

**Breaking a Century of Silence:  
A Historiography of the Tulsa Race Riot**

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It is impossible to make a full report of the happenings, but what I saw was bad enough, and yet I cannot tell all that I saw. When I fully realized what was happening, I saw men and women fleeing for their lives, while white men by the hundreds pursued them, firing in all directions. As one woman was running from her home, she suddenly fell with a bullet wound. Then I saw aeroplanes, they flew very low. To my surprise, as they passed over the business district they left the entire block a mass of flame.

I saw men, women and children driven like cattle, huddled like horses and treated like beasts. Thus, I fully realized the attitude of the Southern white man when he has you bested. I saw hundreds of men marched through the main business section of "White Town" with their hats off and their hands up, with dozens of guards marching them with guns, cursing them for everything mentionable. I saw large trucks following up the invaders, as they ran the colored people from their homes and places of business. Everything of value was loaded on these trucks and everything left was burned to ashes.

I saw machine guns turned on the colored men to oust them from their stronghold.

Tuesday night, May 31st, was the riot, and Wednesday morning, by daybreak, was the invasion.  
— Anonymous.<sup>1</sup>

This marked one of the most destructive acts of racial violence in United States history. Looters, murderers, and arsonists devastated Greenwood in less than 48 hours. The black community was left in rubble through the course of the Tulsa Race Riot. What started with the arrest of a young black man over an alleged assault ended in over a hundred deaths and millions of dollars in damages. That story would have been covered up and forgotten, had it not been for the survivors who shared their stories and writers who chronicled the event in later years.

The events of May 31 through June 1, 1921 had been obscured by a lack of official records and a culture of silence for the better part of a half-century. Thanks to the diligent work of amateur journalists and historians like Mary E. Jones Parrish, and civil servants like Maurice Willows of the American Red Cross, we have a historical record to work with. Writers like Ed Wheeler and Scott Ellsworth pioneered investigation into the riot, conducting interviews and collating their findings into some of the first works dedicated to the act. Thanks to the efforts of Don Ross and the other members of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, the prevailing narrative preserved by Parrish and Willows persisted into acceptance as the official story. Historians working during the commission drafted three distinct histories, built upon past work on the subject and serving different purposes: either to humanize the victims and perpetrators of the riot, make the case for reparations, or examine the context surrounding the riot's remembrance in the city.

Taken together, writings on the Tulsa Race Riot fall into one of three main categories. Firstly, the reports from Parrish and Willows collect as much information as possible in the immediate wake of the riot. Parrish served as an amateur journalist and historian who preserved raw accounts from fellow survivors, shared her own story, and provided conjecture on how victims understood what happened to them. The Red Cross report, while narrow in scope, provides some of the earliest raw data on the event and provides a picture of how much immediate aid was needed in North Tulsa. Secondly, Ed Wheeler's article and Scott Ellsworth's seminal book, *Death in a Promised Land*, highlight the effort taken to counteract the silence that enveloped Tulsa to confront

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<sup>1</sup> Mary E. Jones Parrish, *Race Riot 1921: Events of the Tulsa Disaster* (Tulsa: Out on a Limb Publishing, 1998), 65.

the city's past. This effort culminated in the 1997 commission, which legitimized much of the narrative that they discovered in the African American community about what really happened. Finally, journalists Tim Madigan and James Hirsh, and legal scholar Alfred Brophy, all wrote contemporary histories around the time of the commission, publishing each of their works between 2001 and 2002. While they all differed from one another in authorial intent, a clear shift had taken place. Their works are among the first to step beyond justifying the riot's existence as an event as writers of previous decades had. Instead, they worked to flesh out the events and aftermath of the riot as an attempt to humanize and draw people closer to understanding it. This paper traces that development, from immediate information gathering, to justification, to juxtaposition.

### In the Wake of the Riot

#### *Events of the Tulsa Disaster*

Among the first people to collate Greenwood's experience of the riot was local typist Mary E. Jones Parrish in *Race Riot 1921: Events of the Tulsa Disaster*. The 1998 reprint points out that only 21 copies were originally published, but thanks to Mrs. Parrish and her nephew Clarence Love, who aided in publishing the second addition, this work stands as one of the only complete firsthand written accounts of the riot.<sup>2</sup> Parrish's forward provides insight into her background and purpose for writing; she was astounded by the bravery of black boys who had gone to serve in the Great war; reflecting on their service and the injustice done to Greenwood: "Tonight, as I write and think of Tulsa then and the Tulsa of June 1st, my eyes well with tears and my soul cries for justice. Oh, America! Thou land of the free and the home of the brave! . . . How long will you let mob violence reign supreme? Is democracy a mockery?"<sup>3</sup>

Mob violence and lynching was at the forefront of Parrish's mind when she published this work, looking to the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill as a safeguard for the black community in the future, and pinned the origin of the riot on black men needing to protect Dick Rowland from the lynch mob that was gathering for him. Not content to focus only on the wellbeing of African Americans, she also looks to the riot as a cautionary tale for any reader; mob violence had reduced Greenwood to ash and rubble, and the spirit of destruction and mob violence will continue pouring out to the wider public regardless of "place, person or color." Her desired end for this work, then, serves a similar desire for reflection on illuminating the excesses of mob violence and the dangers that come with letting it continue.<sup>4</sup>

