

Tulsa Race Riot

**A Report by the Oklahoma Commission
to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921**

February 28, 2001

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Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921

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February 21, 2001

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Members of the City Council
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Honorable Stratton Taylor
 President Pro Tempore of the Senate
 Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73105

Dear Sir or Madam:

Pursuant to House Joint Resolution 1035 (1997), as amended, I have the honor to transmit here with the Final Report of Findings and Recommendations of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission. The report includes the commission's findings on each specific item assigned it by statute, and it also explains the methods and processes that led to those findings. In addition, the commission has exercised the option, granted it by law, to make recommendations concerning reparations related to the tragedy.

This Commission fully understands that it is neither judge nor jury. We have no binding legal authority to assign culpability, to determine damages, to establish a remedy, or to order either restitution or reparations. However, in our interim report in February, 2000 the majority of Commissioners declared that reparations to the historic Greenwood community in real and tangible form would be good public policy and do much to repair the emotional and physical scars of this terrible incident in our shared past. We listed several recommended courses of action including direct payments to riot survivors and descendants; a scholarship fund available to students affected by the riot; establishment of an economic development enterprise zone in the historic Greenwood district; a memorial for the riot victims.

In the final report issued to day, the majority of Commissioners continue to support these recommendations. While each Commissioner has their own opinion about the type of reparations that they would advocate, the majority has no question about the appropriateness of reparations. The recommendations are not intended to be all inclusive, but rather to give policy makers a sense of the Commission's feelings about reparations and a starting place for the creation of their own ideas.

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Prologue

By State Representative Don Ross

Personal belongings and household goods had been removed from many homes and piled in the streets. On the steps of the few houses that remained sat feeble and gray Negro men and women and occasionally a small child. The look in their eyes was one of dejection and supplication. Judging from their attitude, it was not of material consequence to them whether they lived or died. Harmless themselves, they apparently could not conceive the brutality and fiendishness of men who would deliberately set fire to the homes of their friends and neighbors and just as deliberately shoot them down in their tracks.

Tulsa Daily World, June 2, 1921

A mob destroyed 35-square-blocks of the African American Community during the evening of May 31, through the afternoon of June 1, 1921. It was a tragic, infamous moment in Oklahoma and the nation's history. The worse civil disturbance since the Civil War. In the aftermath of the death and destruction the people of our state suffered from a fatigue of faith — some still search for a statue of limitation on morality, attempting to forget the longevity of the residue of injustice that at best can leave little room for the healing of the heart. Perhaps this report, and subsequent humanitarian recovery events by the governments and the good people of the state will extract us from the guilt and confirm the commandment of a good and just God — leaving the deadly deeds of 1921 buried in the call for redemption, historical correctness, and repair. Then we can proudly sing together:

“We know we belong to this land.
“And the land we belong to is grand,
and when we say, ay yippy yi ki yea,
“We're only saying, you're doing fine
Oklahoma.”

“Oklahoma, you're O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A,
Oklahoma OK.”

Hopefully with this report, the feeling of the state will be quickened, the conscience of the brutal city will be ignited, the hypocrisy of the nation will be exposed, and the crimes against God and man denounced. Oklahoma can set such an example. It was Abolitionist Frederick Douglass who reminded a callous nation that “[A] government that can give liberty in its Constitution ought to have the power to protect liberty, and impose civilized behavior in its administration.”

Tulsa's Race Relations Are Ceremonial

In the 80 years hence, survivor, descendants, and a bereaved community seeks that administration in some action akin to justice. Tulsa's race relations are more ceremonial — liken to a bad marriage, with spouses living in the same quarters but housed in different rooms, each escaping one another by perpetuating a separateness of silence. The French political historian Alexis d'Tocqueville noted, “Once the majority has irrevocably decided a question, it is no longer discussed. This is because the majority is a power that does not respond well to criticism.”

I first learn about the riot when I was about 15 from Booker T. Washington High School teacher and riot survivor W.D. Williams. In his slow, laboring voice Mr. W.D. as he was fondly known, said on the evening of May 31, 1921, his school graduation, and prom were canceled. Dick Rowland, who had dropped out of high school a few years before to become rich in the lucrative trade of shining shoes, was in jail, accused of raping a white woman Sarah Page, “on a public elevator in broad daylight.” After Rowland was arrested, angry white vigilantes gathered at the courthouse intent on lynching the shine boy. Armed blacks integrated the mob to protect him. There was a scuffle between a black and a white man, a shot rang out. The crowd scattered. It was about 10:00 a.m. A race riot had broken out. He said blacks defended

their community for awhile, “but then the airplanes came dropping bombs.” All of the black community was burned to the ground and 300 people died.”

More annoyed than bored, I leaped from my chair and spoke: “Greenwood was never burned. Ain’t no 300 people dead. We’re too old for fairy tales.” Calling a teacher a liar was a capital offense Mr. W.D. snorted with a twist that framed his face with anger. He ignored my obstinacy and returned to his hyperbole. He finished his tale and dismissed the class. The next day he asked me to remain after class, and passed over a photo album with picture and post cards of Mount Zion Baptist Church on fire, the Dreamland Theater in shambles, whites with guns standing over dead bodies, blacks being marched to concentration camps with white mobs jeering, 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. W.D. asked his astonished student.

After having talked to more than 300 riot survivors over the years, I have pondered that question for 45 years. The report raises the same question Mr. W.D. asked me. I now ask the Oklahoma Legislature, the City and County of Tulsa: “What do you think?” To understand the full context of Mr. W.D.’s question is a travelogue of African American history, Oklahoma blacks in particular. It includes, The Seven Year War and the birth of the nation, the infamous Trail of Tears, the Civil War, the allotment of Indian Territory, statehood, segregation, black towns, and the African American on Greenwood Avenue. Each was a preponderance of the fuel that ignited the 1921 race war in Tulsa.

A bit of American history with an African-American perspective

During the Seven Year War, Indians in the Ohio Valley sided with the French against Great Britain in a losing effort. Canada and other territories were ceded to the British.

Treaties were sign with the tribes protecting their right to hold their lands. The treaties were ignore by the colonial governors. The colonies also soon discovered that rum and slaves were profitable commodities. One of the most enterprising — if unsavory — trading practices of the time was the so-called “triangular trade.” Merchants and shippers would purchase slaves off the coast of Africa for New England rum, then sell the slaves in the West Indies where they would buy molasses to bring home for sale to the local rum producers. In debt after the French and Indian War, England began to tax the colonies to pay for occupation. The measure was resisted, and the colonies began to prepare its Declaration of Independence. In an early draft, Thomas Jefferson wrote:

He (King George) has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of INFIDEL powers, is the warfare of the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he also obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the LIBERTIES of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the LIVES of another.

[This version was removed from the Declaration of Independence after protest from southern colonies, and planted the seed of the Civil War to come.]

The Revolutionary War was fought and a constitution was presented and approved by the colonies. It would sanction slavery and human bondage as the law of the land. Broken treaties and genocide slowly moved Indians for the Ohio Valley, while other treaties settled them in the rich farm lands of the south. The southern tribes held slaves, but also offered the runaway

sanctuary, in some case tribal membership and rights. During the administration of Andrew Jackson, a direct assault on Indian lands was launched. Phony treaties corrupts chiefs and intra-tribal rivalry would lead to warring factions, assassinations and divide the tribal leaders, instigating their removal from their southern homelands. This odyssey, during the 1830s and before, the lives of blacks and Native Americans would be linked on the infamous, cruel "Trail of Tears." On long marches under extreme duress and hardship, the trail led to present-day Oklahoma, Kansas and Nebraska. Indian Territory would be split by the creation of the Kansas and Nebraska territories and after the Civil War abolished in 1907 with the entrance of Oklahoma as a state. Pressed by rival chiefs many of the tribes officially sided with the Confederacy. Afterward, many former black slaves, Freemen, were registered as members of the tribes and offered sections of the Indian land allotments. After the government opened Oklahoma for settlement more blacks came seeking freedom from southern oppression and for new opportunities in the Promised Land. Of the more than 50 all black towns, more than 20 were located in the new state, the more prosperous were Boley and Langston.

