THE TULSA RACE WAR AND ITS LEGACY

RIOT AND REMEMBRANCE

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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON • NEW YORK
2002

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hirsch, James S.
Riot and remembrance : the Tulsa race war and its legacy / James S. Hirsch.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-618-10813-0
1. African Americans — Oklahoma — Tulsa — History —20th century. 2.Tulsa (Okla.) — Race Relations. 3. Racism — Oklahoma — Tulsa — History — 20th century. 4. Riots — Oklahoma — Tulsa — History — 20th century. 5. Violence — Oklahoma — Tulsa — History — 20th century. 6. African American neighborhoods — Oklahoma — Tulsa — History — 20th century. I. Title.
F704.T92 .R56 2002
976.6'8600496073—dc21 2001501615

Printed in the United States of America

Book design by Robert Overholtzer

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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INTRODUCTION

Is the World on Fire?

On a warm evening in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a dozen black women were gathered at Mount Zion Baptist Church to discuss expanding its role in the community when Pressley Little bolted through the doors, his face glistening with sweat.

"Baby, there's a riot starting!" he yelled to his wife, Mabel. "There's shooting at the courthouse."

A black youth had been jailed for allegedly assaulting a white girl in a downtown elevator, and an incendiary front-page article about the incident had set off rumors of a lynching. About 75 armed black men marched to the courthouse to prevent a possible hanging. They were met by about 1,500 whites. A shot was fired and bedlam erupted.

It was May 31, 1921.

Eighty years later, the echoes can still be heard. They rise from a community that has struggled to reconcile and redeem one of the most tragic chapters in American race relations. They also fill a vacuum for a city that has ignored and, in some quarters, covered up the most notorious event in its proud history. Many decades after the riot, Tulsa pried open the darkest secrets of its past and did what every city — indeed, country — should do: it sought justice for a crime long since committed. It also tried to heal the wounds of ne-

glect and hostility in a racially divided community. But it discovered, in confronting race, that justice and reconciliation are cherished but opposing virtues. To correct a historical wrong — be it for slavery or segregation, for discrimination or exclusion — is to drive a wedge even more deeply between angry blacks who demand compensation for their losses and indignant whites who disavow any responsibility. The Tulsa race riot lasted less than sixteen hours, but its search for closure overlapped America's own struggle to make peace with a painful past.

Mabel Little knew that a riot, however it played out, could not have come at a worse time. She had just realized the black version of the American dream.

Eight years earlier, she had moved from the sheltered black community of Boley, Oklahoma, to the booming oil town of Tulsa. At seventeen, she had one dollar and twenty-five cents in her pocket. Her mother predicted she would end up as a prostitute.

That was not an unreasonable idea. Tulsa's black neighborhood, Greenwood, had a flourishing red-light district of opium dens, gambling parlors, whiskey joints, and brothels. But it also had numerous merchants, entrepreneurs, and educators who turned Tulsa into "the promised land" for blacks, and into this group fell Mabel Little.

Initially, the big city disappointed her. Greenwood had only one paved street; rain turned the rest of its roads to mud. Mabel had to carry her nice shoes in a paper bag and lay down two-by-four planks just to cross an avenue. The random violence also shocked her. At a dance one night, a couple was gliding across the floor when the man's mistress approached them, pulled out a gun, and shot the man's wife dead.

But Mabel found her way. She worked as a maid in a hotel for twenty dollars a month, plus meals, and married Pressley in 1914. They had four dollars between them, but they were ambitious. They admired Greenwood's black-operated barbecue joints, grocery stores, funeral parlors, and theaters whose lights glittered in the night. They wanted to be a part of it, so they saved their money and managed to buy a three-room shotgun house; there Pressley ran a shoeshine parlor and Mabel operated a beauty salon. Her aunt Lydia

in Boley had taught her how to wash, straighten, and wave hair, and as Greenwood's population soared, so too did Mabel's business. In 1918 she hired her first hairdresser, and soon after two more. She moved to the heart of the black business district and named her shop the Little Rose Beauty Salon. She was proud to be on a paved street.

