

The Tulsa Race Riot Tea Party/Mixer: Roles

Dick Rowland: I dropped out of high school to take a job shining shoes in a white-owned and white-patronized shine parlor located downtown on Main. Shoe shines usually cost a dime in those days, but we were often tipped a nickel for each shine, and sometimes more. On a busy day, I pocketed a fair amount of money. As a teenaged African American man with few other job prospects, this was a good job.

There were no toilet facilities for blacks at the shine parlor where I worked. The owner had arranged for his African American employees to use a “colored” restroom located nearby in the Drexel. To get to the washroom, located on the top floor, I rode in the building’s elevator. Elevators in those days required an operator, usually a woman.

On the day the riot started, Sarah Page operated the elevator. I went to get on the elevator, and I tripped because the elevator hadn’t stopped properly at the floor. As I tried to catch my fall, I grabbed onto the arm of Sarah Page, who then screamed. A clerk from a clothing store heard the scream and saw me running out of the building. He called the police and said I attempted to rape Sarah Page. The next day I was arrested. I feared for my life because in those days, black men were lynched without trial. I did not attempt to rape Sarah Page. Later, I was acquitted when Page refused to press charges. I was cleared and all charges were dropped, but not before hundreds were killed and Greenwood was burned to the ground.

B. C. Franklin: I was one of the African American attorneys in Greenwood, that’s what the black section of Tulsa was called back then. I was sitting in the courtroom during a recess in a trial when I overheard some other lawyers discussing the alleged rape attempt. “I don’t believe a damn word of it,” one of the men said. “Why, I know [Dick Rowland] and have known him a good while. That’s not in him.” But the white newspapers in town stirred up the townsfolk with a headline that read “Nab Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator.”

In 1919 alone, more than seventy-five blacks were lynched by white mobs—including more than a dozen black soldiers, some of whom were murdered while still in uniform. During the first year following the war, eleven African Americans were burned—alive—at the stake by white mobs. [Ellwood]

Certainly, there was a sense that if the law was going to be upheld so that a black man could get a fair trial, then it would be through the actions of black men, not through official means. When black soldiers returned from fighting in World War I, they had enough of being second-class citizens after fighting for other people’s freedom. They were willing to take action. My law offices were burned to the ground during the riot. I reopened my law offices in a tent.

C. F. Gabe: I saw the riot from beginning to end. In the beginning I attempted to turn back cars of black men who feared that Dick Rowland was going to be lynched. There were huge crowds of whites lining the streets and sidewalks near the courthouse, carrying guns and liquor bottles. As a group of black men were leaving the area, one of its members, an African American World War I veteran who had with him an army-issue revolver, was approached by one of the white members of the mob. When the white man tried to take the gun away from the African American man, the gun went off. That started the riot.

Later, I witnessed the killings of blacks in the streets, the lootings of stores, the burning of black homes and businesses by white mobs. Friends came by my house and said, "The white folks is killing all of the [black people] in town and burning all of their houses." I stayed inside, but when they started shooting my house and pieces of my piano began to fall I believed them. At that point, I was rounded up and carried to the convention center then the fairgrounds for internment. I ended up being arrested. Instead of allowing us to keep our guns and protect our homes, the National Guard took our weapons and put us in internment camps for our "safety." In the meantime, deputized whites looted our homes and stores and burned what was left. Then the National Guard took us to Greenwood to clean up the destruction to help pay for our food in the camp. I tell you, this was not right.

Sheriff Willard McCullough: I was sheriff at the time that Dick Rowland was brought to jail and charged with attempted rape. Tempers were running high with both blacks and white. I was not going to have a lynch mob do the same thing to Dick Rowland on my watch. I put Rowland in the hands of deputies in a secure part of the building. I told them to take the elevator to the top floor and disable it. I also told the officers to shoot anyone, including me, who came to get Rowland. The crowds gathered.

I asked Deputy Barney Cleaver, a black officer, and C.F. Gabe to get the blacks to go home. I tried to get the whites to disperse as well. Before the night ended, there were about 2,000 white men gathered at the courthouse. Then a bunch of them tried to get guns at the National Guard Armory. When they didn't get guns there, they broke into Bardon's Sporting Goods and took guns and ammunition. Once the first shot was fired, all hell broke loose. People ask what happened. Here's what I know. Some white man tried to disarm a black man and the gun went off during that scuffle. Later that night I saw deputized white men burning and looting in Greenwood, the black section of Tulsa. Those men told me they were "hunting Negroes." They went all over South Tulsa, taking black servants from their white employees. Everyone had guns and the police seemed to be behind it.