Parrish leads into her history with a chapter on her experience in Tulsa, first moving there from Rochester, New York out of an appreciation for the blossoming black community forming there.<sup>5</sup> She then begins telling the story of the riot from her perspective. The beginning was simple enough in introducing the altercation between Dick Rowland and Sarah Page, as well as the fear of lynching that sparked years of hatred that had been building up. In addition, the lynching of a white boy the year before caused Greenwood residents to distrust city officials, prompting them to band together to protect the accused. That evening, she was at her typewriting class while her daughter watched people gathering and heading to downtown. It wasn't until her daughter told her that men with guns were passing by that Parrish learned about the contingent of black veterans en route to the courthouse to protect Rowland. She watched the crowds pass by her window throughout the night before making a harrowing realization; the devastating violence seen in Chicago and Washington before were coming to Tulsa. When the gravity of the situation finally set in, she turned to Psalms and prayed for courage to withstand what was coming.<sup>6</sup>

Early that morning, Mrs. Parrish and her daughter attempted to flee as the fighting moved towards her home. She ran north on Greenwood Avenue as gunfire closed on her neighborhood. Others called out for her to get out of the street before they got shot, but she pressed on to Standpipe Hill, a high hill in North Tulsa from which she could see Greenwood burn.<sup>7</sup> They fled Tulsa and were stopped on their trip to Claremore by

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

a white woman who warned against entering the next town, offering instead to let them stay at her home until it was safe to return to Tulsa.<sup>8</sup>

After a couple days, Parrish returned alongside other black Tulsans with the Red Cross through the white part of town, where she was brought to the internment camp at Exposition Park. She was disgusted to see her people rounded up like cattle, yet she felt driven to share in that fate with them; a friend's home had not been burnt down, however, and they invited her to stay with them instead. After passing through the white district, they came to what had once been Deep Greenwood, which they "found to be piles of bricks, ashes, and twisted iron, representing years of toil and savings."<sup>9</sup> Each black person in her group bore a tag that read "police protection," which they had to wear to be permitted to leave the camps. They finally passed through the destruction to the other side of Greenwood's homes that were left standing, where her friend's home was still standing but ransacked.<sup>10</sup>

She got up the next morning and found the makeshift hospital that the American Cross put together at Booker T. Washington High School before heading on to a telegraph office to inform her brother in McAlester what had happened in Tulsa. He heard that nobody had gotten out of her home and thought she and her daughter had burnt alive, and wanted her to get out of town, but she resolved to stay in Tulsa.<sup>11</sup> She returned to Booker T. Washington to join the lines of people were receiving aid with armed guard watching over them.<sup>12</sup> She was then approached by Reverend H.T.S. Johnson of the Inter-Racial Commission to report on the event for the organization, which she accepted in part to get her mind off her own trouble in favor of others. Before she could start, however, she was sent to City Hall by the guards for not being branded with a "police protection" tag; upon her arrival, not even the executive director of the Y.M.C.A., Professor W.J. Gregg, could effectively vouch for her. A business firm had to come and identify her before they would grant one to her.<sup>13</sup>

When reflecting on her experience as a reporter, she immediately took note of a few things in those first days following the riot: for one, the dead were disposed of so quickly that no accurate records were kept on the body count; secondly, the African American community both praised the work of the Oklahoma State Troops for their efforts to maintain order, while also condemning the Oklahoma Home Guard for removing them from Greenwood with the promise that their property would be saved if blacks followed their directions; thirdly, she highlights both the efforts made by whites in the Colored Citizens' Relief Committee to help those affected, while the city simultaneously put the Fire Ordinances in place to keep people from rebuilding.<sup>14</sup> As she collected testimonies from survivors, these realities surrounded their rebuilding efforts and questions of authority carried from the riot to its aftermath.

Those interviews formed an invaluable resource for researchers, as they painted a picture of how black Tulsans first thought about their experiences. Those interviews include teacher James T.A. West, who describes being rounded up and herded like livestock to the convention center by the Home Guard.<sup>15</sup> Tulsa Medical, Dental and Pharmaceutical Association president P.S. Thompson outlined racial prejudice and distrust in policing as the main causes of the riot; lynchings and distrust pressed black Tulsans to take matters into their own hands.<sup>16</sup> Greenwood entrepreneur C.L. Netherland's perspective is perhaps the most dire, as he reflected on how his family was reduced from a big brick house to sleeping on a convention center bench. He returned home after the riot and had to stay in his old coal barn; his barber shop reduced to rubble, he had taken to putting a single folding chair out on the sidewalk to replace his storefront.<sup>17</sup> Together with the other testimonies, these stories shined a light on both the brokenness of a devastated community and the variety of individual emotions and experiences that flowed from the survivors.

The rest of Parrish's work focuses on major elements of the riot's aftermath. Among the pieces considered was an editorial from the *St. Louis Argus*, an African-American newspaper, in April of 1922,

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 57.

highlighting the rapid reconstruction efforts over the course of that first year. It takes particular interest in the spirit of the people in Greenwood: who “under the most cruel and soul-crushing conditions,” have been determined to stay put in Tulsa.<sup>18</sup> She also expounds on the Inter-Racial Commission’s demands for greater developments in infrastructure, education, and city services, pointing to inter-racial cooperation as the best measure for improving the lot for black and white Tulsans alike.<sup>19</sup> She closes with excerpts from the June 8 publication of the *Literary Digest*. It provides a larger consideration of mob violence and racial hatred in America, with the events in Tulsa serving as a harrowing example, as the conditions for similar destruction exists “in all parts of the country where the Negro is numerous enough to be a problem.”<sup>20</sup> Those conditions include “the lynch-law spirit, peonage, race prejudice, economic rivalry between blacks and whites, radical propaganda, unemployment, corrupt politics, and the new negro spirit of self-assertion,,” with the recommended solution being just laws and enforcement, African-American unionization, and the Biblical Golden Rule.<sup>21</sup>