There were few black hairdressers in Tulsa, and customers came from towns fifty miles away. Entertainers who appeared at the Dreamland Theatre, hookers who worked on Archer Street, and babies still in their mothers' arms — all came to Mabel Little's salon. Standing beneath a picture of Jesus with his hands folded in prayer, she worked from seven in the morning to seven in the evening to serve her more than six hundred customers. Meanwhile, Pressley opened the Little Bell Café, which prepared "smothered steak" with rice and brown gravy. After seven years of hard work — and eighteen days before the riot — they built a duplex with a new salon on the first floor and a three-room rental upstairs. They rented out a second building and also built their own home as well, with new furniture in five rooms. They drove a Model T Ford.

They were rich in property but had only fifty dollars in cash.

"They've gone to stop a lynching," Pressley told Mabel as they hurried out of the church. Panic filled Greenwood. Men and women rushed from their houses down the streets, some near hysteria. Mabel returned to their home and spent the night listening to the racing car engines, the crackling pistols, the muffled shouts. By morning, she heard airplanes buzzing overhead, and for the rest of her life she swore that those planes firebombed Greenwood.

A few blocks away, Veneice Sims heard the first bullets carom off the Santa Fe rail yard, and she knew her own dreams for the evening would be dashed

At sixteen, she was going to her first high school prom, and her date, Verby Ellison, a well-groomed youth with curly hair, had permission to keep her out until midnight. She yearned for some independence from her strict father, a well-paid mechanic for a bus company, who had recently purchased a Victrola but only allowed her to play church music. Veneice liked jazz and when her parents were out,

she smuggled Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" onto the machine. Her father also forbade dancing in the living room. "Better not shake or shimmy," he would say.

But that night the Booker T. Washington High School band was to play in the chandeliered ballroom of the Stradford Hotel, believed to be the country's largest hotel owned by a black. By late afternoon, Veneice had carefully laid out her prom clothes on the bed she shared with her sister: a blue silk dress made by a neighborhood seamstress, silver slippers, and a dazzling pearl necklace borrowed from a family friend. But in the early evening, she heard a ruckus outside her comfortable three-bedroom home. Cars tore down the street and men shouted; Veneice tried to ignore the commotion, imagining herself gliding across the dance floor in her taffeta gown.

She heard the first gunshot. Then others. A streetlamp shattered. Her father grabbed a rifle as he bounded from the house. Veneice had no idea what was happening until he returned.

"There's a race riot," he said. "It's time to go."

Veneice rushed to her bedroom. She didn't want to abandon the gown or the pearls, but she had no choice. The oldest of six children, she followed her siblings into the family's black Ford, and as her father drove through the streets, she had no sense of what would befall her community, but she wept for all she had left behind.

George Monroe was only five years old, but he knew there was trouble. Shortly after daybreak, he heard the voices of white hoodlums on the porch of his home. Both his father, a porter who also owned a roller rink, and his mother were out of the house, leaving four children behind. As the white men reached the front door, the youngsters slid under a bed. George, the youngest, was the last child under and barely squeezed himself in. The four men, carrying torches, walked past the bed to the curtains, lighted them at the bottom, and spun back around. As they walked back past the bed, one of them stepped on George's hand. The youngster opened his mouth to scream, but his sister Lottie jammed her hand against his mouth. The men slammed the door on their way out.

With the house in flames, the crying children scrambled to their

feet and made their way outside. They lived on Easton Street next to Mount Zion Baptist Church, a brick structure completed only fifty-seven days earlier. Its parishioners thought it more magnificent than any white church in Tulsa. George would later say he could stick his hand out the window and touch Mount Zion, but now the church, and indeed the entire block, was on fire. George ran down the street, but everywhere he turned the town he knew, where grocers hung fresh vegetables on a string, preachers sang "A-men," and kids barreled through the streets on bicycles, was burning. George looked at Lottie and asked, "Is the world on fire?"

Four blocks away, J. B. Stradford stood sentinel at his three-story, fifty-four-room marvel, the Stradford Hotel. Trimmed in pressed brick and set on stone slabs, it symbolized black affluence and pride in Tulsa. Stradford himself was the wealthiest man in Greenwood and one of its most outspoken. Born a Kentucky slave, he became a college-educated businessman. He was a "race man" — an ardent supporter of civil rights — who went to court to challenge the Jim Crow laws. He exhorted his fellow blacks to demand equality, which was considered subversive in the South.

