

Sidedoor

Episode 3: Confronting the Past

TC: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian. I'm Tony Cohn and in this episode we're gonna do things a little differently. We're going to spend all of our time on one story. My co-host, Megan Detrie, is going to tell you about one of the most devastating outbreaks of racial violence in American history, a riot that happened in 1921 in the wealthiest black community in the United States at the time: the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma. At least 1,256 homes, along with churches, schools, businesses and even a hospital were deliberately burned or destroyed. No one knows with certainty how many people were killed. Then, until the turn of the century, the story carried a kind of collective silence for the people of Oklahoma. And now, newly discovered documents and artifacts are asking the nation to reckon with its past.

Voice of survivor: They were herding the black people down to the convention hall. They were entering them in the convention hall building.

Voice of survivor: We didn't know where they were taken and then they set our house afire.

Voice of survivor: Set fire to 30 blocks. Terrible fire.

Voice of survivor: Seems like a dream. Doesn't seem like a thing like that ever happened. You can see the blazes from where they lived over the hill. It looked like the whole world was on fire.

MD: Clyde Eddy, Jimmie Lilly Franklin, and Eunice Jackson were witnesses to the 1921 Oklahoma Race Riot which started ostensibly because of an encounter between a young black shoe shiner and a white elevator operator in a elevator on Memorial Day weekend in 1921. The recordings were collected by the Smithsonian's newly National Museum of African American History and Culture for an exhibit about the power of place in the African American experience. Paul Gardullo is a curator who worked on the collection.

PG: In late May of 1921, a young man named Dick Rowland, who was a Tulsan, had an encounter with a young white woman in a downtown elevator -- what happened in the elevator we don't really know, whether he stepped on her foot, the elevator stopped short, but what we do know is the woman exited the elevator with claims that she was raped which she later recanted.

MD: But to understand what happens next, you need to know more about what was going on in Oklahoma at the time.

PG: African Americans had been moving to the Oklahoma territories since the 1840s. Some had come on the trail of tears, both enslaved with Cherokees and free members

of the Cherokee nation and had established themselves in pockets and communities all throughout eastern Oklahoma.

MD: On November 16, 1907, Oklahoma became a state. And with statehood came the ability separate blacks and whites through a set of federal laws known as the Jim Crow laws. There were to be separate coaches and railcars. Interracial marriage became a felony. Over the first few years hospitals, cemeteries and even public pay phone booths were all segregated. In the fourteen years between statehood and the 1921 race riot, 26 African Americans were lynched in Oklahoma.

PG: As Tulsa began to develop into one of Oklahoma's major cities and oil was discovered, blacks shared in that as well, owning land, building a community in north Tulsa that became known as Black Wall Street, or in the parlance of the time Negro Wall Street.

MD: Black Wall Street, also called the Greenwood neighborhood, was a thriving commercial district with some of the most prosperous black-owned businesses in the Southwest. There were cafes, grocery stores, beauty parlors, a seven hundred and fifty seat theater, a roller skating rink, two black owned-newspapers. Dentists, lawyers, doctors' offices and more than half-dozen African American churches. But most importantly, Greenwood was home to nearly 10,000 people. Paul says that Tulsa, with its growing black wealth and increasingly resentful white population was just a powder keg just waiting for a match.

PG: So this is a little necessary background to the situation that results in Dick Rowland's accusations of 1921 and subsequent arguments between the established and prosperous black community protecting one of its own and a white community that is fearful of and becoming more desperate about their black neighbors.

MD: After Dick Rowland was arrested, black Tulsa worried that a white mob, spurred on by a sensationalist news story, might attempt some form of vigilante justice.

A group of armed African American WWI veterans came to the courthouse to offer their assistance in defending Rowland. They were sent away by the Sheriff. Meanwhile, angry white Tulsans were gathering outside. They grew into a mob of two thousand people, some also had guns. A shot was fired, and mayhem broke loose.

PG: Overnight on May 31, the conflagrations turn deadly. White mobs with the sort of authority of Tulsa's police attack and raze all of what had been called Negro Wall Street burning it to the ground, an untold number of black community members are murdered, thousands of homes are lost as well.