### Maurice Willows and the American Red Cross

The second major primary source often relied upon by Tulsa Race Riot scholars is the Disaster Relief Report prepared by Red Cross director Maurice Willows in December 1921. This report focuses primarily on the economic, infrastructural, and medical elements of the riot and its aftermath. The report begins with a narrative reading of events as of the time the report came out, in which Willows placed blame for the violence on “the lack of law enforcement.”<sup>22</sup> He established that, although the term “riot” was used to describe the disaster and whites were harmed, “the wholesale destruction of property – life and limb – in that section occupied by negroes (sic) between the hours of daylight and noon, testifies to a one-sided battle.” He also indicated that the arrest of Dick Rowland was incidental to the riot, as both he and Sarah Page drop from the story with no further prosecution. He backed up the cause he gave for the riot as a lack of police response, he refers back to newspaper coverage of Chief of Police Gustafson’s trial as proof. He also pointed out that the majority of the violence and destruction took place “nearly a mile from the courthouse,” and that “All that fire, rifles, revolvers, shot guns, machine guns, and organized inhuman passion could do with thirty-five city blocks with its twelve thousand negro (sic) population, was done.”<sup>23</sup> The organized element of the riot has garnered the attention of researchers, as it challenges the idea of a disordered riot in favor of an organized assault on Greenwood. That forms the crux of the debate over the naming of this event, be it a riot, massacre, or pogrom.<sup>24</sup>

Willows’ estimation of the dead and injured reflects the toll of this organized assault. While he points out that many bodies were rushed, and few records were kept, he fields estimates from 55 to 300 dead.<sup>25</sup> This estimate falls alongside the wounded that the Red Cross treated, numbering 84 blacks and 48 whites in hospitals, and 531 people getting treatment at different stations after three days. In addition, he also associated eight cases of premature stillbirths and numerous birth complications to the trauma of the riot.<sup>26</sup> Compared to the conservative estimates of around 30 dead, the Red Cross report, above all, contributes by far the bleakest image of human loss after the event. Among competing claims, the Red Cross stands out as the organization most consistently working with victims, and their consistent work with victims in the months following the riot lends some credence to their estimates.

When considering property damage, the report establishes that the invasion destroyed thirty-five blocks. This widescale devastation left twelve thousand people homeless and caused over four million dollars in

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-108.

<sup>22</sup> Maurice Willows, “Narrative Report as of December 31, 1921,” In *Disaster Relief Report: Riot, June 1921* (Tulsa: American Red Cross, 1921), 1. <http://tulsahistory.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/1921-Red-Cross-Report-December-30th.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> To highlight the debate surrounding the event’s naming, the 1921 Race Riot Centennial Commission changed its name to the 1921 Race Massacre Commission in November of 2018. This came after the last known survivor, Dr. Olivia Hooker, passed away. She had advocated for the name change. Source: Krehbiel, Randy, “1921 Centennial Commission to Replace ‘Riot’ with ‘Massacre’ in Official Title,” *Tulsa World*, November 7, 2018. [https://www.tulsaworld.com/news/local/government-and-politics/centennial-commission-to-replace-riot-with-massacre-in-official-title/article\\_128d9304-6d59-5b5f-872a-f72509d3ecd8.html](https://www.tulsaworld.com/news/local/government-and-politics/centennial-commission-to-replace-riot-with-massacre-in-official-title/article_128d9304-6d59-5b5f-872a-f72509d3ecd8.html) (accessed March 22, 2019).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

damages.<sup>27</sup> It was amid the burning that the Red Cross immediately began preparations for disaster relief and “before any official request had been made, the Red Cross had by common consent, sprang into action.”<sup>28</sup> They prepared 384 army tents but were hobbled in further housing measures because of issues of sanitation and a stubborn city government who would not provide sewage service or enough toilets.<sup>29</sup> While they aimed to help until Greenwood’s needs were met, the Red Cross considered reconstruction the responsibility of local government.<sup>30</sup> Alongside the raw data they provide throughout the document, the Red Cross report, above all, sets the stage for rhetoric for the historians in the decades after the riot. Its contributions are threefold: first, it places blame squarely on the ineffective action of local authorities who allowed the massacre and burning to transpire; second, it unflinchingly describes the depth of destruction felt by Greenwood, both in terms of life and property, giving researchers a sense of scale for the riot; finally, it places full responsibility on local authorities to redress what had happened, placing further blame on them for shirking their responsibilities before, during, and after the riot.