Stradford often insisted that if a black man were ever lynched in Tulsa, he would personally ensure that the streets would be bathed in blood. But on the day the riot began, the county sheriff assured him that the black prisoner would not be accosted, and he urged other blacks not to go to the courthouse unless the sheriff requested their help. His pleas were ignored, and on the morning of the riot, Stradford stood at his hotel doorway to fend off the white marauders.

He was approached by a captain of the National Guard, which had been called in to restore order.

"I know you, Mr. Stradford," he said. "We came to take you to a place of safety. It's not safe for you to be here."

"If you guarantee my hotel will not be burned, I'll go with you."

"Your hotel won't be burned," the guardsman said. "It will be used as a place of refuge."

Stradford agreed to leave and was escorted to an automobile. But as he got in, he saw a "raiding squad" of white rioters break into a

drugstore near the hotel and steal cigars, tobacco, and money from its register. Some of the men had already stuffed their shirts with silk handkerchiefs and fine socks stolen from other stores, and now they grabbed bottles of perfume and splashed themselves with the liquid. They moved closer to the hotel. Stradford, helpless, was whisked away in the car. When he returned, the building lay in ashes.

The Tulsa race riot looms as a singular historical event. America has experienced dozens of bloody race riots, but Tulsa's was the worst in the twentieth century and possibly in American history. Comparisons are difficult; even eighty years after the fact the death toll is in dispute. Thirty-eight were confirmed dead, including ten whites, but the true figure was well over that, perhaps even three hundred. More certain is the destruction of property: 1,256 houses were burned in a thirty-six-square-block area of Greenwood, including churches, stores, hotels, businesses, two newspapers, a school, a hospital, and a library — in short, all the institutions that perpetuated black life in Tulsa. The burned property was valued between $1.5 and $1.8 million — more than $14 million in 2000 dollars. Many homes were looted before being torched, but no white rioter was ever convicted for his or her crime (women looted as well).

While the riot was triggered by a racially charged news article, it was fueled by two headstrong forces: whites reasserting their supremacy in the South through the Jim Crow laws and disenfranchisement, and blacks demanding political equality and economic opportunity. In the years before the riot, whites imposed their will through lynchings, particularly in the South. African Americans learned that any black accused of "assaulting" — a euphemism for "raping" — a white woman violated the ultimate taboos of sex and race in America. Public hanging was deemed the appropriate punishment.

Oklahoma was particularly vulnerable to such hysteria. Spurred by free land and then by oil, it attracted whites from the Deep South. These settlers established racism as custom and wrote it as law. At the same time, southern blacks were drawn to the territory because it was not part of the Confederacy, and they believed they could create a bastion of political equality. Compounding these

forces in Tulsa was a history of vigilantism and lawlessness that culminated in the total collapse of authority on that night of May 31, 1921.

For all its devastation, the riot had a quiet afterlife. Very different oral accounts were quietly passed down on front porches and in barbershops across the city, but the riot was left out of many history books, ignored in classrooms, and overlooked in newspaper retrospectives. Every city is sensitive about its image, but few cities have sold its image as brilliantly as Tulsa. Lacking oil itself, it relied on its "Magic City" boosterism to become the nation's oil capital, a vision of clean neighborhoods, thriving businesses, and happy families. It wouldn't tolerate the stories, true or not, of black corpses being thrown into incinerators, stuffed into mass graves, or dumped into the Arkansas River. A hush fell over Tulsa, and few heard the whispers of history.

Only at the end of the century did this culture of silence — or even conspiracy of silence, as some have called it — irrevocably shatter. Unlike any other race riot in American history, Tulsa's was subject to an exhaustive government inquiry that sought to determine facts, assign responsibility, and recommend reparations or other compensation to individuals or to the community at large. As the country began debating the much thornier question of reparations for descendants of slaves, Tulsa emerged as a model of how one city sought redemption. The proposition was simple enough: justice delayed does not necessarily mean justice denied; and even long after the conflict, truth can be revealed and reconciliation is possible.

But the government investigation that began in 1997 roused bitter memories, as blacks and whites fought over virtually every aspect of the riot — about who started it and who failed to stop it; about government conspiracies and aerial bombings; about the very stories that had been transmitted through generations of Tulsans. A riot that had been buried for years suddenly became a national story.

