

LIFESTYLE

Sun-Sentinel, Sunday, February 21, 1993 Section E

Voices from a Florida town that died in a racial firestorm 70 years ago rise from the ashes, asking for justice.

Owed to Rosewood



Staff photo/ROBERT DUYOS

Survivor Lee Ruth Davis was 7 when her father hustled her to safety after a white mob began a week-long rampage in Rosewood.

By MARGO HARAKAS
Staff Writer

Lee Ruth Davis awoke in the dark to her father's voice. "C'mon," he said. "I'm going to take ya to Mr. Wright's house. You stay there till I come back."

Wrapping blankets around his children, he hustled Davis, two of her brothers and a sister out the door.

Davis, 7, sensed something ominous in the air. She pulled the blanket closer as they walked the half mile through the frosty night, her father strangely silent.

"John Wright was a Yankee fellow, a white man,"

Davis says. He owned a two-story house and the general store in the predominantly black town of Rosewood. "That's where you bought everythin', unless you went to Gainesville," some 40 miles or more to the northeast.

But it was not shopping her daddy was intent on this night.

A frenzied, heavily armed and liquored-up white mob had descended on Rosewood. They had hanged and shot one black man, and reportedly dragged another black man three miles behind a car. ~~More white men were coming — from~~ Perry, Jacksonville and Georgia. And the word was spreading: Everything breathing in Rosewood was going to get dead.

The first week of January 1923 was as sordid and shameful as any in Florida's history. The whirlwind of racial hatred unleashed by an accusation of black-on-white assault turned a thriving and pleasant town into a heap of cinders. At least seven people were killed. Three churches, a school and every house in the small town (except for the Wrights) was torched.

When the embers cooled and the smoke lifted, the whites began assiduously burying the shocking truth of the Rosewood massacre.

Details are scarce. Most of what is known is gleaned from conflicting anecdotal stories and a few not necessarily unbiased newspaper accounts. (The *Florida Times Union* reported,

"Young Wife Assaulted by Negro Brute." An editorial in the *Gainesville Daily Sun* talked about the good men who belonged to the Ku Klux Klan, and applauded the Klan's espoused opposition to gambling and its defense of womanhood.)

Even the estimates of the number of dead vary, from six or seven to as many as 150. Some say the bloodletting began on New Year's Day, others indicate it began a day or so later. Some accounts list the number of houses destroyed as 18. Survivors say it had to be more like 40 or 50.

Yet there is one essential truth, a point of convergence that remains clear and undisputed: A white mob went mad in Rosewood that first week of 1923 and committed unspeakable atrocities.

Now, 70 years after the orgy of violence, state

**BLACK
HISTORY
MONTH**

Rep. Miguel DeGrandy, R-Miami, is pressing the state to acknowledge the wrong done in Rosewood, and he's asking for compensation for the remaining survivors and for establishment of a memorial to honor those who fell and those who tried to save them.

Also, to assure that the tragedy never again is dismissed or forgotten, film producer/writer Michael O'McCarthy has signed a contract with Multimedia Motion Pictures to co-produce a TV movie on the sad demise of once proud Rosewood. It was an outraged O'McCarthy who two years ago located the survivors, put them in touch with Holland & Knight and initiated the action for compensation.

Why is the call for justice finally being heard now, 10 years after a *St. Petersburg Times* reporter reminded the world of the chilling dark secret of Rosewood?

"I think the public is more sensitive to these types of issues today, more outraged by them," says Manuel L. Dobrinsky, with the Miami law firm of Holland & Knight. Dobrinsky is representing without charge Davis and her cousin Minnie Lee Langley of Jacksonville.

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FROM PAGE 1E

Remembering Rosewood's reign of terror

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"It was a time," says Davis, setting the stage, "when if you seen a white person, you better know your place. If you seen a white child, and that white child want your seat, you better get up no matter how old you are."

It was a time when racial tensions flared white hot. A time when a 7-year-old child could outlive her birthplace.

"The Rosewood massacre was not the only racial massacre in Florida," says Ted Hemmingway, professor of history at Florida A&M. Between 1882 and 1968 Florida had 282 lynchings, a record exceeded only by Mississippi, 591; Georgia, 531; Texas, 493; Alabama, 347; and Arkansas, 284, he says.

"Even as early as 1912 when Booker T. Washington toured the state, five people were lynched in one day in Lake City."

What set rural Rosewood apart was that the violence inflicted there all but wiped a town from the map.

"It's a dreadful, dreadful story," says Davis, now 77 and living in Miami. Davis, her cousin Langley, now 88, and Margie Hall Johnson, Wilson Hall and Mary Hall Daniels, all living outside Jacksonville, share the experience of the bloody white rage, and of being the only Rosewood victims known to be alive today.