### Silence Falls on Tulsa

Much to the dismay of researchers, the historical record is mostly still after the works of Parrish and Willows. Aside from a University of Tulsa masters’ thesis by Loren G. Hill, no immediately evident major writings surfaced between 1922 and 1972. In the words of journalist and Tulsa Race Riot author James S. Hirsch:

The riot disappeared from sight. There were no memorials to honor the dead, no public ceremonies to observe an anniversary or express regret. Tulsans, black and white, made no public acknowledgement of the riot. Greenwood’s damaged buildings were evidence of the assault, but in time they too were toppled or rebuilt. The riot was not mentioned in Oklahoma’s history books from the 1930s. The *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, a quarterly journal on state history published by the Oklahoma historical Society, has never run a story on the riot. It began publication in 1921.<sup>31</sup>

It is perplexing that the most destructive act of racial violence in American history went unaccounted for through two generations. Hirsch takes interest in this, as his history takes a longer view on Tulsa’s collective memory. First and foremost, white community leaders made a collaborative effort to cover up the event, with official records and the *Tribune’s* destruction of their editorial that called for Rowland’s lynching.<sup>32</sup> Morse troubling is an altogether lack of scrutiny on the part of scholars and journalists over the course of that first half-century. Hirsch called the white response a “conspiracy of silence,” as the riot went utterly ignored both by individuals and institutions.<sup>33</sup> He characterizes the white perspective as “one of those inexplicable events, an act of nature,” which people were simultaneously shocked by and unwilling to give serious attention to.<sup>34</sup>

Worse, the specter of historical revisionism crept over the white story of the riot. Whites who acknowledged the event fit the event into Tulsa’s efforts at boosterism by framing it as “a healing event in the city’s history, a catalyst for progress between the races, and an opportunity for magnanimous outreach.”<sup>35</sup> A depression-era Federal Writers Project report made for *Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State* highlighted white paternalism by spinning the story as a humanitarian triumph that led to a sense of commonality and mutual understanding between black and white Tulsans, a read of post-riot history that ignores the monumental systemic barriers put up against blacks.<sup>36</sup>

The oil boom of the 1920s drew attention away from the riot and instead highlighted the fabulous wealth flowing into the city, with oil barons funding extensive building projects both downtown and around the area

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 4. This figure equals about 56 billion dollars in 2018, adjusted for inflation.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>31</sup> James S. Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and its Legacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 168.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 168-69.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 169-170.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

abroad.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, the strong Tulsa economy and surge in population in the 1920s allowed Greenwood to rebuild and enter into a renaissance, briefly overtaking Harlem in amenities and becoming a cultural phenomenon for the African American music scene in the Jazz age.<sup>38</sup>

Aside from its own growth, another factor for why Greenwood was publicly silent on the riot was the fear of retribution. Above all, black Tulsans feared an imminent second riot; those fears could not be quelled in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s as black leaders took a more moderate approach to negotiating in hopes of avoiding another riot.<sup>39</sup> This highlighted the distrust still operative in Tulsa race relations as fear created an atmosphere where black and white communities had cut off ties and blacks feared history repeating itself.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, whites also “othered” the black community as the dominant narrative placed the blame on blacks for the riot.<sup>41</sup> With that fear in mind, it is remarkable that victims of the riot provided oral histories in the years after the riot. That required considerable bravery to share those stories, considering how real the fear of possible retribution hung over the community.

### **Voices Finally Heard: Writings of the 1970s and 1980s** Ed Wheeler’s “Profile of a Race Riot”

It was in this atmosphere of tense silence that Ed Wheeler entered the fray as one of the first journalists to investigate the riot in fifty years. Wheeler was a white Tulsa resident who served in the Oklahoma National Guard and built a career as a DJ on KVOO who made a name for himself with his historical dramas.<sup>42</sup> He was contacted in 1970 by the editor of the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce magazine, Larry Silvey, who had used his position to draw attention to issues of race before. Silvey, who admired Wheeler’s dramas, inquired about what Wheeler considered off limits for his show, to which he responded with the Tulsa Race Riot as he feared the possibility of a public reaction like that seen in Orson Welles’ “War of the Worlds” broadcast. Silvey then asked him to write an article about it for his magazine for the fiftieth anniversary, which Wheeler accepted.<sup>43</sup>

Wheeler attempted to start his research on public records but was shocked to find none could be found. He then turned to oral histories, interviewing forty blacks and twenty whites who lived through it; this gave him a sense of the gravity of his work, as victims would only meet him at night in the safety of the local churches when sharing their experiences. His meetings with whites also revealed the nature of the rioters’ intents, as one Klan member stated that “If it hadn’t been for the soldiers, we would have killed every god-damn nigger in the city.”<sup>44</sup> As word got out on his research, Wheeler began getting threatening calls in the night, insinuating that his family could be at risk if his article got published. Those threats came to a head one morning, when someone had written across his car window, “best look under your hood from now on.”<sup>45</sup> It became clear for Wheeler that some elements in Tulsa wanted to maintain that culture of silence by any means necessary.

When he finished the work, Silvey attempted to get the article published, but other leaders in the Chamber refused to let it move forward, calling it “possibly inflammatory” and fearing that it would cause another race riot to break out.<sup>46</sup> Luckily, Wheeler found an ally in the editor for *Impact*, a black magazine, named Don Ross.<sup>47</sup> Ross later served in the Oklahoma state legislature and spearheaded getting the Tulsa Race Riot officially recognized, but Wheeler’s article gave his small magazine the opportunity to take the first step towards breaking the silence. The magazine sold out in Greenwood but did not reach far into the rest of Tulsa; still, the Chief of Police at the time, Bill Wilbanks, confided in him that the Tulsa Police Department had an unpublished official headcount from the riot which closely matches the higher Red Cross estimates from the time. Wilbanks,

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-72.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-84

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 184-85

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-203.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

however, would not grant Wheeler a copy for fear of it affecting his pension.<sup>48</sup> While the article itself did not get wide circulation, Wheeler briefly entered the national spotlight as “a white patriot who had no affection for Afrocentric history but whose interpretation of the riot essentially affirmed the “black” version of the event.”<sup>49</sup>

His narrative begins by confronting the established white narrative, calling attention to the prejudices that shaped the violence:

The blame for the riot was heaped upon “negroes of the lower class – gamblers and bootleggers” and “a group of negroes who had been worked upon by a lawless element of white agitators, reds and bolshevists.”

