The Eruption of Tulsa

By WALTER F. WHITE

A HYSTERICAL white girl related that a nineteen-year-
old colored boy attempted to assault her in the public
elevator of a public office building of a thriving town of
100,000 in open daylight. Without pausing to find whether
or not the story was true, without bothering with the slight
detail of investigating the character of the woman who
made the outcry (as a matter of fact, she was of exceedingly
doubtful reputation), a mob of 100-per-cent Americans set forth on a wild rampage—cost the lives of
fifty white men; of between 150 and 200 colored men,
women and children; the destruction by fire of $1,500,000
worth of property; the looting of many homes; and ever-
lasting damage to the reputation of the city of Tulsa and
the State of Oklahoma.

This, in brief, is the story of the eruption of Tulsa on
the night of May 31 and the morning of June 1. One
could travel far and find few cities where the likelihood of
trouble between the races was as little thought of as
in Tulsa. Her reign of terror stands as a grim reminder
of the grip mob violence has on the throat of America, and
the ever-present possibility of devastating race conflicts
where least expected.

Tulsa is a thriving, bustling, enormously wealthy town
of between 60,000 and 100,000. In 1910 it was the home
of 18,182 souls, a dead and hopeless outlook ahead. Then
oil was discovered. The town grew amazingly. On De-
29, 1920, it had bank deposits totaling $65,449,935.90; almost $1,000 per capita when compared with the
Federal Census figures of 1920, which gave Tulsa 72,075.
The town lies in the center of the oil region and many are
the stories told of the making of fabulous fortunes by men
who were operating on a shoe-string. Some of the stories
rival those of the "forty-niners" in California. The town
has a number of modern office buildings, many beautiful
homes, miles of clean, well-paved streets, and aggressive
and progressive business men who well exemplify Tulsa's
motto of "The City with a Personality."

So much for the setting. What are the causes of the
race riot that occurred in such a place?

First, the Negro in Oklahoma has shared in the sudden
prosperity that has come to many of his white brothers,
and there are some colored men there who are wealthy.
This fact has caused a bitter resentment on the part of the
lower order of whites, who feel that these colored men,
members of an "inferior race," are exceedingly presumptuous
in achieving greater economic prosperity than they
who are members of a divinely ordered superior race.
There are at least three colored persons in Oklahoma who
are worth a million dollars each; J. W. Thompson of Clear-
view is worth $500,000; there are a number of men and
women worth $100,000; and many whose possessions are
valued at $25,000 and $50,000 each. This was particularly
true of Tulsa, where there were two colored men worth
$150,000 each; two worth $100,000; three $50,000; and
four who were assessed at $25,000. In one case where a
colored man owned and operated a printing plant with
$25,000 worth of printing machinery in it, the leader of
the mob that set fire to and destroyed the plant was a
linotype operator employed for years by the colored owner
at $48 per week. The white man was killed while attack-
ing the plant. Oklahoma is largely populated by pioneers
from other States. Some of the white pioneers are former
residents of Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee, Texas, and
other States more typically southern than Oklahoma. These
have brought with them their anti-Negro prejudices.

One of the charges made against the colored men in
Tulsa is that they were "radical." Questioning the whites
more closely regarding the nature of this radicalism, I
found it means that Negroes were uncompromisingly de-
nouncing "Jim-Crow" cars, lynching,peonage; in short,
were asking that the Federal constitutional guaranties
of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" be given regard-
less of color. The Negroes of Tulsa and other Okla-
ahoma cities are pioneers; men and women who have dared,
men and women who have had the initiative and the
courage to pull up stakes in other less-favored States and
face hardship in a newer one for the sake of greater event-
ual progress. That type is ever less ready to submit to
insult. Those of the whites who seek to maintain the old
white group control naturally do not relish seeing Negroes
emancipating themselves from the old system.

A third cause was the rotten political conditions in Tulsa.
A vice ring was in control of the city, allowing open opera-
tion of houses of ill fame, of gambling joints, the illegal
sale of whiskey, the robbing of banks and stores, with
hardly a slight possibility of the arrest of the criminals,
and even less of their conviction. For fourteen years
Tulsa has been in the absolute control of this element.
Most of the better element, and there is a large percentage
of Tulsans who can properly be classed as such, are inter-
ested solely in making money and getting away. They
take little or no interest in the election of city or county
officials, leaving it to those whose interest it was to
secure officials who would protect them in their vice opera-
tions. About two months ago the State legislature assigned
two additional judges to Tulsa County to aid the present two
in clearing the badly clogged dockets. These judges found
more than six thousand cases awaiting trial. Thus in a
county of approximately 100,000 population, six out of every
one hundred citizens were under indictment for some sort
of crime, with little likelihood of trial in any of them.

Last July a white man by the name of Roy Belton, accused
of murdering a taxicab driver, was taken from the county
jail and lynched. According to the statements of many
prominent Tulsans, local police officers directed traffic at the
scene of the lynching, trying to afford every person present
an equal chance to view the event. Insurance companies
refuse to give Tulsa merchants insurance on their stocks;
the risk is too great. There have been so many automo-
tive thefts that a number of companies have canceled all
policies on cars in Tulsa. The net result of these conditions
was that practically none of the citizens of the town, white
or colored, had very much respect for the law.

So much for the general causes. What was the spark
that set off the blaze? On Monday, May 30, a white girl
by the name of Sarah Page, operating an elevator in the Drexel Building, stated that Dick Rowland, a nineteen-
year-old colored boy, had attempted criminally to assault her. Her second story was that the boy had seized her
arm as he entered the elevator. She screamed. He ran.