Police Commissioner Jim Adkison: Things were out of control in Greenwood. It was like a war zone. People were shooting each other. There was looting and burning. We had people storming the National Guard Armory. We were outnumbered. Police Chief Gustafson called in his entire force—around 65 men—and Gustafson and I began commissioning “special deputies”—perhaps as many as 400 of them to help restore order. Remember, there were thousands of people running the streets that night—May 31, 1921. Of course, in retrospect, I should have been more careful about the selection of men we deputized and armed. But it was a very tense situation. We never told anyone to kill black people or torch their homes. Our instructions were to disarm people and to absolutely prevent looting and burning.

O. W. Gurley: I was one of the wealthiest Greenwood residents. I owned the Gurley Hotel. I tried my hardest to defuse the situation with Dick Rowland and the whites coming to lynch him. I was known for fighting crime in our section of town, which was known as Black Wall Street. I talked with the Sheriff McCullough and I believed him when he said that Dick Rowland was safe and he wasn't going to let anyone lynch Dick. I told the folks back in Greenwood that there wasn't going to be a lynching, but they called me a liar and threatened to shoot my heart out. The African American veterans came back from France with ideas about equality. And Tulsa wanted to return to the way things were before the war. They figured they fought for equality in France, and they weren't coming home after risking their lives and be insulted in their own homes. I'll tell you, I barely made it out of the riot alive. I was shot at, my hotel was burned, residents from my hotel were rounded up and interned.

Mary Parrish: I was a teacher in Greenwood before the riots. Shortly after the riots, I published a book called *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*. When I looked out the window of my apartment building on the morning of June 1, 1921, I saw armed white men gathering nearby. I left the building, running north on Greenwood Ave., away from the gunfire, amidst showers of bullets from the machine gun located in the granary and from men who were quickly surrounding our district. I saw the airplanes coming in. There was a great shadow in the sky and upon a second look we discerned that this cloud was caused by fast approaching aeroplanes. It then dawned upon us that the enemy had organized in the night was invading our district the same as the Germans invaded France and Belgium. The National Guard might say they came in to protect the citizens of Greenwood, but by disarming the black men and not disarming the white men, they allowed the destruction—the looting and burning—of our community to happen.

Thelma Booker: The National Guard came knocking on our door and told us we had to leave our homes. They said it wasn't safe and they were going to protect us. We didn't feel too comfortable about that. Then they marched us through the white area of Tulsa, made us raise our hands in the air as we walked through as if we were going to attack someone with our house slippers. First, we were taken to the convention center, then to the ball field, and finally to the fairgrounds, like we were prize cattle. You know, they even went and rounded up black folks who worked as domestics in white people's homes. Oh sure, they fed us and gave us medical attention. And while our homes and businesses were looted and burned behind us, they made us stay until a white person came and vouched for us. Anyone who was vouched for received a card. Anyone without a card on the streets could be arrested. Of course, we had to pay for our food and all while we were being "protected." We were sent out to clean up the city. We were paid standard laborers' wages. It was by no means an easy existence, but some whites soon complained that we were being "spoiled" at the fairgrounds and by the attention given by the Red Cross and other charitable organizations.

Green E. Smith: I shouldn't have even been at the Tulsa Race Riot. I lived in Muskogee and I was just in town for a few days to put a cooling system in the Dreamland Theater in Greenwood. I went to the Dreamland at about 5 a.m. I wanted to get the system installed and catch a train back to Muskogee. I heard shooting and when I looked outside, it looked like the world was coming to end with bullets. I stayed where I was. Around 8 a.m., it seemed like things had slowed down a bit. But at 9:30 a gang came down the street knocking on the doors and setting buildings on fire. They were policemen. People keep asking, "How did you know they were policemen?" I knew because they wore badges that said "special police." I watched them go into one building after another and when they came out the buildings were smoking. When I left the building, I was arrested because they were arresting or rounding up all of the blacks. I did finally get back to Muskogee, but not before I witnessed the destruction of Greenwood. One young woman was half-lying, half sitting, her eyes were filled with misery. I asked her if she was sick. "No, I ain't sick. I ain't got nothin'." That's all she said, but she was right. These people worked their whole lives to buy a home, a piano, a dining room table, and it one night, their homes were snatched away.

Colonel Rooney: I was in charge of the local units of the National Guard. I first knew there was trouble when a group of white men tried to break into the armory to take guns. We held them back. When I did hear that the National Guard needed to move in to Greenwood, I had planned to put a line of troops around the town, but I didn't have enough men to protect the line. Instead, I ordered my men to start gathering up Greenwood residents and taking them to internment centers. We figured if they were gathered together, they could more easily be protected against the mobs sweeping through Greenwood. Some Greenwood residents did not want to give up their guns, so there were skirmishes. We certainly didn't anticipate that looters would come in and burn the homes of the black Greenwood residents.