But this was hogwash.

Prejudice, suspicion, ignorance and hate caused the riot.

Intolerance, anger, rumormongering and fear fanned its flames.

Such elements were prevalent in abundance on both sides of the racial fence.<sup>50</sup>

He describes the outbreak of conflict in terms of a great battle, with mobs meeting to face each other downtown and upwards of forty-five cars full of whites on the hunt for blacks. In addition, Wheeler lends credence to further scrutiny of Tulsa police response, as the police chief lent a machine gun mounted to a truck to a group of white men and sent it east towards Muskogee to prevent any blacks from coming into Tulsa to help in the fight.<sup>51</sup> This is important, as it proves that the police department had crowd control weaponry on hand that could be used to quell the violence. Had those weapons been mobilized early in the conflict, it may have changed the course of the riot and prevent it from devastating Greenwood. Instead, the police chief sat on the tools he had at his disposal before handing it off to send far afield of the conflict.

The work closes with the new status quo which persisted after the massacre, that the “negroes moved back to their “ghetto,” with its disease, illiteracy and narcotics problem of epidemic proportions,” and “the whites settled back to whisper in their cocktail parties about the “coloreds”, make profound pronouncements for political purposes in political purposes in election campaigns about helping “those less fortunate” and then continued to maintain the status quo,” before asking whether or not the riot was ever truly suppressed, or if it’s waiting to ignite once again.<sup>52</sup> Wheeler’s choice to close the article by calling out Tulsa’s complacency echoes through the histories that followed, and his work marked the first step of Tulsans who attempted to come to grips with the event.

#### *Death in a Promised Land* and the Beginning of a Narrative

Among the first comprehensive histories written on the Tulsa Race Riot was *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* by Scott Ellsworth, a historian currently serving at the University of Michigan who specializes in civil rights and the American South. Completed in 1982, he traces the history of the riot, first through the context of Tulsa’s development as an oil boom city in the turn of the twentieth century, then through the larger context of race relations and racial violence between World War I and the riot.<sup>53</sup> He worked through a narrative of the riot, setting the stage first with racial tensions in Tulsa in 1920-1921.<sup>54</sup> Ellsworth follows up with the conditions immediately in the wake of the disaster, stating that “The aftermath of the riot

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 204. Bill Wilbanks retired in Independence, Kansas, and passed away in 2013. This document has not resurfaced but may be worth seeking out from family.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>50</sup> Ed Wheeler, “Profile of a Race Riot” (Tulsa: *Impact*, 1971), 3. Web, [https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc\\_2011.60.18](https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2011.60.18) (accessed December 2, 2018.)

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>53</sup> Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 8, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 45.

provides us with a valuable view of the inter-workings of power, race relations, and racial ideologies in Tulsa.”<sup>55</sup> The final chapter observes the legacy, or perceived lack thereof in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the United States more broadly as blacks and whites formed vastly different personal and collective memories of racial violence.<sup>56</sup> Finally, Ellsworth offers a brief epilogue on the post-riot history of Greenwood, describing the rise and fall the community experienced between 1921 and World War II, as well as the steady urban decay that had eaten away at Greenwood into the 1970s.<sup>57</sup> This work stands as the first major history of the events of the Tulsa Race Riot, and it both solidified his place as an expert on the topic and set the pattern for the authors who tackled the subject after him. Subsequent histories will follow a similar structure, setting the stage with the history of Tulsa and early 20th century racial violence, depicting the events of the riot with the same core narrative intact, depicting the failures of the government to intervene, then working from the aftermath of the riot to present their interpretation of the riot’s value. Thus, Ellsworth made an essential contribution to the academics surrounding the riot, providing a template for future historians to address the narrative of the event as the collective silence surrounding it slowly broke apart.

### **The Oklahoma Commission: Creating an Official History**

If Ed Wheeler and Scott Ellsworth helped crack the door for the story of the Tulsa Race riot to come out of obscurity through the 70s and 80s, The Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 threw the door wide open at the turn of the twenty-first century. Incorporating the collective work of historians including Ellsworth, John Hope Franklin, and Alfred Brophy, the Oklahoma state government employed a wide range of academic and political leaders to investigate the events of the riot and provide an official narrative from the state.

While fielding a variety of uncertainties and differences, the 2001 report establishes that a series of facts asserted throughout the narrative of the riot hold true. For one, as “Black Tulsans had every reason to believe that Dick Rowland would be lynched,” they believed that they alone were responsible for his safety as the authorities failed to act early on. Further officials deputized many whites who participated in the rioting and added to the violence while also providing ammunition to whites not in law enforcement.<sup>58</sup> This corresponds with claims from Maurice Willows that the local authorities had failed in their duty, and with Alfred Brophy’s assertion that Tulsa’s police and city government were responsible for much of the damage caused by showing that they helped the white rioters and gave impunity to some as deputies.

Further, the commission found that those who entered Greenwood “stole, damaged or destroyed” whatever was left behind and burnt down 1,256 homes, “along with virtually every other structure . . . in the Greenwood District.”<sup>59</sup> They gave an estimate of 100 to 300 people killed, noting that no criminal prosecutions took place afterwards. The city paid for much of the Red Cross relief but did little else, actually stood in the way of rebuilding, and “in the end, the restoration of Greenwood after its systematic destruction was left to victims of that destruction.”<sup>60</sup> Forcefully, the section concludes that “these things are not myths, not rumors, not speculation. They are the historical record.”<sup>61</sup> That closing statement is vital, as it presents the darkest elements of the riot as truth, turning the assertion that Tulsa city officials failed to respond in both the short and long term into the state-accepted story of the riot. That acceptance vilifies two decades of efforts by historians to tell Greenwood’s story and serves as a rare case of the marginalized experience in America becoming accepted as objective fact by government leadership.