Oklahoma history re-recorded

Attorney B.C. Franklin, one of the genuine heroes in the aftermath of the race war heeded the call to settle into Indian Territory. He was the father of historian Dr. John Hope Franklin, who served as consultant scholars for this report and an earlier inspiration in my inquiry of the riot. In his memoirs attorney Franklin wrote of two men, whom he called "very rich Negroes" and the "greatest leaders" — O.W. Gurley and J.B. Stradford. In 1908, Gurley, constructed the first building, a rooming house and later the home of Vernon A.M.E. Church, on a muddy trail that would become the Black Wall Street of America. According to B.C. Franklin, Gurley bought 30 or 40 acres, plotted them and had them sold to "Negroes only." Attorney Franklin's account of the settlement of Greenwood, shattered earlier notions of blacks being forced in a section of town. It now ap-

pears the division was self-imposed. "In the end," Attorney Franklin wrote, "Tulsa became one of the most sharply segregated cities in the country." One of the possible errors I find in the report is that Gurley lost \$65,000 in the riot. Indeed, he is listed in City Commission reports of having lost \$157,783. Today his fortune would be worth more than \$1 million.

J.B. Stradford, would later join Gurley on Greenwood, and build the finest hotel in the city, valued at \$75,000. Before statehood, the territory had been seen by blacks as not only the Promised Land more notably as the nation's first all-black state, E.P. McCabe was the leading advocate of all-black towns and had migrated from Kansas and founded Langston, Oklahoma. A former Kansas auditor active in Republican politics, McCabe had also become the assistant auditor of Oklahoma. He would lead a crusade to press President Benjamin Harrison into bringing "Indian Territory" into the union as an all-black state. Against that backdrop, Gurley viewed his acres as a natural urban evolution from the rural trend of organizing black towns. White Democrats prepared for the State Constitutional Convention by using the black statehood issues and racist attacks against their Republican "Nigger loving opponents." Both Democrats and Republicans would disenfranchise blacks during the balloting for control of the convention. The Democrats won and sometimes with the Ku Klux Klan as allies maintains political control of the state into the millennium. After statehood the first bill passed by the Oklahoma Legislature was the infamous 'Senate Bill One' that tightly segregated the state.

Stradford, and his friend A.J. Smitherman, publisher of the *Tulsa Star* newspaper, were brave tenacious advocates on behalf of their race. After Stradford was acquitted for violating Oklahoma Jim Crow laws, in 1912, the hotel owner filed a lawsuit in the State Supreme Court suing the Midland Valley Railroad for false imprisonment. In a narrowly interpreted decision the court opined the unconstitutionality of the Jim Crow law did not affect the right of the conductor to rely upon it. Similarly, the court rested upon a case filed by E.P. McCabe challenging Oklahoma's segregation dismissing the McCabe argument as irrelevant to the case. Four years later Stradford petitioned the Tulsa City Commission against its segregationist ordinance that "such a law

is to cast a stigma upon the colored race in the eyes of the world; and to sap the spirit of hope for justice before the law from the race itself." The Tulsa City Ordinance would remain on the books until the civil rights movement of the 1960s. From his unpublished memoirs, Stradford was accused as being an instigator of the riot, but contended he was not present. He said initially the sheriff contacted him and other black leaders for their assistance in protecting Rowland. However, when they arrived the sheriff said he could handle it and would call them when needed. Thus, the men left. The courthouse mob grew and there was no call to them for assistance. Armed and filled with moonshine, the men returned to the courthouse. According to Stradford a white man attempted to take a gun from one of the blacks "our boys shot into the crowd and a number were killed and wounded. Under the threat of lynching, Stradford escaped to Independence, Kansas and from there to Chicago, where his descendants reside to this day.

A.J. Smitherman wrote passionately about the rights of blacks from the daily newspaper columns. In 1917, the brave and fearless publisher traveled to Dewey, Oklahoma in the middle of a race riot where a white mob had pulled the accused from the jail, lynched him, and burned the homes and businesses in the black section. His investigation led to the arrest of 36 white men including the mayor. In 1918, he stood with black farmers and local law officers in Bristow averting a lynching of an innocent black man accused of raping a white woman. Smitherman was involved in similar incidents in Beggs, Okmulgee, Haskell, and Muskogee, Oklahoma. He and Stradford were among the leading black citizens arrested for causing the riot. Both fled. Smitherman died in Buffalo, New York after publishing newspapers there and in Springfield, Massachusetts. His descendants now live in Florida and North Carolina. From my view there were black and whites that stood gallantly in face of a hostile community. Among those were Judge L. J. Martin who called for repatriations and set out to raise \$500,000 from the city's wealthy elite, only to be ousted by the mayor from the city's

welfare committee; Cyrus Avery, treasurer of the relief committee who raised funds to house and feed the black refugees; Maurice Willow, the Red Cross director whose work saved many lives and through his effort food, shelter, medical and hospital care was provided; Franklin, Stradford, Gurley, and Smitherman, aforementioned in his report.

From my Memories of early oral histories of blue suits and Klan sheets

"I teach U.S. History and those decisions that brought us to the riot," Seymour Williams my high school history professor said to me 45 years ago. He and W.D. Williams (no relations) for many years tutored me on their experience and prodded others of their generation to tell me the story. "The riot isn't known much by young teachers. Many were born after the riot and it was banned by book publishers, as much as U.S. history about blacks and slavery. I could teach a course on just what has been left out of history." Why the silence in our community? The old man then introduced this student to his assessment. "Blacks lost everything. They were afraid it could happen again and there was no way to tell the story. The two Negro newspapers were bombed. With the unkept promises, they were too busy just trying to make it." He added, "There were a lot of big shot rednecks at that courthouse who ran the city and still do. Sinclair Oil Company owned one of the airplanes used to drop fire bombs on people and buildings." "Polite white people want to excuse what happens as being caused by trouble-making blacks and white trash ruffians. "Nope," he said, noting that blacks did not like to talk about the riot. "The killers were still running loose and they're wearing blue suits as well as Klan sheets." During that time, whites seeking opportunity could not circulate among the rich and powerful without Klan credentials. "Hell, Robert Hudson, the lawyer assigned to Rowland was a charter member of the Klan. In the aftermath of the riot, where could Negroes find justice?" He further noted, "Lot of people were killed. Many, many Negroes." I only vividly remember the stories of Professor and Mr. W.D. The other 300 or more voices have blended in to one essay. Still I hold all their collective anger, fear, and hope.

Reparation?

Reparations: It happened. There was murder, false imprisonment, forced labor, a cover-up, and local precedence for restitution. While the official damage was estimated at \$1.5 million, the black community filed more than \$4 million in claims. All were denied. However, the city commission did approved two claims exceeding \$5,000 “for guns and ammunition taken during the racial disturbance of June 1.” In his memoirs Stradford recalled the guards acted like wild men. “The militia had been ordered to take charge, but instead they joined the rioter.” His view is supported by action of the governor in a concerted effort to rid the National Guard of the Ku Klux Klan in 1922. The preponderance of the information demands what was promised. Whether it was Ku Klux Klan instigated, land speculator’s conspiracy, inspired by yellow journalism, or random acts, it happened. Justice

demands a closure as it did with Japanese Americans and Holocaust victims of Germany. It is a moral obligation. Tulsa was likely the first city in the to be bombed from the air. There was a precedent of payments to at least two whites victims of the riot. The issue today is what government entity should provide financial repair to the survivors and the condemned community that suffered under vigilante violence? The Report tells the story, let justice point the finger and begin the reconciliation!

And Finally

Vigilantes under deputized and under the color of law, destroyed the Black Wall Street of America. Some known victims were in unmarked graves in a city owned cemetery and others were hauled off to unknown places in full view of the National Guard. The mob torched the soul of the city, an evil from which neither whites nor blacks have fully recovered.



(Courtesy McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa).

Final Report of the Oklahoma Commission to Study The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921

Compiled by Danney Goble

The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission originated in 1997 with House Joint Resolution No. 1035. The act twice since has been amended, first in 1998, and again two years later. The final re-writing passed each legislative chamber in March and became law with Governor Frank Keating's signature on April 6, 2000.

In that form, the State of Oklahoma extended the commission's authority beyond that originally scheduled, to February 28, 2001. The statute also charged the commission to produce, on that date, "a final report of its findings and recommendations" and to submit that report "in writing to the Governor, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, and the Mayor and each member of the City Council of the City of Tulsa, Oklahoma."

This is that report. It accounts for and completes the work of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission.

A series of papers accompanies the report. Some are written by scholars of national stature, others by experts of international acclaim. Each addresses at length and in depth issues of expressed legislative interest and matters of enormous public consequence. As a group, they comprise a uniquely special and a uniquely significant contribution that must be attached to this report and must be studied carefully along with it.

Nonetheless, the supporting documents are not the report, itself. The scholars' essays have their purposes; this commission's report has another. Its purpose is contained in the statutes that first created this commission, that later extended its life, and that each time gave it the same set of mandates. That is why this report is an accounting, presented officially and offered publicly, of how Oklahoma's 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission has conducted its business and addressed its statutory obligations.