Judge Oliphant: I was 71 at the time of the riot. I owned rental property in the black section of town called Greenwood. I left my part of town in Tulsa and went over to Greenwood when I heard about the riot. I called the police department about 8 a.m. to ask for help in protecting my property. Then four uniformed officers and deputies came. Instead of protecting property, they were the chief fellows starting fires. I saw Dr. A. J. Jackson, one of the best surgeons in the country, come out of his home with his hands in the air saying, “Here I am. I want to go with you.” Jackson was surrendering to the officers. Two shot him, and he bled to death. Then I watched them throw gas and oil on Dr. Jackson’s house. The scene of destruction was unreal:

They were scattered around there, quite a large number of people looting the houses and taking out everything. . . . Some were singing, some were playing pianos that were taken out of the buildings, some were running Victrolas, some were dancing a jig and just having a rollicking easy good time in a business which they thought they were doing that [which] was upright (Brophy 57)

There were men, women, and children just going into the homes of blacks who the National Guard had rounded up and taken to the fairgrounds. Just don’t seem decent to me. Twelve hundred and fifty-six homes were destroyed in that riot.

Walter White: The NAACP sent me into Tulsa see what was happening. There were thousands of whites gathered at the jailhouse. Some had left to get guns from the National Guard Armory. Others broke into a sporting good store. The black veterans arrived armed as well, but they were turned back. Shortly after I arrived, I learned that special deputy sheriffs were being sworn in to guard the town from a rumored counterattack by the Negroes. It occurred to me that I could get myself sworn in as one of these deputies. It was even easier to do this than I had expected. That evening in the City Hall I had to answer only three questions—name, age, and address. I might have been a thug, a murderer, an escaped convict, a member of the mob itself that had laid waste a large area of the city—none of these mattered; my skin was apparently white, and that was enough. Because I am very light complexioned, I was given one of these special deputy commissions. I was told, “Now you can go out and shoot any N___ you see, and the law’ll be behind you.” I spent a tense night riding about the city in the company of four members of the Ku Klux Klan. I wrote an article for the *Nation* magazine about that June night in 1921.

(nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/segregation/text2/investigatelynchings.pdf)

Mrs. Jackson: A mob attacked my home and killed my husband on the night of June 1, 1921. My husband was a surgeon, a black surgeon, who was respected by blacks and whites alike for his skills. My husband and I fought off the mob that attacked our home. An officer who knew my husband came up to the house and assured him that if he would surrender he would be protected. This my husband did. The officer sent him under guard to the convention hall, where black people were being placed for protection. En route to the hall, disarmed, Dr. Jackson was shot and killed in cold blood. The officer who had assured Dr. Jackson of protection stated to me, “Dr. Jackson . . . did only what any red-blooded man would have done under similar circumstances in defending his home. Dr. Jackson was murdered by white ruffians.”

John Hope Franklin: I was a child at the time of the riot. I later became a historian; my book, *From Slavery to Freedom*, sold more than 3.5 million copies. My father, B. C. Franklin, was in Greenwood at the time. We were at home in an all-black town nearby, and we didn't know what happened to my father. By the time the riot had ended, the damage was staggering. As many as 300 African Americans had been killed by city and state officials, and deputized government agents. Every church, school, and business in Greenwood had been set on fire. Thirty-five square blocks of property was laid waste in ashes, more than 1,200 houses were destroyed, and nearly 10,000 African Americans were rendered homeless.

One of the most profound effects [of the riot] in the long run was what it did to the city. It robbed it of its honesty, and it sentenced it to 75 years of denial. . . . The term “riot” itself seems somehow inadequate to describe the violence that took place. For some, what occurred in Tulsa on May 31 and June 1, 1921, was a massacre, a pogrom, or, to use a more modern term, an ethnic cleansing. For others, it was nothing short of a race war. But whatever term is used, one thing is certain: When it was all over, Tulsa's African American district had been turned into a scorched wasteland of vacant lots, crumbling storefronts, burned churches, and blackened, leafless trees.

Otis G. Clark: I was 18 at the time of what was called the Tulsa Riots. I grew up in Greenwood, the African American section of Tulsa, which folks called “Black Wall Street.” Greenwood had two theaters, two pool halls, hotels, and cafes and stuff. We had an amazing little city. . . . Greenwood had 15,000 residents, a 65-room hotel, several banks, and two newspapers.

During the night of May 31, 1921, I dodged bullets, raced through alleys to escape armed mobs and saw my family’s home burned to the ground. Gunfire and the blaze from the fire was getting closer, and all we had on our minds was getting out of the house before the “war” got there. I went to a mortuary, where a man was planning to get an ambulance out of the garage to help victims of the violence. The man was just about to open the door when a bullet shattered his hand into pieces, blood flying everywhere. I ran through streets and alleys until I saw my cousin: I jumped in the car and we hadn’t gone two blocks before we turned this corner and ran right into a crowd of white men coming toward us with guns.