### **Histories Reframed: The Battle for Reparations and Representation**

The Oklahoma Commission brought with it an explosion of public interest in the Tulsa Race Riot and a wealth of resources for historians to further tap into in addressing the riot. Three historians published sweeping

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-109.

<sup>58</sup> Danney Goble, “Final Report of the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Race Riot of 1921,” in *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Race Riot of 1921* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Commission to Study the Race Riot of 1921, 2001), Web, <https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf> (accessed December 3, 2018), 11.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-14.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.



histories of the riot between 2001 and 2002, and each one built upon the established narrative to different ends. Tim Madigan, Alfred Brophy, and James Hirsch retold the story of the riot, first to humanize the traumatic events, then to illustrate the case for reparations, and finally to explore how the course of the riot and its impact on collective memory. Taken together, their books illustrate the current state of the riot's coverage in academia.

#### *The Burning and Humanizing Vignettes*

The first, a journalist named Tim Madigan, published *The Burning: Massacre, Destruction, and the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*. Perhaps more than any other work yet produced for the topic of the riot, Madigan's history focuses on the collection of stories, personalities and experiences that were central to the riot. While many prior writings take an academic tone, expressing a hitherto unknown historical moment to understand the events itself, *The Burning* works chapter-by-chapter to illustrate the perspectives of the biggest black and white players immediately preceding and following the riot.

Madigan built his narrative through the first-hand survivors' accounts starting with Eldoris Ector McCondichie, whose mother had awoken her with news that "The white people are killing the colored folks!"<sup>62</sup> She and her family were forced to evacuate north of the city, but when they returned they saw their community in ruins.<sup>63</sup> As Madigan interviewed her in 2000 she kept tissues on hand, saying that, "by now, I know better to talk about that day without holding a few of these."<sup>64</sup> Using her example as a prologue, Madigan illustrates the emotional impact that the riot had on her and other black Tulsans.

In the next vignette he constructs focuses on Captain Townsend D. Jackson, a former slave, wildwest lawman, and militia leader who settled in Tulsa in 1913.<sup>65</sup> He had come to the First Baptist Church in Greenwood to speak, and Madigan remarked on his impressive appearance as "a stately, six-foot fellow whose short, dark hair had gone mostly gray." Among those gathered to listen and feverishly took notes was Andrew J. Smitherman, the publisher for the local African American paper, the *Tulsa Star*.<sup>66</sup> Greenwood entrepreneur John B. Stradford was also present. Both he and Smitherman listened to the story of the former slave with the rest of the growing Greenwood gentry, seeing Jackson as a prime example of black progress in their day.<sup>67</sup>

The next vignette focuses on Richard Lloyd Jones, publisher for the *Tulsa Tribune*, characterizing the man whose newspaper has been blamed for setting off the riot.<sup>68</sup> Jones began his journalistic career as a magazine writer, covering the dilapidated state of Abraham Lincoln's birthplace in Kentucky, and eventually purchased it to become its ward, before convincing Teddy Roosevelt to create a memorial there in 1909.<sup>69</sup> Jones carried his service to memorializing Lincoln as his claim to fame, and was outspoken in his support for Lincoln's place in American history, later stating that, "It is time to put Mr. Lincoln to work. He is the symbol of American society. He is the symbol of the battle against the sins within. He is the symbol of all that is good in our country."<sup>70</sup>

It is with great irony that much of his journalistic career in Tulsa then served to denigrate the black community in Greenwood, which he called "Niggertown." While he was apathetic to "docile" blacks, he commented that, "A bad nigger is about the lowest thing that walks on two feet. Give a bad nigger his booze and his dope and his gun and he thinks he can shoot up the world. And these four things are to be found in Niggertown, booze, dope, bad niggers and guns."<sup>71</sup> It is with this attitude, and the financial strain of a struggling paper, that the *Tribune* entered the fray of civil strife on May 31, 1921 with Jones' scathing editorial on the arrest of Dick Rowland. While the exact words of that editorial are lost in a coverup, the headline "to lynch negro tonight" has been frequently recalled from it.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Tim Madigan, *The Burning: Massacre, Destruction, and the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-30.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46.

The book closes with intimate characterizations of the survivors that he interviewed.<sup>73</sup> *The Burning*, then, is a crucial resource for connecting to the emotional impact that the riot had on the survivors and larger community alike. It captures the complications and contradictions that are wrapped up in the people who contributed to, or were afflicted by, violence and hate. While reading the other histories can make the summer of 1921 feel like a distant event, this collection of individual stories provides a personal connection to the events by filtering the riot through many peoples' experiences.