Its duties were many, and each presented imposing challenges. Not least was the challenge

of preparing this report. Lawmakers scheduled its deadline and defined its purpose, and this report meets their requirements. At the same time, four years of intense study and personal sacrifice surely entitle commission members to add their own expectations. Completely reasonable and entirely appropriate, their desires deserve a place in their report as well.

Together, then, both the law's requirements and the commissioners' resolves guide this report. Designed to be both concise and complete, this is the report that law requires the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission to submit to those who represent the people. Designed to be both compelling and convincing, this also is the report that the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission chooses to offer the people whom both lawmakers and the commissioners serve.



The Commission shall consist of eleven (11) members

The legislative formula for commission membership assured it appropriate if unusual composition. As an official state inquiry, the state's interest was represented through the executive, legislative, and administrative branches. The governor was to appoint six members, three from names submitted by the Speaker of the House, three from nominees provided by the Senate President Pro Tempore. Two state officials — the directors of the Oklahoma Human Rights Commission (OHRC) and of the Oklahoma Historical Society (OHS) — also were to serve as ex officio members, either personally or through their designees.

Reflecting Tulsa's obvious interest, the resolution directed the city's mayor to select the commission's final three members. Similar to the gubernatorial appointments, they were to come from names proposed by Tulsa's City Commission. One of the mayor's appointees had to be "a survivor of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot incident"; two had to be current residents of the historic Greenwood community, the area once devastated by the "incident."

The commission began with two ex officio members and ended with two others. After Gracie Monson resigned in March 2000, Ken-

neth Kendricks replaced her as OHRC's interim director and its representative to the commission. Blake Wade directed the historical society until Dr. Bob Blackburn succeeded him in 1999. Blackburn had been Wade's designated representative to the commission anyway. In fact, the commission had made him its chairman, a position he would hold until June 2000.

Governor Frank Keating's six appointees included two legislators, each from a different chamber, each from an opposite party, each a former history teacher. Democrat Abe Deuschendorf's participation in the debate over the original house resolution echoed his lingering interest in history and foretold his future devotion to this inquiry. As a history teacher, Robert Milacek had included Tulsa's race riot in his classes. Little did he know that he, himself, would contribute to that history as a Republican legislator, but he has.

Governor Keating turned to metropolitan Tulsa for two appointees. T. D. "Pete" Churchwell's father serviced African-American businesses in the Greenwood district, and Churchwell has maintained concern for that community and with the 1921 riot that nearly destroyed it. He was Blackburn's replacement as chairman during the commission's closing months. Although born in Oklahoma City, Jim Lloyd and his family moved to Turley (the community just north of Greenwood) when he was three. Raised in Tulsa, he graduated from Nathan Hale and the University of Tulsa's College of Law. He now practices law in Sand Springs and lives in Tulsa.

The governor's other appointees entered the inquiry less with geographical than with professional connections to Tulsa and its history. Currie Ballard lives in Coyle and serves neighboring Langston University as historian-in-residence. Holding a graduate degree in history, Jimmie White teaches it and heads the social science division for Connors State College.

Tulsa Mayor Susan Savage appointed the commission's final three members. If only five in 1921, Joe Burns met the law's requirement that one mayoral appointee be a survivor of the 1921 "incident." He brought the commission not faint

childhood memories but seasoned wisdom rooted in eight decades of life in the Greenwood community and with Greenwood's people.

As the resolution specified, Mayor Savage's other two appointees live in contemporary Greenwood, but neither took a direct route to get there. Eddie Faye Gates's path began in Preston, Oklahoma, passed through Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, and crisscrossed two continents before it reached Tulsa in 1968. She spent the next twenty-four years teaching its youngsters and has devoted years since researching and writing her own memoirs and her community's history. Vivian Clark-Adams's route took nearly as many twists and turns, passing through one military base after another until her father retired and the family came to Oklahoma in 1961. Trained at the University of Tulsa, Dr. Vivian Clark-Adams serves Tulsa Community College as chair of the liberal arts division for its southeast campus.

In the November 1997, organizing meeting, commissioners voted to hire clerical assistants and expert consultants through the OHS. (The legislature had added \$50,000 to the agency's base appropriations for just such purposes.) They then scheduled their second meeting for December 5 to accommodate the most appropriate and most eminent of all possible authorities.

John Hope Franklin is the son of Greenwood attorney B. C. Franklin, a graduate of Tulsa's Booker T. Washington High School (Fisk and Harvard, too), and James B. Duke Professor of History Emeritus at Duke University. Recipient of scores of academic and literary awards, not to mention more than a hundred honorary doctorates, Franklin came back for another honor. He received the Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award on December 4 and stayed to meet and help the commission on the fifth.

Commissioners were delighted to learn that Franklin was anxious to serve, even if he confessed the contributions limited by age (he was eighty-two at the time) and other obligations. They enthusiastically made John Hope Franklin their first consultant, and they instantly took

his advice for another. Dr. Scott Ellsworth, a native Tulsan now living in Oregon, was a Duke graduate who already had written a highly regarded study of the riot. Ellsworth became the second consultant chosen; he thereafter emerged first in importance.

As its work grew steadily more exacting and steadily more specialized, the commission turned to more experts. Legal scholars, archeologists, anthropologists, forensic specialists, geophysicists — all of these and more blessed this commission with technical expertise impossible to match and unimaginable otherwise. As a research group, they brought a breadth of vision and a depth of training that made Oklahoma's commission a model of state inquiry.

Ten consultants eventually provided them expert advice, but the commissioners always expected to depend mostly on their own resources, maybe with just a little help from just a few of their friends. Interested OHS employees were a likely source. Sure enough, a half-dozen or so pitched in to search the agency's library and archives for riot-related materials.

That was help appreciated, if not entirely unexpected. What was surprising — stunning, really — was something else that happened in Oklahoma City. As the commission's work attracted interest and gathered momentum, Bob Blackburn noticed something odd: an unusual number of people were volunteering to work at the historical society. Plain, ordinary citizens, maybe forty or fifty of them, had asked to help the commission as unpaid researchers in the OHS collections.

At about that time, Dick Warner decided that he had better start making notes on the phone calls he was fielding for the Tulsa County Historical Society. People were calling in, wanting to contribute to the inquiry, and they just kept calling. After two months, his log listed entries for 148 local calls. Meanwhile, Scott Ellsworth was back in Oregon, writing down information volunteered by some of the three hundred callers who had reached him by long distance.

Most commission meetings were in Tulsa, each open to any and all. Oklahoma's Open Meetings Law required no less, but this com-

mission's special nature yielded much more. It seemed that every time the commissioners met at least one person (usually several) greeted them with at least some thing (usu ally a lot) that the commission needed.

Included were records and papers long presumed lost, if their existence had been known at all. Some were official documents, pulled together and packed away years earlier. Uncovered and examined, they took the commission back in time, back to the years just before and just after 1921. Some were musty legal records saved from the shredders. Briefs filed, dockets set, law suits decided — each opened an avenue into another corner of history. Pages after pages laid open the city commission's deliberations and decisions as they affected the Greenwood area. Overlooked records from the National Guard offered overlooked perspectives and illuminated them with misplaced correspondence, lost after-action reports, obscure field manuals, and self-typed accounts from men who were on duty at the riot. Maybe there was a family's treasured collection of yellowed newspaper clippings; an envelope of faded photographs; a few carefully folded letters, all handwritten, each dated 1921.

One meaning of all of this is obvious, so obvious that this report pauses to affirm it.

Many have questioned why or even if anyone would be interested now in events that happened in one city, one time, one day, long ago. What business did today's state lawmakers have in something so old, so local, and so deservedly forgotten? Surely no one cares, not anymore.

An answer comes from hundreds and hundreds of voices. They tell us that what happened in 1921 in Tulsa is as alive today as it was back then. What happened in Tulsa stays as important and remains as unresolved today as in 1921. What happened there still exerts its power over people who never lived in Tulsa at all.

How else can one explain the thousands of hours volunteered by hundreds of people, all to get this story told and get it told right? How else can one explain the regional, national, even international attention that has been con-

centrated on a few short hours of a mid-sized city's history?

As the introductory paper by Drs. Franklin and Ellsworth recounts, the Tulsa disaster went largely unacknowledged for a half-century or more. After a while, it was largely forgotten. Eventually it became largely unknown. So hushed was mention of the subject that many pronounced it the final victim of a conspiracy, this a conspiracy of silence.

