riots.²⁸ The violence in Chicago, East St. Louis, Omaha, and several other northern communities left the dreams and aspirations of black citizens shattered.

As events in these cities documented, black citizens had changed their attitudes about white violence and intimidation. No longer content to sit quietly by while white mobs stormed their communities and destroyed their property, blacks began to defend themselves against the mounting violence. Encouraged to do so by the NAACP and other black leaders, blacks appeared in public with rifles at their sides. Many also volunteered to assist white police officers in defending black prisoners whose lives were threatened by white mobs. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, a band of armed blacks arrived at the jail to offer assistance to police officers who were outmanned and outgunned in an effort to protect black prisoners from a hostile white crowd. The presence of an armed black population in their midst, however, sent shivers through the white community and contributed to a paranoia that fed racial fears and hostility.²⁹

Newspapers in the South added to white fears by publishing almost a daily litany of alleged racial attacks and rapes by black men against white women. A day seldom went by during the period from 1917 to 1923 in which an incident of this kind was not reported on the front page.³⁰ Such news helped sell papers to readers who had a lurid fascination with the violent and grotesque.

28. Spear, *Black Chicago*, vii, 201-22; Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (New York, 1983), 17. Also see Lisabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York, 1990), 30-38.

29. Rudwick, *Race Riot in East St. Louis*; Ellsworth, *Death in the Promised Land*; and Tuttle, *Race Riot*.

30. See especially *Atlanta Constitution*, *Gainesville Daily Sun*, and *Jacksonville Times-Union* in late 1922.

Violent retribution was the accepted manner of response in the South, in particular, but also increasingly in the North as well, for crimes against white women. Lynchings escalated steadily, from thirty-eight in 1917 to fifty-eight in 1918, as whites sought to reimpose segregation following the war and as the competition for jobs intensified amidst a troubled postwar economy. During the period from 1918 to 1927, lynch mobs took the lives of 454 persons, of whom 416 were African American. In Florida, 47 black citizens were lynched during the same period. It was open season on African Americans, with any violation of southern racial codes, not just rape, sufficient to warrant execution. So violent and inhumane did society become during this era that communities posted public notices in newspapers inviting people to come and watch the burning of a live Negro.³¹

Florida was very much a part of this violent period. In addition to the forty-seven blacks who died by lynching, the Klan attacked the black community of Ocoee, Florida, in western Orange County in November 1920 when two black men attempted to vote. Mose Norman and July Perry had gone to the polls to protest the exclusion of blacks from the political process. Perry had arrived first and been chased away by local officials. He returned later in the day with Norman and also brought his rifle to protect them. Word quickly spread that Perry was armed, and sheriff's deputies, accompanied by Klansmen, arrived that evening in Ocoee to arrest Perry and Norman. The two refused to go quietly, however, and other black residents defended them. Within minutes a gun battle erupted during which deputies and Klansmen killed six black residents. Two whites were also killed in the hail of bullets. In the aftermath of the gun battle, deputies and Klansmen turned their anger against the entire black community, destroying twenty-five black homes, two churches, and a lodge.³² Whites justified their actions in the Orlando newspaper, pointing out that Perry had armed himself

31. See Tolnay and Beck, *Festival of Violence* and W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana, 1993) for lynching statistics during this era; also Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 172; Williamson, *Crucible of Race*; and Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, 1990), 228-35.

32. "Lynching - Ocoee, Florida," Part 7, Series A, Reel 9, Group 1, Series C, Administration Files, Box C-353, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (microfilm edition). Also see Lester Dabbs, Jr., "A Report of the Circumstances and Events of the Race Riot on November 2, 1920, in Ocoee, Florida" (master's thesis, Stetson University, 1969).

and shot at a deputized posse that was trying to arrest him. To Perry, Norman and other black residents, the deputized posse looked more like a Ku Klux Klan mob.

Approximately two years later, race relations took another terrible turn in the state when a white school teacher in Perry was allegedly murdered by an escaped black convict in December 1922. Her badly beaten body was discovered by local residents less than one month before the Rosewood incident. The convict and an alleged accomplice were quickly captured by the sheriff and placed in the Perry jail. Local whites, joined by men from as far away as Georgia and South Carolina, gathered at the jail in Perry and forcibly took the two black men from the sheriff and his deputies. They escorted Charlie Wright, the escaped convict, outside town where they beat him brutally in order to extract a confession and to determine if others were involved. Despite the severity of his injuries, Wright refused to indict anyone else in the crime. He was subsequently burned at the stake. The mob's vengeance remained undiminished, however, and members subsequently seized two other black men whom they suspected of being involved in the teacher's murder. Both black men were shot and then hung, although neither was ever implicated in the crime. Following the murders, the white mob, still not appeased, turned its fury on the entire black community and burned a church, Masonic lodge, amusement hall, and black school. Several homes were also put to the torch, despite the fact that no local black resident was accused of participating in the crime and most had expressed their sympathies and horror at the death of the school teacher. Although many in the mob may have belonged to the local Klan, none wore regalia during the attack against those charged with the teacher's death or during the assault on the black community.³³

The Perry story was recounted on the front page of the *Gainesville Daily Sun* from December 4th to the 13th, and it left local white and black citizens in a state of high tension. The day after events in Perry concluded the *Sun* reported that two blacks killed a white farmer at Jacobs, Florida, near Marianna.³⁴ This story and rumors of other such acts in the *Sun* caused great consternation in the white community. Whites lived in fear, apparently persuaded by such news stories that blacks were bent on taking revenge against

33. *Gainesville Daily Sun*, especially December 8-9, 1922.

34. *Ibid.*, December 14, 1922.

white women and men for the destruction of the black community at Perry. Black residents in the area knew that such stories were untrue but they could not persuade local white neighbors otherwise.

Many local blacks worried that they were sitting on a tinder box that might well explode at any moment. Their premonitions proved only too accurate. Less than a month after Perry, following the alleged assault against Fanny Taylor in Sumner on the morning of January 1, 1923, a group of white men descended on Rosewood. Over the next few days, at least eight people would be killed and the predominantly black township burned to the ground. What had been a peaceful, law-abiding black community had been consumed by white rage and a society distorted by race.

Historian George Tindall wrote in 1967 that Rosewood was the last of such racial clashes in the South.³⁵ The violence ended as the state and national economies improved and as blacks and whites increasingly condemned the widespread destruction. Moreover, few could point to an increase of rape or violence by blacks as justification for such community-wide violence. In Florida, white businessmen feared that the racial violence at Perry and Rosewood would discourage tourists from coming to the Sunshine state. The economic boom in the state in the 1920s offered many the first chance for real prosperity, and few wanted to jeopardize that. Business leaders pressured political representatives to stop the violence and to restore law and order. Individual acts of violence and lynching continued in Florida and elsewhere, but a modicum of order and stability had returned to southern life. It was a civility, however, that offered black residents little more than a respite from violence and it offered no relief to the former residents of Rosewood.

35. Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 155.