"Rosewood was a nice town," Davis says, "a lovely little place. Everybody owned their own homes. And they were nice homes, too. Weren't no shacks."

The town was a stop on Florida's first cross-state railroad, connecting Jacksonville on the Atlantic Coast to Cedar Key on the Gulf Coast. The deep woods surrounding the area made for a thriving turpentine and timber industry.

Most men in town worked either at the local turpentine still or at the sawmill in nearby Sumner. Davis' father, John Bradley, fell trees. Langley's family survived by selling game and fur trapped in the same woods.

Rosewood's hardworking residents thought they had built stability into their town in the form of a school, churches, a baseball diamond and train station.

Yet in a wink, it was gone, brought down by the incendiary accusation of one Fannie Taylor, a white woman living in Sumner, three miles away.

"We knowed what happened," says Davis, piecing together what she remembers and what she's been told.

Aunt Sarah and my cousin were working in Fannie Taylor's back yard that day." They'd gone to Sumner, Davis says, to do Taylor's washing, just like always.

"This man come, stepped over the fence and went into the house."

Davis doesn't know the man's name, only that he was white and worked as an engineer on the train. Aunt Sarah had seen him come to the house before.

When he left, Davis says, "Mrs. Taylor was all abused up. When her husband come home, what she gonna say?"

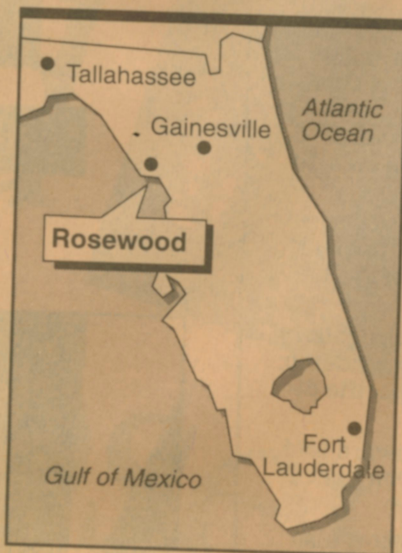
Certainly not that Taylor had an abusive lover, as Davis and other blacks at the time believed. Instead, Taylor screamed that a black man had attacked her. Some reports say Taylor was robbed, others say raped. Some accounts say three black men were sought in connection with the attack. Other accounts name only one suspect, Jesse Hunter, an escapee from a chain gang.

In any case, a hastily assembled posse set off from Sumner with a pack of yelping bloodhounds. The dogs led the posse to Aaron Carrier's house in nearby Rosewood, and then to wagon tracks that disappeared at a river.



Talking about the massacre is an emotional experience for Lee Ruth Davis.

Staff photo/JUDY SLOAN REICH



Staff graphic

ment official to try to stop the bloodletting. Many say those sworn to uphold the peace were among the mob. According to a summary of events prepared by Holland & Knight, "the sheriff of Rosewood left town when the mob told him to leave, the governor of Florida went hunting, and Rosewood burned."

A black man named Sam Carter faced perhaps the most savage attack. The posse suspected him of providing the wagon used in the alleged attacker's getaway. "They took Sam Carter and hanged him to a tree behind Sylvester's house and they shot him all to pieces," Davis says.

In some accounts, Carter was tortured for two days, with the rabid mob cutting off his fingers and ears before finally killing him with a rifle shot to the face.

Davis also tells of Sylvester Carrier, a young black musician who was down at the depot when the mob rode by. "Sundown better not find you here," the men warned him.

Sylvester understood the threat.

"Those crackers are coming back to my house tonight," he told John Bradley, Davis' father.

Bradley sheltered his younger children at Wright's house, told his older boys to run for it and joined Sylvester to hold off the mob, in what became the biggest battle of the weeklong melee. A dozen or so relatives had taken refuge at Sylvester's home that night, including Langley and Aunt Sarah.

The first shot that rang out killed Aunt Sarah, says Langley. Hit her square in the head.

Then a barrage let loose. Langley, crouched down in the woodbin next to Sylvester, remembers white men storming the front door, and each being blasted away by Sylvester's rifle.

It seemed the firing went on forever. But eventually it stopped when the mob ran out of ammunition. The men retreated, planning to return the next morning.

As the whites withdrew, everyone in the house fled to the nearby woods.

"We stayed out there in the woods for four days," Langley says. "We didn't have no food, no water, no clothes [they were dressed only in thin nightclothes], no coat, no shoes. Nothing. Lordy, it was cold."

Either that night or the next, the fires began. "We could see it from the woods," Langley

Davis says at one point she had a vision. "I said let's go home, I see a train coming to take us out."