That silence is shattered, utterly and permanently shattered. Whatever else this commission has achieved or will achieve, it already has made that possible. Regional, national, and international media made it certain. The *Dallas Morning News*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, National Public Radio (NPR), every American broadcast television network, cable outlets delivering Cinemax and the History Channel to North America, the British Broadcasting Corporation — this merely begins the attention that the media focused upon this commission and its inquiry. Many approached it in depth (NPR twice has made it the featured daily broadcast). Most returned to it repeatedly (the *New York Times* had carried at least ten articles as of February 2000). All considered it vital public information.

Some — including some commission members — thought at least some of the coverage was at least somewhat unbalanced. They may have had a point, but that is not the point.

Here is the point: The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission is pleased to report that this past tragedy has been extensively aired, that it is now remembered, and that it will never again be unknown.



The Commission shall undertake a study to [include] the identification of persons. . . .

No one is certain how many participated in the 1921 riot. No one is certain how many suffered how much for how long. Certainty is reserved for a single quantifiable fact. Every year there remain fewer and fewer who experienced it personally.

Legislation authorizing this commission directed that it seek and locate those survivors. Specifically, it was to identify any person able to

“provide adequate proof to the Commission” that he or she was an “actual resident” of “the ‘Greenwood’ area or community” at the time of the riot. The commission was also to identify any person who otherwise “sustained an identifiable loss . . . resulting from the . . . 1921 Tulsa Race Riot.”

Some considered this the commission’s most difficult assignment, some its most important duty, some its most compelling purpose. They all were right, and had Eddie Faye Gates not assumed personal and experienced responsibility for that mandate, this commission might have little to report. Because she did, however, it principally reports what she and those who worked with her were able to accomplish in the commission’s name.

Commissioner Gates’s presence gave this commission a considerable and welcomed head start. She already had included several riot victims among the early pioneers whom she had interviewed for *They Came Searching: How Blacks Sought the Promised Land in Tulsa*. The book finished, she had an informal list of survivors, but the list kept changing. Death erased one name after another. Others appeared. Many were of old people who had left Oklahoma years, even decades, ago; but she heard about them and patiently tracked them down. As lawmakers were authorizing this inquiry, the count stood at thirteen, nineteen if all the leads eventually panned out. No one presumed that even nineteen was close to final, but no one knew what the accurate total might be either.

At its very first organizing meeting on November 14, 1997, this commission established a “subcommittee on survivors,” headed by Commissioner Gates and including Commissioner Burns and Dr. Clark-Adams. From that moment onward, that subcommittee has aggressively and creatively pursued every possible avenue to identify every possible survivor.

Letters sent over Dr. Ellsworth’s signature to *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines urged readers to contact the commission if they knew of any possibilities. From *Gale’s Directory of Publications*, Commissioner Gates targeted the nation’s leading African-American newspapers

(papers like the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*), appealing publicly for survivors or to anyone who might know of one. The commission’s website, created and maintained by the Oklahoma Historical Society, prominently declared a determination to identify and register every survivor, everywhere. For affirmation, it posted the official forms used as the subcommittee’s records, including instructions for their completion and submission.

An old-fashioned, intensely personal web turned out to be more productive than the thoroughly modern, entirely electronic Internet. Like historical communities everywhere, modern Greenwood maintains a rich, if informal, social network. Sometimes directly, sometimes distantly, it connects Greenwood’s people, sometimes young, sometimes old. Anchoring its interstices are the community’s longest residents, its most active citizens, and its most prominent leaders.

One quality or another would describe some members of this commission. After all, these are the very qualifications that lawmakers required for their appointments. Others share those same qualities and a passion for their community’s history as well. Curtis Lawson, Robert Littlejohn, Hannibal Johnson, Dr. Charles Christopher, Mable Rice, Keith Jemison, Robert and Blanchie Mayes — all are active in the North Tulsa Historical Society, all are some of the community’s most respected citizens, and all are among this commission’s most valuable assets.

The initial published notices had early results. Slowly they began to compound upon themselves. The first stories in the national and international media introduced a multiplying factor. Thereafter, each burst of press attention seemed to increase what was happening geometrically. People were contacting commissioners, some coming forward as survivors, more suggesting where or how they might be found. Names came in, first a light sprinkle, next a shower, then a downpour, finally a flood.

Old city directories, census reports, and other records verified some claims, but they could confirm only so much. After all, these people had been children, some of them in pants, back in

1921. After eighty years, could any one remember the kind of details — addresses, telephone numbers, property descriptions, rental agreements, business locations — someone else could verify with official documents? Not likely. In fact, these were exactly the kind of people most likely to have been ignored or lost in every public record. Officially, they might have never existed.

Except that they did, and one who looked long enough and hard enough and patiently enough could confirm it — that is, if one knew where to look and whom to ask.

That is what happened. Name-by-name, someone found somebody who actually knew each person. In fact, that is how many names surfaced: a credible figure in the community knew how to find older relatives, former neighbors, or departed friends. Others could be confirmed with equal authority. Maybe someone knew the claimant's family or knew someone that did. If a person claimed to be kin to someone or offered some small detail, surely someone else knew that relative or remembered the same detail as well. Some of those details might even be verified through official documents.

It was a necessary process but slow and delicate, too. As of June 1998, twenty-nine survivors had been identified, contacted, and registered. (The number did not include sixteen identified as descendants of riot victims.) It took another fourteen months for the total to reach sixty-one. It would have been higher, except that three of the first twenty-nine had died in those months. This deadline had an ominous and compelling meaning.

Work immediately shifted through higher gears. In March 2000, the identification process finished for forty-one survivors then living in or near Tulsa. Just a few more still needed to be contacted. The real work remaining, however, involved a remarkable number of survivors who had turned up outside of Oklahoma. Following a recent flurry of media attention, more than sixty out-of-state survivors had been located. They lived everywhere from California to Florida, one in Paris, France!

All of that work is complete. As the commission submits its report, 118 persons have been identified, contacted, and registered as living survivors of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot. (Another 176 persons also have been registered as descendants of riot victims.)

The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission thereby has discharged the mandate regarding the identification of persons.



The Commission shall . . . gather information, identify and interview witnesses . . . , preserve testimony and records obtained, [and] examine and copy documents . . . having historical significance.

Whatever else this commission already has achieved or soon will inspire, one accomplishment will remain indefinitely. Until recently, the Tulsa race riot has been the most important least known event in the state's entire history. Even the most resourceful of scholars stumbled as they neared it for it was dimly lit by evidence and the evidentiary record faded more with every passing year.

That is not now and never will be true again. These few hours — from start to finish, the actual riot consumed less than sixteen hours — may now comprise the most thoroughly documented moments ever to have occurred in Oklahoma. This commission's work and the documentary record it leaves behind shines upon them a light too bright to ignore.

The Oklahoma Historical Society was searching its existing materials and aggressively pursuing more before this commission ever assembled. By the November 1997, organizing meeting, Bob Blackburn was ready to announce that the society already had ordered prints from every known source of every known photograph taken of the riot. He was contacting every major archival depository and research library in the country to request copies of any riot-related materials they might hold themselves. Experienced OHS professionals were set to research important but heretofore neglected court and municipal records.

This was news welcomed by commission members. It assured early momentum for the job ahead, and it complemented work that some of

them were already doing. Eddie Faye Gates, for one, had pulled out every transcript of every interview that she had made with a riot witness, and she was anxious to make more. Jim Lloyd was another. Lloyd already had found and copied transcripts from earlier interviews, including some with Tulsa police officers present at the riot. He also had a hunch that a fellow who knew his way around a courthouse just might turn up all sorts of information.

That is how it began, but that was just the beginning. In the months ahead, Larry O'Dell and other OHS employees patiently excavated mountains of information, one pebble at a time, as it were. They then pieced together tiny bits of fact, carefully fitting one to another. One by one, completed puzzles emerged. Arranged in different dimensions, they made magic: a vision of Greenwood long since vanished.

Master maps, both of the community on the eve of the riot and of the post-riot residue, identified every single piece of property. For each parcel, a map displayed any structure present, its owner and its use. If commercial, what firms were there, who owned them, what businesses they were in. If residential, whether it was rented or owned. If the former, the landlord's name. If the latter, whether it was mortgaged (if so, to whom and encumbered by what debt.) For both, lists identified each of its occupants by name.

It was not magic; it was more. Larry O'Dell had rebuilt Greenwood from records he and other researchers had examined and collected for the commission. Every building permit granted, every warranty deed recorded, every property appraisal ordered, every damage claim filed, every death certificate issued, every burial record maintained — the commission had copies of every single record related to Greenwood at the time of the riot.

Some it had only because Jim Lloyd was right. Able to navigate a courthouse, he ran across complete records for some 150 civil suits filed after the race riot. No one remembered that they even existed; they had been misplaced for thirty-five years. When Jim

Lloyd uncovered and saved them, they were scheduled for routine shredding.