MD: This wasn't just rage...or indiscriminate violence. Historians say it was an attempt to wipe out the heart of black life—and black success—in Tulsa. John W. Franklin, the program manager at the museum, has spent years working on reconciliation within the

Tulsa community. He follows in the footsteps of his father, the prominent historian John Hope Franklin, and his grandfather BC Franklin-- a well-known lawyer in Tulsa -- who fought for the Greenwood district to rebuilt after the riot.

JF: When the so-called riot occurred, a riot is usually thought of in the United States in terms of black people destroying things, but in this case it was white people destroying a black community. And so it's referred to increasingly not as a Tulsa race riot but as a Tulsa massacre. And, in light of what occurred in Europe with ethnic cleansing, people are increasingly calling it a pogrom, because it's a destruction in one night of an entire black communities' well-being, livelihood and future.

MD: Within hours a pattern emerged: armed whites would break into black homes and businesses. Anyone inside was forced onto the streets. Men were led away at gunpoint to internment centers. If they resisted, they were shot. If they had guns, they were shot. The rioters then looted the homes, hauling off whatever they wanted, before setting the buildings on fire. Columns of smoke rose hundreds of feet into the air over the north end of the city. This is John again, whose grandfather survived the riot:

JF: African Americans are machine-gunned down in the streets of their neighborhood. Private planes drop turpentine-burning turpentine bombs on the black communities so that the businesses, banks, hotels, residences, furriers, insurance companies all burn from the top down, including my grandfather's rooming house and law offices.

MD: Eldoris McCondichie was asleep at home when the violence broke out in North Tulsa.

EM: When my mother had me to get up, I just didn't want to get up or wake up then so I just didn't answer her, but then she said, "Eldoris, wake up." We have to go. And then she said the white people are killing the colored folks. And she didn't have any more trouble with me getting up.

MD: Here is Olivia Hooker, a retired psychology professor who recently turned 101. Her father and his business partner owned a department store in Greenwood.

OH: Picture with me the trauma of a young six year old girl, hearing things hitting the house and thinking it was hail until my mother took me to the window and let me peer through the blinds and said, "That thing up there on the stand with the American flag on it is a machine gun! And that means that your country is shooting at you!" This was an amazing thought to an idealistic child. I had never met any kind of discrimination.

MD: Olivia's mother hid her and her siblings under a table as her father and brother were taken away. She remembers men sneaking into her backyard to set fire to doll clothes that had been hung on a line to dry.

OH: But the damage that was done was not only the material things: a house destroyed an entire neighborhood destroyed all the services destroyed our school bombed on the

day that we should have been getting our report cards to move up to the next class. So the children of Tulsa were very devastated.

MD: Jimmie Lilly Franklin lived with her uncle, parents, grandparents and three sisters in a four-bedroom two-story house in the heart of the African American District.

JF: And we got to the bottom of the stairway to see our front door being splintered and people rushing in with shotguns and pistols and some of them had hoods. So it frightened us to death and the next thing they noticed standing near the bottom of the stairway was that they were loading up mamma's candle piano into a truck, poppa's photographic equipment into a truck and our piggy banks off the mantle in the living room. Minnie started to say something and mamma put her hands over her lips and told her not to speak anything.

MD: The rioting continued through the next day until the morning of June 1st. The Oklahoma National Guard arrived and declared Martial law. By then, most of the city's black population had fled or was being held under armed guard. There were a few pockets of armed resistance still in the northern most parts of the district, and in some areas, sympathetic whites hid black neighbors and employees. But, around 40 blocks the city were destroyed, including over a thousand homes. John describes the scene.

JF: Churches burning, homes burning, businesses burning.

MD: No one knows exactly, but it's likely that between 100 and 300 people were killed.

JF: And then the aftermath of the Red Cross, getting nourishment and clothing and temporary housing for the entire community which has been devastated.

MD: Across Tulsa's dividing line, the railroad tracks, no white homes had been touched. It was days before the Red Cross was allowed to enter the city to offer relief. Thousands of black Tulsans spent the winter living in tents. Others moved away. Official damage was estimated at 1.5 million dollars -- about 18 million by today's standards. The black community filed damage claims for three times that amount, but all of the claims were denied. And when a grand jury investigated the riots, it blamed them on the black community. No one -- black or white -- was convicted for taking part in the violence.