Knowing Davis often seemed to sense things others did not, the hideaways crawled through the woods and underbrush back to the Wrights' house. At one point, a white man on horseback spotted them and tried to flush them from the bush. "Come on out," he hollered. "Nobody's goin' to hurt ya."

"We didn't move," Davis said. The man finally tired of the game and went on his way.

The Wrights, panic-stricken at the absence of Davis and her brothers and sisters, were searching for them everywhere. Mrs. Wright screamed with relief when they appeared.

"There were 150 or more women and children in the Wright's yard," Davis says.

Just as Davis had foreseen, a train was coming. It rolled slowly through the swamp and woods, stopping to rescue Rosewood's survivors.

If there were any white heroes or heroines in the sad and sinister story, they were the Wrights and the brothers John and William Bryce, Northerners who had come south to run a railroad.

"Capt. Bryce, he was so good to us," Langley recalls. "He had food and clothes for us. Everything we wanted, he gave to us on that train."

The *New York Times* said seven people died — five blacks and two whites — in the week-long orgy of violence. One of those reported shot to death was Sylvester Carrier. Sylvester, Davis says, actually escaped to Texas, where he changed his name to Lewis.

Among those who died at the hands of the mob was James Carrier, kin to both Langley and Davis. A stroke victim, paralyzed on one side, Carrier went looking for his daughter instead of fleeing when he could. When the mob pursued him, he sought protection from W.H. Pillsbury at the mill.

According to a *New York Times* story of Jan. 7, "Pillsbury locked him in a house in the negro quarter. Later, however, when a new clash became imminent the negro was turned over to 25 or 30 men."

The men, says Langley, forced James Carrier to dig his own grave, then shot him in it. For nothing, for being black.

Langley says that until recently, she never told anyone of the terrible things that happened in Rosewood in 1923, though it has worried her mind all these years.

Margie Hall Johnson, 83, now living in Hilliard, near Jacksonville, says even today she's scared to go back to Rosewood. "Oh, Lord," she says. "I wouldn't go back there."

Davis did return to the area a couple of times, though there's nothing really there now.

DeGrandy's bill makes the point that the state knew, or should have known, of the imminent danger facing the residents of Rosewood and it did nothing to protect them or their property. Furthermore, no one

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In any case, a hastily assembled posse set off from Sumner with a pack of yelping bloodhounds. The dogs led the posse to Aaron Carrier's house in nearby Rosewood, and then to wagon tracks that disappeared at a river. Convinced Carrier had helped Taylor's "attacker" to escape, they tied Carrier to the back of a car and dragged him to Sumner.

Langley doesn't remember Carrier being dragged. They came on horseback, "along the railroad track, as far as you could see." A hundred or more men in cowboy hats lusting for a lynching.

"They tied Aaron with the rope to hang him. Right there behind his own house. . . . They were hollerin', talkin' about bring me the rope, bring me the rope," Langley says.

At the last moment, the son of the white sawmill owner, W.H. Pillsbury, stepped in. "He took Aaron away from those white people," says Langley, "and carried him to Sumner and then on to Gainesville for safekeeping."

Davis says it was the sheriff from Bronson who freed Carrier's neck from the noose. If it was, he was the only law enforce-

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One woman, described by Davis as a white woman and by newspapers as black, was shot as she tried to escape her burning house.

Davis, meanwhile, secreted away at the Wright house, knew nothing of the carnage going on outside.

Not till the next day, when she ignored Mrs. Wright's warnings to stay in the yard and instead wandered up the road to a nearby town and an older brother's house, did Davis learn why she was in hiding.

"They're going to kill all the black people from Rosewood," said her sister-in-law, visibly shaken. "Go. Go to the hammock and hide."

"We went way down into the hammock," Davis recalls. "There were about seven or eight of us kids. And we sat there on a big log with our feet in the water. It was so cold. We didn't have food or water."

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DeGrandy's bill makes the point that the state knew, or should have known, of the imminent danger facing the residents of Rosewood and it did nothing to protect them or their property. Furthermore, no one was ever prosecuted for the murders, the kidnappings, the arson, the theft of property. Besides asking for compensation for the victims, his bill calls for a memorial to be erected to honor those who died as well as those who tried to shelter and protect the victims of Rosewood.

For those who experienced it, talking about the massacre brings tears. Strangely though, the racial hatred did not beget more racial hatred.

"I don't hate, but let me tell you what I feel about white people," Langley says. "I ain't never had any use for them any more. There some good ones and some bad ones, but you don't know how to mix them out."

A gentle-voiced Davis wearily tells a white visitor, "Why would I blame you when you weren't even born yet? I can't blame people for what somebody else do. I don't even hate them that did it. "I can't hate. If I hate I can't get to heaven."