The commission gathered the most private of documents as well. Every form registering every survivor bears notes recording information taken from every one of 118 persons. With Kavin Ross operating the camera, Eddie Faye Gates videotaped interviews with about half of the survivors. Each is available on one of nine cassettes preserved by the commission; full transcripts are being completed for all. Sympathetic collectors turned over transcripts of another fifty or more. Some had been packed away for twenty, even thirty years.

Others, including several resourceful amateur historians, reproduced and gave the commission what amounted to complete documentary collections. There were sets of municipal records, files from state agencies, reports kept by social services, press clippings carefully bound, privately owned photographs never publicly seen.

People who had devoted years to the study of one or more aspects of the riot supplied evidence they had found and presented conclusions they had reached. Beryl Ford followed the commission's work as a Tulsan legendary for his devotion to his city and its history. William O'Brien attended nearly every commission meeting, sometimes to ask questions, sometimes to answer them, once to deliver his own full report on the riot. Robert Norris prepared smaller, occasional reports on military topics. He also dug up and turned over files from National Guard records. Others located affidavits filed with the State Supreme Court. The military reports usually had been presumed lost; the legal papers always had been assumed unimportant.

Commissioners were surprised to receive so much new evidence and pleased to see that it contributed so much. They were delighted to note that so much came from black sources, that it documented black experiences and recorded black observations.

It had not always been that way. Too many early journalists and historians had dismissed black sources as unreliable. Too few early librarians and archivists had preserved black sources as important. Both thereby condemned

later writers and scholars to a never ending game of hide-and-go-seek, the rules rigged so no one could win.

This commission's work changes the game forever. Every future scholar will have access to everything every one ever had when the original source was white. In fact, they will have a lot more of it. They also will have more from sources few had before when the original source was black.

Because they will, the community future scholars will behold and the property they will describe was a community of black people, occupied by black people. The public records they will examine involved black people and affected black people. Objects they will touch came from black people. Interviews they will hear and transcripts they will read were recorded from black people. The evidence they will explore reveals experiences of black people.

Consider what so much new information and what so many new sources can mean for future historians. Consider what it already has meant for one.

Read closely Scott Ellsworth's accompanying essay, "The Tulsa Riot," a rather simple title, as titles go. Much more sophisticated is the title he gave the book he wrote in 1982, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*.

It is fair that they have different titles. They tell somewhat different stories in somewhat different ways. The chief difference is that the one titled so simply tells a tale much more sophisticated.

For one thing, it is longer. The report attached here filled 115 typed pages in the telling; the comparable portion of the book prints entirely in 25 pages. The report has to be longer because it has more to report, stories not told in the first telling. It offers more because it draws upon more evidence. The report packs 205 footnotes with citations for its story; 50 did the job for the first one.

Within that last difference is the difference that causes every other difference. To write this report, Scott Ellsworth used evidence he did not have — no one had it — as recently as

1982. He cites that new evidence at least 148 times. He had information from black sources accessible now because of this commission. That knowledge contributed to Scott Ellsworth's citations from black newspapers, black interviews, or black writings. He cites black sources at least 272 times.

No wonder the two are different. From now on, everything can be different. They almost have to be.

Before there was this commission, much was known about the Tulsa race riot. More was unknown. It was buried somewhere, lost somewhere, or somewhere undiscovered. No longer. Old records have been reopened, missing files have been recovered, new sources have been found. Still being assembled and processed by the Oklahoma Historical Society, their total volume passed ten thousand pages some time ago and well may reach twenty thousand by the time everything is done.

The dimensions of twenty thousand pages can be measured physically. Placed side-by-side, they would reach across at least ten yards of library shelving, filling every inch with new information. The significance of these twenty thousand pages has to be gauged vertically and metaphorically though. Stacked high, they amount to a tower of new knowledge. Rising to reach a new perspective, they offer visions never seen before.

The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission thereby has discharged the mandate to gather and preserve a record of historical significance.

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The Commission shall . . . develop a historical record of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot

The commission's first substantive decision was to greet this obligation with a series of questions, and there was compelling reason why. Eighty years after the fact, almost as many unresolved questions surround the race riot as did in 1921 — maybe even more. Commissioners knew that no "historical record" would be complete unless it answered the most enduring of those questions — or explain why not. That was reason enough for a second decision: Commissioners agreed to seek consultants, respected

scholars, and other experts to investigate those questions and offer answers.

Their findings follow immediately, all without change or comment, each just as the commission received it. Accompanying papers present what scholars and others consider the best answers to hard questions. The reports define their questions, either directly or implicitly, and usually explain why they need answers. The authors give answers, but they present them with only the confidence and exactly the precision they can justify. Most retrace the route they followed to reach their positions. All advance their positions openly. If they sense themselves in hostile territory, some stake their ground and defend it.

The commissioners harbor no illusion that every reader will accept their every answer to every question. They know better. Why should everyone else? None of them do. All eleven have reservations, some here, some there. Some dispute this point; some deny that one. Some suggest other possibilities. Some insist upon positions squarely opposite the scholars'.

None of that matters. However they divide over specifics, they also are united on principles. Should any be in need, they endorse and recommend the route they took to reach their own consensus. The way around an enraged showdown and the shortest path to a responsible solution is the line that passes through points ahead. Each point marks a big question and an important answer. Study them carefully.

What was the total value of property destroyed in the Tulsa race riot, both in 1921's dollars and in today's? Larry O'Dell has the numbers. Any one of them could be a little off, probably none by very much. Could a lawyer argue, and might a judge decree, that citizens living now had a duty to make that good, had to repay those losses, all because of something that happened eighty years ago? Alfred Brophy can make the case, and he does.

Over eight decades, some Tulsans (mostly black Tulsans) have insisted that whites attacked Greenwood from the air, even bombed it from military airplanes. Other Tulsans (mostly white Tulsans) have denied those

claims; many have never even heard them. In a sense, it is a black-or-white question, but Richard S. Warner demonstrates that it has no black-or-white answer.

He proves it absolutely false that military planes could have employed military weapons on Greenwood. He also proves it absolutely true that civilian aircraft did fly over the riot area. Some were there for police reconnaissance, some for photography, some for other legitimate purposes. He also thinks it reasonable to believe that others had less innocent use. It is probable that shots were fired and that incendiary devices were dropped, and these would have contributed to riot-related deaths or destruction. How much? No one will ever know: History permits no black-or-white answer.

Can modern science bring light to old, dark rumors about a mass grave, at least one, probably more, somewhere in Tulsa? Could those rumors be true? If true, where is one? Robert L. Brooks and Alan H. Witten have answers. Yes, science can address those rumors. Yes, there are many reasons to believe that mass graves exist. Where? They can point precisely to the single most likely spot. They can explain why scientists settle on that one — explain it clearly enough and completely enough to convince non-scientists, too. Without making a scratch on the ground, they can measure how deep it has to be, how thick, how wide, how long. Were the site to be exhumed and were it to yield human remains, what would any one learn? Quite a bit if Lesley Rankin-Hill and Phoebe Stubblefield were to examine them.

How many people were killed, anyway? At the time, careful calculations varied almost as much as did pure guesses — forty, fifty, one hundred, two hundred, three hundred, maybe more. After a while, it became hard to distinguish the calculations from the guesses. By now, the record has become so muddied that even the most careful and thorough scientific investigation can offer no more than a preliminary possible answer.

Clyde Collins Snow's inquiry is just as careful and just as thorough as one might expect from this forensic anthropologist of international reputation, and preliminary is the word



An Invisible Empire rally at Belle Isle, Oklahoma City in 1923. During the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan flourished across Oklahoma, claiming tens of thousands members (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society).

that he insists upon for his findings. By the most conservative of all possible methods, he can identify thirty-eight riot victims, and he provides the cause of death and the burial site for each of them. He even gives us the names of all but the four burned beyond recognition.

That last fact is their defining element. Thirty-eight is only the number of dead that Snow can identify individually. It says nothing of those who lost their lives in the vicious riot and lost their personal identities in records never kept or later destroyed. An accurate death count would just begin at thirty-eight; it might end well into the hundreds. Snow explains why as many as 150 might have to be added for one reason, 18 more for another reason. What neither he nor any one can ever know is how many to add for how many reasons. That is why there will never be a better answer to the question of how many died than this: How many? Too many.

For some questions there will never be answers even that precise. Open for eighty years and open now, they will remain open forever because they are too large to be filled by the evidence at hand.