It was found afterwards that the boy had stepped by acci-
dent on her foot. It seems never to have occurred to the
citizens of Tulsa that any sane person attempting crimi-
nally to assault a woman would have picked any place in the
world rather than an open elevator in a public building
with scores of people within calling distance. The story of
the alleged assault was published Tuesday afternoon by the
Tulsa Tribune, one of the two local newspapers. At four
o'clock Commissioner of Police J. M. Adkison reported to
Sheriff McCullough that there was talk of lynching Row-
land that night. Chief of Police John A. Gustafson, Captain
Wilkerson of the Police Department, Edwin F. Barnett,
managing editor of the Tulsa Tribune, and numerous other
citizens all stated that there was talk Tuesday of lynching
the boy.

In the meantime the news of the threatened lynching
reached the colored settlement where Tulsa's 15,000 colored
citizens lived. Remembering how a white man had been
lynched after being taken from the same jail where the
colored boy was now confined, they feared that Rowland
was in danger. A group of colored men telephoned the
sheriff and proffered their services in protecting the jail
from attack. The sheriff told them that they would be
called upon if needed. About nine o'clock that night a
crowd of white men gathered around the jail, numbering
about 400 according to Sheriff McCullough. At 9:15 the
report reached "Little Africa" that the mob had stormed
the jail. A crowd of twenty-five armed Negroes set out
immediately, but on reaching the jail found the report un-
true. The sheriff talked with them, assured them that the
boy would not be harmed, and urged them to return to their
homes. They left, later returning, 75 strong. The sheriff
persuaded them to leave. As they compiled, a white man at-
ttempted to disarm one of the colored men. A shot was
fired, and then—in the words of the sheriff—"all hell broke
loose." There was a fusillade of shots from both sides and
twelve men fell dead—two of them colored, ten white.
The fighting continued until midnight when the colored men,
greatly outnumbered, were forced back to their section of
the town.

Around five o'clock Wednesday morning the mob, now
numbering more than 10,000, made a mass attack on Little
Africa. Machine-guns were brought into use; eight aerop-
planes were employed to spy on the movements of the
Negroes and according to some were used in bombing the
colored section. All that was lacking to make the scene
a replica of modern "Christian" warfare was poison gas.
The colored men and women fought gamely in defense of
their homes, but the odds were too great. According to the
statements of onlookers, men in uniform, either home
guards or cx-service men or both, carried cans of oil into
Little Africa, and, after looting the homes, set fire to them.

Many are the stories of horror told to me—not by colored
people—but by white residents. One was that of an aged
colored couple, saying their evening prayers before retiring
in their little home on Greenwood Avenue. A mob broke
into the house, shot both of the old people in the backs of
their heads, blowing their brains out and spattering them
over the bed, pillaged the home, and then set fire to it.

Another was that of the death of Dr. A. C. Jackson, a
colored physician. Dr. Jackson was worth $100,000; had
been described by the Mayo brothers "the most able Negro
surgeon in America"; was respected by white and colored
people alike, and was in every sense a good citizen. A
mob attacked Dr. Jackson's home. He fought in defense of
it, his wife and children and himself. An officer of the
home guards who knew Dr. Jackson came up at that time
and assured him that if he would surrender he would be
protected. This Dr. Jackson did. The officer sent him
under guard to Convention Hall, where colored people were
being placed for protection. En route to the hall, dis-
armed, Dr. Jackson was shot and killed in cold blood. The
officer who had assured Dr. Jackson of protection stated to
me, "Dr. Jackson was an able, clean-cut man. He did only
what any red-blooded man would have done under similar
circumstances in defending his home. Dr. Jackson was mur-
dered by white ruffians."

It is highly doubtful if the exact number of casualties
will ever be known. The figures originally given in the
press estimate the number at 100. The number buried by
local undertakers and given out by city officials is ten white
and twenty-one colored. For obvious reasons these of-
icials wish to keep the number published as low as possible,
but the figures obtained in Tulsa are far higher. Fifty
whites and between 150 and 200 Negroes is much nearer
the actual number of deaths." Ten whites were killed
during the first hour of fighting on Tuesday night. Six white
men drove into the colored section in a car on Wednesday
morning and never came out. Thirteen whites were killed
between 5:30 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. Wednesday. O. T. John-
son, commandant of the Tulsa Citadel of the Salvation
Army, stated that on Wednesday and Thursday the Salvation
Army fed thirty-seven Negroes employed as grave
diggers and twenty on Friday and Saturday. During the first
two days these men dug 120 graves in each of which a
dead Negro was buried. No coffins were used. The
bodies were dumped into the holes and covered over with
dirt. Added to the number accounted for were numbers
of others—men, women, and children—who were incin-
erated in the burning houses in the Negro settlement.
One story was told me by an eye-witness of five colored
men trapped in a burning house. Four burned to death.
A fifth attempted to flee, was shot as he emerged from
the burning structure, and his body was thrown back
into the flames. There was an unconfirmed rumor afloat in
Tulsa of two truck loads of dead Negroes being dumped
into the Arkansas River, but that story could not be con-
firmed.

What is America going to do after such a horrible car-
nage—one that for sheer brutality and murderous anarchy
cannot be surpassed by any of the crimes now being
charged to the Bolsheviki in Russia? How much longer
will America allow these pogroms to continue unchecked?
There is a lesson in the Tulsa affair for every American
who fatuously believes that Negroes will always be the
meek and submissive creatures that circumstances have
forced them to be during the past three hundred years.
Dick Rowland was only an ordinary booted with no
standing in the community. But when his life was threat-
ened by a mob of whites, every one of the 15,000 Negroes
of Tulsa, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, was willing
to die to protect Dick Rowland. Perhaps America is wait-
foring for a nationwide Tulsa to wake her. Who knows?