When the smoke cleared over Greenwood, 35 square blocks had been burned to the ground. More than 1,200 houses were destroyed, along with dozens of office buildings, restaurants, churches, and schools. It looked like a war had hit the area. Not a single house or building stood untouched. Greenwood was a huge wall of fire, the heat so strong I felt it down the block. I fled Tulsa on a freight train headed north. I didn’t get off until I hit Milwaukee.

Ruth Phelps: Honestly, I couldn’t believe what was happening in Tulsa. We lived outside of the city along the road to Sand Springs, about a day’s walk north from Tulsa. We helped out the black folks running away from Tulsa. We hid and fed about 20 black riot victims in the basement of our home for most of a week. We believed that the Golden Rule applied whether people were white, black, or Native American. So when terrified and hungry black people came to our door, we hid them in our basement. I put an extra pot of beans and sow belly on the stove. Our house became a “safe house” for black Tulsans who were not imprisoned by the white authorities. Just like the Underground Railroad, blacks walked through the woods and along creek beds at night. Then we hid them during the day until it was safe for them to move on. We didn’t ask what happened that night in Tulsa. We knew by watching them huddle and cry in the basement that it was terrible. When we drove to Greenwood later and saw the burned down remains of their homes, we were glad that we offered sanctuary, and they knew that God lived in some white folks. (tulsareparations.org/TulsaRiot3Of3.htm)

Mary Jo Erhardt: After a sleepless night, punctuated by the sounds of gunfire, I woke up early in my room at the YWCA on the morning of June 1. Heading downstairs, I heard Jack, the African American porter who worked at the building. “Miss Mary! Oh, Miss Mary!” he said, “Let me in quick.” He told me armed whites were chasing him. I quickly put him in the walk-in refrigerator. I hid him behind some beef carcasses and returned to the hall door when I heard a loud knocking at the service entrance door. A large white man was trying to open the door. He had a revolver pointed in my direction. “What do you want?” I asked sharply. Strangely, those guns frightened me not at all. I was so angry I could have torn those ruffians apart—three armed white men chasing one lone, harmless Negro. I cannot recall in all my life feeling hatred toward any person, until then. Apparently my feelings did not show, for one answered, “Where did he go?” “Where did WHO go?” I responded.

“That [black man],” one demanded, “did you let him in here?”

“Mister,” I said, “I’m not letting ANYBODY in here!” which was perfectly true. I had already let in all I intended.

It was at least 10 minutes before I felt secure enough to release Jack. He was nearly frozen, dressed thinly as he was for the hot summer night, but he was ALIVE!
(tulsareparations.org/TulsaRiot3Of3.htm)

Maria Morales Gutierrez: My husband and I had recently emigrated from Mexico when the riot broke out. We were living in a small house off Peoria Ave., near Independence St. Hearing gunfire and screams from the street on the morning of June 1, I walked outside, where I saw two small African American children, who had been separated from their parents, walking along the street. Suddenly, an airplane appeared on the horizon, bearing down on the two frightened youngsters. I ran out into the street, and scooped the children into my arms and out of danger. A group of whites later demanded that I turn the two children over to them. I told them no. It’s a wonder they didn’t shoot me the way they had been shooting and burning blacks that night.
(tulsareparations.org/TulsaRiot3Of3.htm)

Don Ross, Oklahoma State Representative: I first learned about the riot when I was about 15 from Booker T. Washington High School teacher and riot survivor W. D. Williams. Mr. Williams said on the evening of May 31, 1921, his school graduation and prom were canceled. Dick Rowland was in jail, accused of raping a white woman Sarah Page “on a public elevator in broad daylight.” After Rowland was arrested, angry whites gathered at the courthouse intent on lynching Dick. Armed blacks came to the courthouse to protect him. There was a scuffle between a black and a white man and a shot rang out. A race riot broke out. Mr. Williams said blacks defended their community for a while, “but then the airplanes came dropping bombs.” All of the black community was burned to the ground and 300 people died.”

I didn't believe my teacher. I said, “Greenwood was never burned. Ain't no 300 people dead. We're too old for fairy tales.” The next day Mr. Williams asked me to stay after class. He showed me pictures and postcards of Mount Zion Baptist Church on fire, the Dreamland Theater in shambles, whites with guns standing over dead bodies, blacks being marched to internment camps, trucks loaded with caskets, and a yellowing newspaper article accounting block after block of destruction—“30, 75, even 300 dead.” Everything was just as he had described it. I was to learn later that Rowland was assigned a lawyer who was a prominent member of the Ku Klux Klan. “What you think, fat mouth?” Mr. Williams asked me after I saw his photo album. When I became state representative, I initiated legislation to create the Tulsa Race Riot Commission. (*Much of this is quoted directly from Don Ross' prologue to the Tulsa Race Riot Report.*)