Some of the hardest questions surround the evidence, itself. Evidence amounting to per-

sonal statements — things said to have been seen, heard, or otherwise observed — raises an entire set of questions in itself. Surely some statements are more credible than others, but how credible is that? Most evidence is incomplete; it may be suggestive but is it dispositive? Evidence often inspires inference, but is the inference reasonable or even possible? Evidence is usually ambiguous, does it mean this or does it mean that? Almost every piece of evidence requires an interpretation, but is only one interpretation possible? Responsibilities will be assigned, decisions will be evaluated, judgments will be offered — on what basis?

These are not idle academic musings. On the contrary: This small set of questions explains why so many specific questions remain open. They explain how people — reasonable, fair-minded, well-intended people — can disagree so often about so much.

Consider a question as old as the riot itself. At the time, many said that this was no spontaneous eruption of the rabble; it was planned and executed by the elite. Quite a few people — including some members of this commission — have since studied the question and are persuaded that this is so, that the Tulsa race riot was the result of a conspiracy. This is a serious position and a

provable position — if one looks at certain evidence in certain ways.

Others — again, including members of this commission — have studied the same question and examined the same evidence, but they have looked at it in different ways. They see there no proof of conspiracy. Selfish desires surely. Awful effects certainly. But not a conspiracy. Both sides have evidence that they consider convincing, but neither side can convince the other.

Another nagging question involves the role of the Ku Klux Klan. Everyone who has studied the riot agrees that the Klan was present in Tulsa at the time of the riot and that it had been for some time. Everyone agrees that within months of the riot Tulsa's Klan chapter had become one of the nation's largest and most powerful, able to dictate its will with the ballot as well as the whip. Everyone agrees that many of the city's most prominent men were klansmen in the early 1920s and that some remained klansmen throughout the decade. Everyone agrees that Tulsa's atmosphere reeked with a Klan-like stench that oozed through the robes of the Hooded Order.

Does this mean that the Klan helped plan the riot? Does it mean that the Klan helped execute it? Does it mean that the Klan, as an organization, had any role at all?

Or does it mean that any time thousands of whites assembled — especially if they assembled to assault blacks — that odds were there would be quite a few klansmen in the mix? Does the presence of those individuals mean that the institution may have been an instigator or the agent of a plot? Maybe both? Maybe neither? Maybe nothing at all? Not everyone agrees on that.

Nor will they ever. Both the conspiracy and the Klan questions remain what they always have been and probably what they always will be. Both are examples of nearly every problem inherent to historical evidence. How reliable is this oral tradition? What conclusions does that evidence permit? Are these inferences reasonable? How many ways can this be interpreted?

And so it must go on. Some questions will always be disputed because other questions block the path to their answers. That does not mean there will be no answers, just that there will not be one answer per one question. Many

questions will have two, quite a few even more. Some answers will never be proven. Some will never be disproved. Accept it: Some things can never be known.

That is why the complete record of what began in the late evening of May 31 and continued through the morning of June 1 will never quite escape those hours, themselves. They forever are darkened by night or enshrouded by day.

But history has a record of things certain for the hours between one day's twilight and the next day's afternoon. These things:

- Black Tulsans had every reason to believe that Dick Rowland would be lynched after his arrest on charges later dismissed and highly suspect from the start.
- They had cause to believe that his personal safety, like the defense of themselves and their community, depended on them alone.
- As hostile groups gathered and their confrontation worsened, municipal and county authorities failed to take actions to calm or contain the situation.
- At the eruption of violence, civil officials selected many men, all of them white and some of them participants in that violence, and made those men their agents as deputies.
- In that capacity, deputies did not stem the violence but added to it, often through overt acts themselves illegal.
- Public officials provided firearms and ammunition to individuals, again all of them white.



After looting black homes, the white rioters set them on fire. Here, Thomas and Lottie Gentry's home at 537 N. Detroit—the third house from the left—bursts into flame (Courtesy Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa).



By the time the additional National Guard units from Oklahoma City arrived in Tulsa the riot had pretty much run its course. Some contemporary eyewitnesses, however, were critical of the time that it took for the State Troops to deploy outside of the downtown business district (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society).

- Units of the Oklahoma National Guard participated in the mass arrests of all or nearly all of Greenwood's residents, removed them to other parts of the city, and detained them in holding centers.
- Entering the Greenwood district, people stole, damaged or destroyed personal property left behind in homes and businesses.
- People, some of them agents of government, also deliberately burned or otherwise destroyed homes credibly estimated to have numbered 1,256, along with virtually every other structure — including churches, schools, businesses, even a hospital and library — in the Greenwood district.
- Despite duties to preserve order and to protect property, no government at any level offered adequate resistance, if any at all, to what amounted to the destruction of the neighborhood referred to commonly as “Lit-

tle Africa” and politely as the “Negro quarter.”

- Although the exact total can never be determined, credible evidence makes it probable that many people, likely numbering between one



Greenwood District prior to the riot (Courtesy Greenwood Cultural Center).



Despite being numerically at a disadvantage, black Tulsans fought valiantly to protect their homes, their businesses, and their community. But in the end, the city's African-American population was simply outnumbered by the white invaders (Courtesy Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa).

Identification card (Courtesy Bob Hower).

<p>1921 Tulsa Race Riot "Angels of Mercy" Complimentary Booklet</p>	
<p>IDENTIFICATION CARD</p>	
<p>Name _____</p>	
<p>Sex _____ Age _____</p>	
<p>Period for Passage _____</p>	
<p>NOTICE—This card expires at dark on this date. Police are to arrest bearer unless he is in Fair Grounds or quarters before dark of this date.</p>	
<p>Date _____</p>	
<p>Signed _____</p>	
<p>Above: Green Card Replica as Shown in The Book "1921 Tulsa Race Riot—Angels of Mercy" Courtesy of The Tulsa Historical Society</p>	
<p>AMERICAN RED CROSS Refugee Card</p> <p>U. S. TRANSPORTATION To _____</p> <p>CITY TRANSPORTATION To _____</p> <p>EMPLOYED At _____</p> <p>SHELTERED At _____</p> <p>FOOD AND BEDDING At _____</p> <p>MEDICAL AID At _____</p> <p>PROVISIONS ISSUED From _____</p> <p>CLOTHING FURNISHED</p>	<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">POLICE PROTECTION</p> <p>NAME _____ ADDRESS _____ APPROVED _____ AMERICAN RED CROSS 1401 EAST 10TH STREET TULSA, OKLAHOMA</p>
<p>Front and Back Replicas of Red Cross Refugee Tag Courtesy of The Tulsa Historical Society. Original cards were white.</p>	



(Courtesy Greenwood Cultural Center).

- and three hundred, were killed during the riot.
- Not one of these criminal acts was then or ever has been prosecuted or punished by government at any level, municipal, county, state, or federal.
- Even after the restoration of order it was official policy to release a black detainee only upon the application of a white person, and then only if that white person agreed to accept responsibility for that detainee's subsequent behavior.
- As private citizens, many whites in Tulsa and neighboring communities did extend invaluable assistance to the riot's victims, and the relief efforts of the American Red Cross in particular provided a model of human behavior at its best.
- Although city and county government bore much of the cost for Red Cross relief, neither contributed substantially to Greenwood's re-



Rebuilding after the destruction (Courtesy Greenwood Cultural Center).

building; in fact, municipal authorities acted initially to impede rebuilding.

- In the end, the restoration of Greenwood after its systematic destruction was left to the victims of that destruction.



Maurice Wilkows Hospital. While Tulsa officials turned away some offers of outside aid, a number of individual white Tulsans provided assistance to the city's now virtually homeless black population. But it was the American Red Cross, which remained in Tulsa for months following the riot, provided the most sustained relief effort. Maurice Wilkows, the compassionate director of the Red Cross relief, kept a history of the events. (Courtesy Bob Hower).



Aftermath of the riot (Courtesy Greenwood Cultural Center).

These things are not myths, not rumors, not speculations, not questioned. They are the historical record.

The 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission thereby has discharged the mandate to develop a historical record of the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot.

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The final report of the Commission's findings and recommendations . . . may contain specific recommendations about whether or not reparations can or should be made and the appropriate methods

Unlike those quoted before, these words give this commission not an obligation but an opportunity. Nearly every commissioner intends to seize it.

A short letter sent to Governor Frank Keating as a preliminary report in February, 2000 declared the majority's view that reparations could and should be made. "Good public policy," that letter said, required no less. This report maintains the same, and this report makes the case.

Case, reparations — the words, themselves, seem to summon images of lawyers and courtrooms, along with other words, words like culpability, damages, remedies, restitution. Each is a term used in law, with strict legal meaning. Sometimes commissioners use those words, too, and several agree — firmly agree — that those words describe accurately what happened in 1921 and fit exactly what should happen now.