At stake were whose narrative of history would prevail and whose myths would be discredited.

For the aging survivors, however, the riot was not shrouded in myth. For Veneice Sims, it was watching Greenwood burn to ashes from a glassed-in porch above the city, where her father had taken

the family to escape the mob. For George Monroe, it was a handful of melted dimes that survived the riot in his father's mailbox and were then strung together as a necklace. For the descendants of J. B. Stradford, it was trying to clear his name of any wrongdoing. And for Mabel Little, it was the knowledge that she would never have what she lost in the early morning hours of June 1, 1921. Seventy-seven years later, asked about the meaning of the event, she said: "At the time of the riot, we had ten different business places for rent. Today, I *pay* rent."

And where the Little Rose Beauty Salon once stood is still an empty lot.

I. Beginnings

1

The Self-Made Oil Capital

EARLY IN THE twentieth century, it was inevitable that a big city would develop somewhere in the desolate, rolling landscape that sat above North America's largest pool of oil. The Mid-Continent field, beneath parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas, helped fuel the Model T Fords that put Americans on the road, the trains that transported them across the country, and the ships and planes that prevailed in World War I. The field transformed a land of wheat, cotton, and cattle into a vital industrial resource and turned tired villages into vibrant cities. The city that best exploited this pool would be crowned the Oil Capital of the World.

That city should not have been Tulsa, Oklahoma.

For all the oil that gushed from the Oklahoma soil, not a drop was ever found in this prairie community on the edge of the Ozark Plateau. Tulsa could supply oilmen with the equipment, financing, and amenities that made their work possible and their lives pleasant, but many other towns were far better suited to serve them. Muskogee, fifty miles southeast of Tulsa, was the seat of the federal government that ruled the Indian Territory that became the eastern half of Oklahoma with statehood in 1907. In 1905 Muskogee had 12,000 citizens — more than twice as many as Tulsa — as well as paved streets, a trolley, and the seven-story Turner Hotel, the finest lodging between Kansas City and Dallas. Also bigger than Tulsa was nearby

Bartlesville, which discovered oil in 1897, as well as Vinita, Claremore, Okmulgee, Sapulpa, and a dozen other settlements that dotted the grasslands. They viewed Tulsa as a drab cattle town with one railroad, a dirty train depot, and a huddle of crude wooden houses. A visitor in 1905 recalled that the city lacked even its own postcard.

Located along a curl in the Arkansas River, where the oak-laden foothills of the Ozarks blend into the tawny landscape of the Great Plains, Tulsa was settled in 1836 by Creek Indians from Alabama. They called their village Lochapoka, "place of turtles." The first white settlers arrived in the early 1880s, but "Tulsey Town," as they called it, held little promise other than as a trading post for farmers. At the turn of the century, it was literally a cow town, with thousands of head of cattle routinely driven through its center, rutting streets, trampling gardens, and trailing clouds of dirt. The roads were dust storms in dry weather, swamps in rain. Residents insisted that the streets not be wider than eighty feet — anything greater was too far to walk in the mud.

Main Street was gray and pungent, with no sidewalks, streetlights, or sewers. First and Second streets, littered with watermelon rinds and horse apples, intersected Main. The smell of freshly killed animals pervaded the Frisco Meat Market, which paid cash for hides and proudly hung on its storefront the pink carcasses of deer, raccoons, rabbits, quail, and prairie chickens. Pigs and cattle roamed the streets at will, and mosquitoes bred by the millions in the rain barrels at each store, which offered the only water for horse-drawn fire wagons. It sometimes wasn't enough. In 1897 a blaze destroyed the city's first bank, three masonry buildings, and twelve wooden structures. Schools and churches were small white frame buildings, outhouses stood behind homes, and water faucets disgorged clumps of dirt. The briny brown liquid came from the Arkansas River, which was dangerous to drink (wells provided a limited supply of potable water) and barely fit for bathing. River water gathered in tubs left a thin layer of dirt, and bathers had to towel the granules off their bodies.

The river was also an economic liability: its wide sandy bed and sudden freshets made it difficult to navigate. Steam ferries ground to a halt as cattle ambled in the river past the hapless passenger