JF: The city passed an ordinance following the massacre that everyone had to rebuild with non-flammable materials and my grandfather took that- fought that to the state Supreme Court and won so that people were actually able to rebuild where they had once had businesses and homes. So this is a story of American resilience, in spite of the massacre in spite of the burning in spite of the theft of people's personal property. And the refusal of insurance companies to compensate them because it was a riot.

MD: And then as the Greenwood district rebuilt, the story of the riot just disappeared. It became so hidden that blacks and white grew up in Tulsa having never heard of what happened. Textbooks didn't cover it, classrooms rarely taught it. Even in private, John

says, a sense of shame often kept people quiet. In fact, someone went so far as to try to erase the newspaper coverage that put the riot in motion. The original bound volumes of the paper are gone and in the microfilm version from May 31, 1921, someone has torn out both a front page article and almost all of the editorial page.

JF: This history is basically hidden, suppressed. The newspaper files disappeared from that week. Black didn't talk about it, whites didn't talk about it. Some people did talk about it but for the most part it became a silent part of Tulsa's history.

MD: Meanwhile, John has spent years visiting Tulsa, working with the reconciliation center, and the park, as well as speaking with survivors and their families. And for the last five years he's brought Paul with him to document the experience for the museum.

Then Last year John made a new discovery about his own grandfather, B.C. Franklin.

JF: A family member had put materials in storage and couldn't afford to pay for them and they were sold at auction. And someone approached an intermediary saying that they had these historic artifacts for sale.

MD: It was an unpublished manuscript and two photos of B.C Franklin – one taken five days after the riot, B.C. and his law partner were practicing law in a Red Cross Tent. And the manuscript, written in 1931, is one of the earliest eyewitness accounts of the riot. In it, B.C. tells of meeting a young black soldier called Ross in 1917 after he's come back from fighting in World War 1. Then, during the riot, he encounters Ross again as Ross is trying to defend his burning home while his mother begs the mob to leave. John and a group of Tulsans purchased the manuscript and photos, and donated them to the new museum. In displaying the manuscript, the museum asks the same question of us as John's grandfather asked of the people of Tulsa: to not just be a passerby, but instead to witness this history, and speak truth about what happened. This is John, reading from this grandfather's manuscript.

JF: "During that bloody day I lived a thousand years, in the spirit at least. I lived the whole experience of the race. The experiences of ancestry beyond the seas. The experience of slave ships on their first voyage to America with their human cargo. Experiences of American slavery and its concomitant evils. Experiences of loyalty and devotion to the race, to this nation to its flag and its war and in peace and I thought of Ross out yonder in his last stand no doubt, for the protection of home and fireside and of old mother Ross left homeless in the even tide of her life.

I thought of this place the preachers called hell and wondered seriously if there was such a mystical place. It appeared in this surrounding that the only hell was hell on earth and such as the race was then passing through. For fully 48 hours the fires raged and burned everything in its past and left nothing but ashes and burns safes and trunks where once stood homes. And so proud rich black Tulsa was destroyed by fire but its spirit is neither killed not daunted. How the years have flown and how change and

changing is the whole face of this nation. It is now August 22, 1931 and this is being written. A little more than ten years have passed under the bridge of time since the great holocaust here. Young Ross the veteran of the world war survived the catastrophe, but lost his mind and eye sight in the fires that destroyed home. With a burned and scarred face he sits in an asylum and stares blankly into space. On the corner of North Green Wood and East Easton sits mother Ross with her tin cups in hand, begging alms of passersbys. They are nearly all newcomers and have no knowledge of her tragic past; hence they pay her no attention. Young Mrs. Ross is working, doing the best she can in these devastating time divides visits between her mother-in-law and her husband at the asylum. Of course, he has not the slightest recollection of her or of his mother. All yesteryears are blank pieces of paper to him. He cannot remember one thing in the living breathing throbbing present.

- B.C. Franklin”