Those, however, are their personal opinions, and the commissioners who hold them do so as private citizens. Even the most resolute of its members recognizes that this commission has a very different role. This commission is neither court nor judge, and its members are not a jury. The commission has no binding legal authority to assign culpability, to determine damages, to establish a remedy, or to order either restitution or reparations. In fact, it has no judicial authority whatsoever.

It also has no reason or need for such authority. Any judgments that it might offer would be without effect and meaning. Its words would as

well be cast to the winds. Any recommendations that it might offer neither have nor need judicial status at all. Statutes grant this commission its authority to make recommendations and the choice of how — or even if — to exercise that authority.

The commission's majority is determined to exercise its discretion and to declare boldly and directly their purpose: to recommend, independent of what law allows, what these commissioners believe is the right thing to do. They propose to do that in a dimension equal to their purpose. Courts have other purposes, and law operates in a different dimension. Mistake one for the other — let this commission assume what rightly belongs to law — does worse than miss the point. It ruins it.

Think of the difference this way. We will never know exactly how many were killed during the Tulsa race riot, but take at random any twenty-five from that unknown total. What we say of those we might say for every one of the others, too.

Considering the twenty-five to be homicides, the law would approach those as twenty-five acts performed by twenty-five people (or thereabouts) who, with twenty-five motives, committed twenty-five crimes against twenty-five persons. That they occurred within hours and within a few blocks of each other is irrelevant. It would not matter even if the same person committed two, three, ten of the murders on the same spot, moments apart. Each was a separate act, and each (were the law to do its duty) merits a separate consequence. Law can apprehend it no other way.

Is there no other way to understand that? Of course there is. There is a far better way.

Were these twenty-five crimes or one? Did each have a separate motive, or was there a single intent? Were twenty-five individuals responsible, those and no one else? The burning of 1,256 homes — if we understand these as 1,256 acts of arson committed by 1,256 criminals driven by 1,256 desires, if we understand it that way, do we understand anything at all?

These were not any number of multiple acts of homicide; this was one act of horror. If we must name the fires, call it outrage, for it was

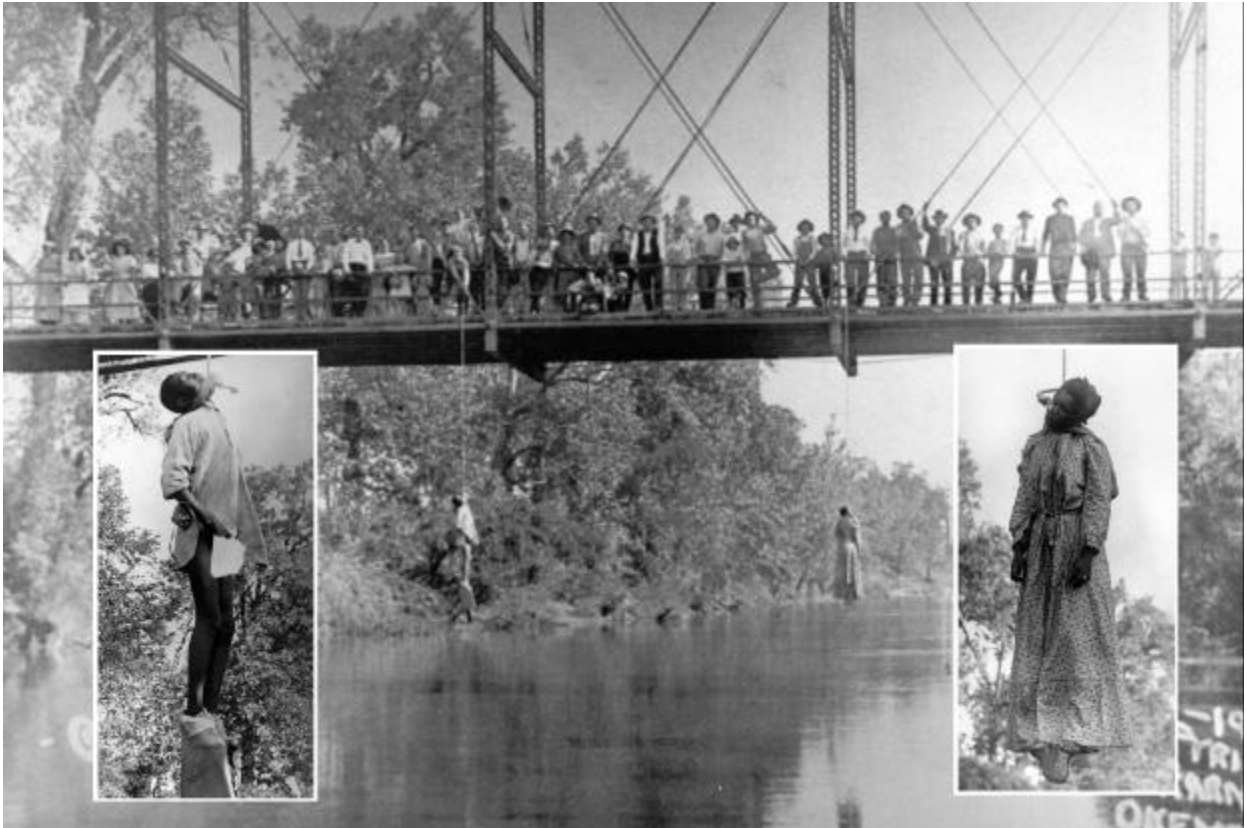
one. For both, the motive was not to injure hundreds of people, nearly all unseen, almost all unknown. The intent was to intimidate one community, to let it be known and let it be seen. Those who pulled the triggers, those who struck the matches — they alone were lawbreakers. Those who shouted encouragement and those who stood silently by — they were responsible.

These are the qualities that place what happened in Tulsa outside the realm of law — and not just in Tulsa, either. Lexington, Sapulpa, Norman, Shawnee, Lawton, Claremore, Perry; Waurika, Dewey, and Marshall — earlier purges in every one already had targeted entire black communities, marking every child, woman, and man for exile.

There is no count of how many those people numbered, but there is no need to know that. Know that there, too, something more than a bad guy had committed something more than a crime against something more than a person. Not someone made mad by lust, not a person gripped by rage, not a heartbroken party of ro-



Lynching believed to be at Mannford, Oklahoma (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society).



Although Oklahoma had been plagued by lynchings since the territorial days, with the coming of statehood, more and more of the victims were African American. Of the thirty-three lynchings that occurred in Oklahoma between 1907 and 1920, including this one, which occurred at Okemah, fully twenty-seven of the victims were black (Courtesy of Currie Ballard).

mance gone sour, not one or any number of individuals but a collective body — acting as one body — had coldly and deliberately and systematically assaulted one victim, a whole community, intending to eliminate it as a community. If other black communities heard about it and learned their lessons, too, so much the better; a little intimidation went a long way. All of this happened years before, most fifteen or twenty years before Dick Rowland landed in jail, but they remained vivid in the recent memories of Greenwood's younger adults.

This, or something quite like it, was almost always what happened when the subject was race. Here was nothing as amorphous as racism. Here were discrete acts — one act, one town — each consciously calculated to have a collective effect not against a person but against a people.

And is that not also the way of Oklahoma's voting laws at the time? The state had amended its constitution and crafted its laws not to keep this person or that person or a whole list of per-

sons from voting. Lengthen that list to the indefinite, write down names to the infinite — one still will not reach the point. For that, one line, one word is enough. The point was to keep a race, as a race, away from the polls.

Jim Crow laws — the segregation commands of Oklahoma's statutes and of its constitution — worked that way, too. Their object was not to keep some exhausted mother and her two young children out of a "white car" on a train headed somewhere like Checotah and send them walking six miles home. (Even if John Hope Franklin could recall that about his own mother and sister and himself as he accepted the Helmerich Award some three-quarters of a century afterwards.) No, the one purpose was to keep one race "in its place."

When Laura Nelson was lynched years earlier in Okemah, it was not to punish her by death. It was to terrify the living. Why else would the lynchers have taken (and printed and copied and posted and distributed) that photograph of her



(Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society).

hanging from the bridge, her little boy dangling beside her?

The lynchers knew the purpose; the photographer just helped it along. The purpose had not changed much by 1921, when another photographer snapped another picture, a long shot showing Greenwood's ruin, smoke rising from fires blazing in the background. "RUNNING THE NEGRO OUT OF TULSA" someone wrote across it, candor atoning for misspelling. No doubt there. No shame either.

Another photograph probably was snapped the same day but from closer range. It showed what just days before must have been a human being, maybe one who had spent a warm day in late May working and talking and laughing. On this day, though, it was only a grotesque, blackened form, a thing, really, its only sign of humanity the charred remains of arms and hands forever raised, as if in useless supplication.