#### *Reconstructing the Dreamland and the Case for Reparations*

Much like Madigan, legal scholar Alfred Brophy's *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Riot of 1921: Race, Reparations and Reconciliation* incorporates vignettes of experiences before, during, and after the riots, while also focusing the core of his attention on the culpability of the city, state, and even federal government in the riot's impact on Greenwood. He crafted his narrative with the goal of garnering support for reparations, centering the thesis of the book on the struggle between black demands for justice and white insistence on a code of law that subjugated and controlled blacks.<sup>74</sup>

A major contributing factor to black Americans seeking greater equality in the leadup to the riot was the Great War, as many young men returned from the Western Front to the rougher underbelly of Greenwood with equality on their mind.<sup>75</sup> In addition, many Greenwood residents had moved to Oklahoma to escape the racial violence and control in the Deep South, and felt "the need to prevent lynchings, to protect voting rights, to develop the community."<sup>76</sup> A.J. Smitherman's *Tulsa Star* fed the community's interests in equality, reminding them of their equal rights while informing them of the legal and cultural changes happening around the country.<sup>77</sup> The ideals espoused in Greenwood ran counter to white views, as lynchings grew more prominent as a means of keeping black aspirations in line.<sup>78</sup> While Oklahoma laws should be protecting black men and women from being murdered by mobs, no punishment would come to lynchers in practice, which made more evident that "when there is a gap between what the society believes and what the law commands, both the law and social system tend to break down."<sup>79</sup>

In the wake of incredible destruction, the problem had been made worse by the city's response, as Greenwood residents had to go to court against the local government to keep from being pushed off their razed land.<sup>80</sup> Initially, the Chamber of Commerce offered to pay restitutions to riot victims, while the Public Welfare Board voiced its plans to rebuild homes in Greenwood; they, along with white newspapers, insisted on "Tulsa Will," a phrase signifying that the city is coming together to rebuild and recover.<sup>81</sup> After the Public Welfare Board was replaced by the Reconstruction committee by the city government, rebuilding efforts stalled out.<sup>82</sup> Much of the idealism surrounding the relief effort melted away as the City Council accepted new zoning proposals by the Tulsa Real Estate Exchange to build up industry and rail infrastructure on Greenwood's charred remains.<sup>83</sup> While the immediate motivation was land development, a forced removal of Tulsa's blacks would also put greater distance between the races, keeping contact between them to a minimum as an effort to avoid future conflict. In effect, the city put a new fire ordinance in place, requiring new buildings to be fireproofed and at least two stories tall, which was beyond the means of most Greenwood residents who just lost everything.<sup>84</sup> While the City Commission and county court went back and forth on the technicalities of the ordinance, it still prevented black Tulsans from rebuilding until a permanent injunction finally ended it in September 1921 as a protection of property rights.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>74</sup> Alfred L. Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Riot of 1921: Race, Reparations and Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), xx.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

By the time the battle over the ordinance passed, white Tulsans no longer expressed interest in helping rebuild. Further, Tulsa *Star* editor A.J. Smitherman saw a shift by whites towards victim-blaming as many were considering attacking Greenwood again.<sup>86</sup> As Greenwood residents tried to rebuild for themselves after the ordinance, they ran into further obstacles; insurance companies were denying victims' claims, citing "riot exclusion" clauses that held up in court. The city was also cleared of blame according to the law of the day, so the victims were left without recourse. With four million dollars in damages to account for, relief efforts came to a paltry onehundred thousand dollars.<sup>87</sup> Thus, as Tulsa grew wealthy the city defaulted on its promises to rebuild, choosing instead to hide behind legal technicality.

With the failure of the city to prevent white Tulsans from destroying Greenwood, promising to aid in rebuilding, and then actively standing in the way of rebuilding efforts, Brophy closes the book with an argument for reparations.<sup>88</sup> He highlights four principles for reparations: first, that city officials were culpable for the disaster; second, that survivors and their families still feel the pain of the riot; third, that these reparations are in response to specific damages from a specific event, rather than general injustice; and fourth, that Tulsans fully knew that they were responsible for rebuilding and shirked that responsibility anyways.<sup>89</sup> By illustrating his case for reparations, Brophy explains aftermath of the riot with the intent of illustrating why the City of Tulsa ought to take practical measures to redress the wrongs of the past.

#### *Riot and Remembrance: A Comprehensive Study on the Riot's Impact*

Of the books written on the Tulsa Race Riot, James S. Hirsch provides perhaps the most complete work on the subject, as it not only covers the event but subsequent efforts to drag the event back into the public's attention. Hirsch builds upon the established narrative, while also examining the development of the Oklahoma Commission, its leaders, and its detractors. It follows those scholars and community leaders who brought it back into the limelight, the conflict brought on by their efforts, and the state of Tulsa's collective memory in the immediate wake of the Oklahoma Commission. Hirsch provides context for Don Ross's story of learning about the riot and spreading awareness in Tulsa, and how those efforts led to the 1997 commission. In covering the commission, it also highlights the vitriolic response from Tulsans like Beryl Ford and Bill O'Brien, who pushed back against the narrative accepted by the black community and academics alike. By building up the context that surrounded his contemporary scholarship on the riot, Hirsch's work provides insight into the interaction between scholarly and public discourse at the time.

The first of these actors, Oklahoma senator Don Ross, came to know about the riot from his teachers at Booker T Washington High in North Tulsa.<sup>90</sup> W.D. Williams, his history teacher, introduced the history of the riot to his class and young Ross openly challenged him. After class, Williams brought out a photo album brimming with photos and documentation of the riot, before telling the young man about his experience and introducing him to a football coach who also lived through the riot and corroborated the history.<sup>91</sup> This experience as a teen compelled him as he "would compel Tulsa to confront its history" as a writer for the Oklahoma Eagle.<sup>92</sup> Through the influence of John Hope Franklin, Ross became convinced that reparations were the way to set things right.<sup>93</sup> That opportunity would come with the 1997 commission.

