

topic:: Remembering Black Wallstreet

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talk:: The date was June 1, 1921 when "BLACK WALLSTREET", the name fittingly given to one of the most affluent all-BLACK communities in America, was bombed from the air and burned to the ground by mobs of envious whites. In a period spanning fewer than 12 hours, a once thriving Black business district in northern Tulsa lay smoldering --a model community destroyed and a major African-American economic movement resoundingly defused.

The night's carnage left some 3,000 African Americans dead and over 600 successful businesses lost. Among these were 21 churches, 21 restaurants, 30 grocery stores and two movie theaters, plus a hospital, a bank, a post office, libraries, schools, law offices, a half dozen private airplanes and even a bus system. As could have been expected, the impetus behind it all was the infamous Ku Klux Klan, working in consort with ranking city officials and many other sympathizers.

In their self-published book, BLACK WALLSTREET: A Lost Dream and its companion video documentary, BLACK WALLSTREET: A BLACK Holocaust in America!, the authors have chronicled for the very first time in the words of area historians and elderly survivors what really happened there on that fateful summer day in 1921 and why it happened. Wallace similarly explained why this bloody event from the turn of the century seems to have had a recurring effect that is being felt in predominately BLACK neighborhoods even to this day.

The best description of BLACK WALLSTREET, or little Africa as it was also known, would be to compare it to a mini-Beverly Hills. It was the golden door of the BLACK community during the early 1900s, and it proved that African Americans could create a successful infrastructure. That's what BLACK WALLSTREET was all about.

The dollar circulated 36 to 100 times, sometimes taking a year for currency to leave the community. Now in 1995, a dollar leaves the BLACK community in 15-minutes. As far as resources, there were Ph.D.'s residing in little Africa, BLACK attorneys and doctors. One doctor was Dr. Berry who owned the bus system. His average income was \$500 a day, a hefty pocket change in 1910.

During that era physicians owned medical schools. There were also pawn shops everywhere, brothels, jewelry stores, 21 churches, 21 restaurants and two movie theaters, It was a time when the entire state of Oklahoma had only two Airports, Yet six BLACKS owned their own planes. It was a very fascinating community.

The area encompassed over 600 businesses and 36 square blocks with a population of 15,000 African Americans. And when the lower-economic Europeans looked over and saw what the BLACK community created, many of them were jealous. When the average student went to school on BLACK WALLSTREET, he wore a suit and tie because of the morals and respect they were taught at a young age.

The mainstay of the community was to educate every child. Nepotism was the one word they believed in. and that's what we need to get back to in 1995. The main thoroughfare was Greenwood Avenue, and it was intersected by Archer and Pine Streets. From the first letters in each of those three names you get G.A.P. and that's where the renowned R and B music group the GAP Band got its name. They're from Tulsa.

BLACK WALLSTREET was a prime example of the typical, BLACK community in America that did businesses, but it was in an unusual location. You see, at the time, Oklahoma was set aside to be a BLACK and Indian state. There were over 28 BLACK townships there. One third of the people who traveled in the terrifying "Trail of Tears" along side the Indians between 1830 and 1842 were BLACK people.

The citizens of this proposed Indian and BLACK state chose a BLACK governor, a treasurer from Kansas named McDade. But the Ku Klux Klan said that if he assumed office that they would kill him within 48 hours. A lot of BLACKS owned farmland, and many of them had gone into the oil business. The community was so tight and wealthy because they traded dollars hand-to-hand, and because they were dependent upon one another as a result of the Jim Crow Laws.

It was not unusual that if a resident's home accidentally burned down, it could be rebuilt within a few weeks by neighbors. This was the type of scenario that was going on day-to-day on BLACK WALLSTREET. When BLACKS intermarried into the Indian culture, some of them received their promised '40 acres and a mule' and with that came whatever oil was later found on the properties.

Just to show you how wealthy a lot of BLACK people were, there was a banker in the neighboring town who had a wife named California Taylor. Her father owned the largest cotton Gin west of the Mississippi (River). When California shopped, she would take a cruise to Paris every three months to have her clothes made.

There was also a man named Mason in nearby Wagner County who had the largest potato farm west of the Mississippi. When he harvested, he would fill 100 boxcars a day, Another brother not far away had the same thing with a spinach farm. The typical family then was five children or more, though the typical farm family would have 10 kids or more who

made up the nucleus of the labor.

On BLACK WALLSTREET, a lot of global business was conducted, The community flourished from the early 1900s until June 1, 1921. That's when the largest massacre of nonmilitary Americans in the history of this country took place, and it was lead by the KU KLUX KLAN. Imagine walking out of your front door and seeing 1,500 homes being burned. It must have been amazing.

Survivors we interviewed think that the whole thing was planned because during the time that all of this was going on, white families with their children stood around the borders of their community and watched the massacre. The looting and everything--much in the same manner they would watch a lynching.

The riots weren't caused by anything black or white. It was caused by jealousy. A lot of white folks had come back from World War I and they were poor. When they looked over into the BLACK communities and realized that BLACK men who fought in the war had come home heroes that helped trigger the destruction.

It cost the BLACK community everything, and not a single dime of restitution--no insurance claims-- has been awarded the victims to this day. Nonetheless, they rebuilt. We estimate, that 1,500 to 3,000 people were killed and we know that a lot of them were buried in mass graves all around the city. Some were thrown into the river. As a matter of fact, at 21st street and Yale Avenue, where there now stands a Sears parking lot, that corner used to be a coal mine. They threw a lot of the bodies into the shafts.

BLACK Americans don't know about this story because we don't apply the word HOLOCAUST to our struggle. Jewish people use the word HOLOCAUST all the time. White people use the word HOLOCAUST. It's politically correct to use it. But we BLACK folks use the word, people think we're being cry babies or that we're trying to bring up old issues. No one comes to our support.

In 1910, our forefathers and mothers owned 13 million acres of land at the height of racism in this country, so the BLACK WALLSTREET BOOK and VIDEOTAPE prove to naysayers and revisionists that we had our act together. Our mandate now is to begin to teach our children about our own, ongoing BLACK HOLOCAUST. They have to know when they look at our communities today that we don't come from this.

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