Shot horizontally, that particular photo still turns up from time to time in the form of an

early use: as a postcard. People must have thought it a nice way to send a message.

It still sends a message, too big to be jotted down in a few lines; but, then, this message is not especially nice either. The message is that here is an image of more than a single victim of a single episode in a single city. This image preserves the symbol of a story, preserves it in the same way that the story was told: in black-and-white.



(Courtesy Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa).

See those two photos and understand that the Tulsa race riot was the worst event in that city's history — an event without equal and without excuse. Understand, too, that it was the worst explosion of violence in this state's history — an episode late to be acknowledged and still to be repaired. But understand also that it was part of a message usually announced not violently at all, but calmly and quietly and deliberately.

Who sent the message? Not one person but many acting as one. Not a "mob;" it took forms too calculated and rational for that word. Not "society;" that word is only a mask to conceal responsibility within a fog of imprecision. Not "whites," because this never spoke for all whites; sometimes it spoke for only a few. Not "America," because the federal government was, at best, indifferent to its black citizens and, at worse, oblivious of them. Fifty years or so after the Civil War, Uncle Sam was too complacent to crusade for black rights and too callous to care. Let the states handle that — states like Oklahoma.

Except that it really was not "Oklahoma" either. At least, it was not all of Oklahoma. It was just one Oklahoma, one Oklahoma that is distinguishable from another Oklahoma partly by purpose. This Oklahoma had the purpose of keeping the other Oklahoma in its place, and that place was subordinate. That, after all, was the object of suffrage requirements and segregation laws. No less was it the intent behind riots and lynchings, too. One Oklahoma was putting the other Oklahoma in its place.

One Oklahoma also had the power to effect its purpose, and that power had no need to rely on occasional explosions of rage. Simple violence is, after all, the weapon of simple people, people with access to no other instruments of power at all. This Oklahoma had access to power more subtle, more regular, and more formal than that. Indeed, its ready access to such forms of power partially defined that Oklahoma.

No, that Oklahoma is not the same as government, used here as a rhetorical trick to make one accountable for the acts of the other. Government was never the essence of that

Oklahoma. Government was, however, always its potential instrument. Having access to government, however employed, if employed at all — just having it — defined this Oklahoma and was the essence of its power.

The acts recounted here reveal that power in one form or another, often several. The Tulsa race riot is one example, but only an example and only one. Put alongside it earlier, less publicized pogroms — for that is what they were — in at least ten other Oklahoma towns. Include the systematic disfranchisement of the black electorate through constitutional amendment in 1901, reaffirmed through state statute in 1901. Add to that the constitution's segregation of Oklahoma's public schools, the First Legislature's segregation of its public transportation, local segregation of Oklahoma neighborhoods through municipal ordinances in Tulsa and elsewhere, even the statewide segregation of public telephones by order of the corporation commission. Do not forget to include the lynchings of twenty-three African-Americans in twelve Oklahoma towns during the ten years leading to 1921. Stand back and look at those deeds now.

In some government participated in the deed.

In some government performed the deed.

In none did government prevent the deed.

In none did government punish the deed.

And that, in the end, is what this inquiry and what these recommendations are all about. Make no mistake about it: There are members of this commission who are convinced that there is a compelling argument in law to order that present governments make monetary payment for past governments' unlawful acts. Professor Alfred Brophy presses one form of that argument; there doubtless are others.

This is not that legal argument but another one altogether. This is a moral argument. It holds that there are moral responsibilities here and that those moral responsibilities require moral responses now.

It gets down to this: The 1921 riot is, at once, a representative historical example and a unique historical event. It has many parallels in the pattern of past events, but it has no equal for its violence and its completeness. It symbolizes so much endured by so many for so long. It does it,



Shock and despair accompany the aftermath of the Tulsa Race Riot (Courtesy of the Library of Congress).



(Courtesy Bob Hower).

however, in one way that no other can: in the living flesh and blood of some who did endure it.

These paradoxes hold answers to questions often asked: Why does the state of Oklahoma or the city of Tulsa owe anything to anybody? Why should any individual tolerate now spending one cent of one tax dollar over what happened so long ago?

The answer is that these are not even the questions. This is not about individuals at all — not any more than the race riot or anything like it was about individuals.

This is about Oklahoma — or, rather, it is about two Oklahomas. It must be about that because that is what the Tulsa race riot was all about, too. That riot proclaimed that there were two Oklahomas; that one claimed the right to push down, push out, and push under the other; and that it had the power to do that.

That is what the Tulsa race riot has been all about for so long afterwards, why it has lingered not as a past event but lived as a present entity. It kept on saying that there remained two Oklahomas; that one claimed the right to be dismissive of, ignorant of, and oblivious to the other; and that it had the power to do that.

That is why the Tulsa race riot can be about something else. It can be about making two Oklahomas one — but only if we understand that this is what reparation is all about. Because the riot is both symbolic and singular, reparations become both singular and symbolic, too. Compelled not legally by courts but extended freely by choice, they say that individual acts of reparation will stand as symbols that fully acknowledge and finally discharge a collective responsibility.

Because we must face it: There is no way but by government to represent the collective, and there is no way but by reparations to make real the responsibility.

Does this commission have specific recommendations about whether or not reparations can or should be made and the appropriate methods? Yes, it surely does.

When commissioners went looking to do the right thing, that is what nearly all of them found and what they recommended in last year's preliminary report. To be sure they had found the right thing, they have used this formal report to explore once more the distant terrain of the Tulsa race riot and the forbidding territory in which it lies. Now, they are certain. Reparations are the right thing to do.

What else is there to do? What else is there to find?

COMMISSIONERS:

Currie Ballard, Coyle
Dr. Bob Blackburn, Oklahoma City
Joe Burns, Tulsa
Vivian Clark, Tulsa
Rep. Abe Deuschendorf, Lawton
Eddie Faye Gates, Tulsa
Jim Lloyd, Tulsa
Sen. Robert Milacek, Waukomis,
Jimmie L. White, Jr., Checotah

Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921

CHAIRMAN:

T. D. "Pete" Churchwell, Tulsa

SPONSORS:

Sen. Maxine Horner, Tulsa
Rep. Don Ross, Tulsa

ADVISORS:

Dr. John Hope Franklin, Durham, NC
Dr. Scott Ellsworth, Portland, OR



February 7, 2000

The Honorable Frank Keating
Governor of the State of Oklahoma
State Capitol building
Oklahoma City, OK 73105

Dear Governor Keating:

The Tulsa Race Riot Commission, established by House Joint Resolution No. 1035, is pleased to submit the following preliminary report.

The primary goal of collecting historical documentation on the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 has been achieved. Attachment A is a summary listing of the record groups that have been gathered and stored at the Oklahoma Historical Society. Also included are summaries of some reports and the full text of selected documents to illustrate the breadth and scope of the collecting process. However, the Commission has not yet voted on historical findings, so these materials do not necessarily represent conclusions of the Commission.

At the last meeting, held February 4, 2000, the Commission voted on three actions. They are:

1) The Issue of Restitution

Whereas, the process of historical analysis by this Commission is not yet complete,

And Whereas, the archeological investigation into casualties and mass burials is not yet complete,

And Whereas, we have seen a continuous pattern of historical evidence that the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 was the violent consequence of racial hatred institutionalized and tolerated by official federal, state, county, and city policy,

And Whereas, government at all levels has the moral and ethical responsibility of fostering a sense of community that bridges divides of ethnicity and race,

And Whereas, by statute we are to make recommendations regarding whether or not reparations can or should be made to the Oklahoma Legislature, the Governor of the State of Oklahoma, and the Mayor and City Council of Tulsa,

That, we, the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission, recommend that restitution to the historic Greenwood Community, in real and tangible form, would be good public policy and do much to repair the emotional as well as physical scars of this most terrible incident in our shared past.

2) The Issue of Suggested Forms of Restitution in Priority Order

The Commission recommends

- 1) Direct payment of reparations to survivors of the Tulsa Race Riot.
- 2) Direct payment of reparations to descendants of the survivors of the Tulsa Race Riot.
- 3) A scholarship fund available to students affected by the Tulsa Race Riot.
- 4) Establishment of an economic development enterprise zone in the historic area of the Greenwood District.
- 5) A memorial for the reburial of any human remains found in the search for unmarked graves of riot victims.

3) The Issue of an Extension of the Tulsa Race Riot Commission

The Commission hereby endorses and supports House Bill 2468, which extends the life of the Commission in order to finish the historical report on the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.

We, the members of the Tulsa Race Riot Commission, respectfully submit these findings for your consideration.