Following the precedent set by Florida's commission on the Rosewood riot of 1923, Ross used their example to press the Oklahoma government for a resolution to pay reparations for the Tulsa Race Riot.<sup>94</sup> Even further, the commissions surrounding riots in Chicago in 1919, Harlem in 1935, and the Kerner Commission of 1967 all set positive models for Ross to move forward after he spearheaded legislation to create the Tulsa Race Riot Commission.<sup>95</sup> A few things, however, set this commission apart from those that came before. First, this riot was the worst in American history. Second, the collective memories of black and white communities

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-106.

<sup>90</sup> Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance*, 186.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 189-90.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 197-198.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 237-238.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 239-240.

competed with one another, causing both communities to see themselves as the better actors in the event.<sup>96</sup> With those competing narratives hanging over proceedings, the issue of reparations as admission of responsibility hung as one of the greatest challenges for the commission. In one statement cited by someone writing in to the *Tulsa World*, they said: "I am 43 years old, and I have nothing to do with the Tulsa Race Riot. I'll be damned if my money pays for anybody's reparations. You're going to start another riot."<sup>97</sup>

With all the publicity brought to the Tulsa Race Riot during the commission, Tulsa resident, collector, and local history enthusiast Beryl Ford rose to the challenge of defending the long-running white narrative of the riot. As Hirsch characterizes him:

To Beryl Ford, the black men at the courthouse were not war veterans who stopped a lynching but armed thugs who had driven through white Tulsa, looking for trouble. . . .

He revered the men and women who transformed this piece of grassland into a great city, and he was outraged at the attacks on their reputation. Yes, the riot was awful, but it certainly didn't happen the way the "colored" and their white allies would have you believe today. If the reporters and television cameras and the commissioners would just sit down with him, he would tell them what really happened.<sup>98</sup>

As a respected member of the white community, Ford stood for the established interpretation of the riot that he and other white Tulsans held dear.<sup>99</sup> He was also a proud Tulsan who amassed a collection of ephemera of Tulsa history, a history which he felt was under assault. He lashed out against black Tulsans, claiming not because of any racism on his part but because they were twisting his city's cherished history for their own gain.<sup>100</sup> The commission granted Ford and Bill O'Brien, one of his compatriots, an opportunity to speak with them, in part because he represented a portion of the white mainstream, and because it would placate other dissenters.<sup>101</sup> They came together on January 5, 2001 to discuss the report, where conflict between black and white narratives came to a head.<sup>102</sup> After O'Brien claimed that the riot was set off by "black militants," and he stated that, "you people started it. You initiated the action, you started the shooting, and only after the whites got organized could they contain the blacks," setting the meeting off into a fever pitch with "you people" statements flowing from both sides.<sup>103</sup> At the close of the book, after the Commission report passed without reparations coming forward, Hirsch turns his attention to the efforts made in its wake, including a private fund for the survivors of the riot, the state giving survivors gold medals, and a musical created to tell the story.<sup>104</sup>

### Conclusion

After a precursory survey of the scholarship surrounding the Tulsa Race Riot, its problems reflect the difficulty surrounding the public debate over the subject. It is a challenge to find primary sources because, put simply, the city's efforts to cover up the true extent of the riot worked. When searching for a paper trail, few can be found. Without the Red Cross report and the tireless efforts of Mary E. Jones Parrish, the riot would likely have slipped into obscurity. Photos, memoirs, and oral histories are the Tulsa Race Riot historian's only other respite in researching the event. The trouble of limited primary sourcing is problematic for existing literature, as dissenting perspectives on the cause and character of the riot would rely on information that simply isn't present. That leaves a series of books that all essentially tell the same story of the riot in the same fashion since 1982, then backloading their accounts with new applications of that narrative.

To contemporary writers' credit, the differences in their works also indicate that scholarship surrounding the riot is beginning to grow out of its infancy. As they brought new application to the narrative it indicated that they had moved from justifying the riot's existence to an unknowing academic world, to the first steps towards

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 279-280.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 284-285.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 328-29.

injecting more nuance into retellings than before. Further academic understanding surrounding Greenwood's post-riot history would provide an understanding of the community that gives it a greater sense of texture and would juxtapose the riot to the community that fell victim to it.

The collective silence that fell over Tulsa also deserves greater attention as a sociological phenomenon. Broad studies on racial violence and collective memory would benefit from the example of the Tulsa Race Riot as a case study with many contributing factors. More serious attention to a comparative study of Tulsa and other communities that have suffered racial violence would also be beneficial. In addition, the coverup also had unexpected repercussions, as it effectively delegitimized any narrative other than the stories that Greenwood preserved. Whether or not the survivors' memories are completely trustworthy, whites from the time did not likewise preserve that experience.

Aside from Hirsch, most of the writers give relatively little time to fielding alternative accounts, in part because any records that could support an alternative have been either hidden or destroyed. Historians and journalists, responding to the information on the riot that currently exists, struggle to seriously consider many white perspectives on the riot because those perspectives are not readily available. While it seems immediately obvious that the perspectives provided by those like Beryl Ford seem incomplete and dishonest, the impact of the Tulsa Race Riot's divided narrative is central to the opposition still felt today. It needs to be taken seriously, because it still forms the framework that shapes how many whites in Tulsa understand the riot. Public historians would be of use in addressing the adaptive challenges that come with introducing a tough historical narrative, especially one that feels demonizing to white people, to Tulsa's white community, which still struggles with a loss in self-image in light of race riot scholarship. Breaking through to that community will be crucial in creating a better environment for discourse.