

## Development and Demise of Rosewood

A city lay in travail, God our Lord, and from her loins sprang twin Murder and Black Hate. Red was the midnight; clang, crack and cry of death and fury filled the air and trembled underneath the stars when church spires pointed silently to Thee. And all this was to sate the greed of greedy men who hide behind the veil of vengeance!

W. E. B. Du Bois, "A Litany of Atlanta," 1906

The development of Rosewood, Florida, stretched across five decades beginning in the 1850s, but its complete destruction took less than one week in early 1923 (Figure 2.1). Unlike similar race riots, of which there were many, Rosewood's has received little scholarly attention, and most previous research was collected and published as part of a state-sponsored investigation in the 1990s. The official investigation eventually resulted in monetary compensation for survivors and their descendants, including university scholarships for students in Florida. Examining similar racial violence during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries contextualizes the Rosewood race riot. The destruction of Rosewood marked the end of a particularly brutal five-year period of racial violence that included the 1917 East St. Louis riot (Lumpkins 2008), the Red Summer of 1919, (Abu-Lughod 2007; Krugler 2015; Voogd 2008), and the 1921 Tulsa riot that resulted in great loss (Ellsworth 1982). This period is only one chapter in a deeper history stretching back to the mid-nineteenth century and before. A contextualization of early twentieth-century racial violence in the form of lynchings and race riots presents a troubling reminder of the United States' turbulent past. This history of violence is very much a part of modern America. Understanding the role of racial violence in American history requires a diachronic approach situating local events within broader histories. Rosewood offers a case study of how national trends affected local places.

While most race riots took place in urban centers, Rosewood's location in western Levy County, Florida, makes it a rare case of a rural race



Figure 2.1. Ruins of a house near Rosewood, 1923. (*Literary Digest*, January 20, 1923)

riot. Located approximately nine miles east of the Gulf of Mexico, the area where Rosewood once stood remains rural today. Locals continue to make their living off the area's natural resources; fishing, hunting, and working in the burgeoning natural tourism industry remain common careers. The area where Rosewood once stood is still referred to by many as the Gulf Hammock. This name, dating to the nineteenth century, describes the local landscape in terms of its outstanding fertility, giving rise to a nineteenth-century saying, "as rich as the Gulf Hammock" (Hawks 1871:57). The naming of many local towns references this natural fertility, such as the nearby town of Gulf Hammock. Rosewood's name was itself derived from the large stands of red cedar in the area that were the source of the town's initial economic vitality (Dye 1997:29). Rosewood was never incorporated, but business directories and railroad commission reports record the town's settlement prior to the Civil War (Hawks 1871:57) and date Rosewood's initial settlement to 1855.

Rosewood was settled by a handful of Whites who homesteaded large tracts of land in the swampy wilderness. The town experienced rapid growth following the Civil War due in equal parts to the area's store of high-quality cedar and the completion of the Florida Railroad in 1861. Although the railroad's operations were interrupted multiple times during the Civil War, its completion just before the war was a major economic and engineering feat pulled off by Levy County's namesake, David Levy Yulee. Yulee was himself a remarkable individual. Born in the U.S. Virgin Islands on June 12, 1810, Yulee was a driving force behind Florida statehood and the first Jewish member of the U.S. Senate (Tebeau 1971:173). As with all major construction projects of the day, the railroad was built with slave labor. Its construction began on the Atlantic coast at Fernandina

Table 2.1. Florida Railroads, 1853–1967

| Name of Railroad                       | Years of Operation |
|--|--------------------|
| Florida Railroad                       | 1853–1872          |
| Atlantic, Gulf & West India Transit    | 1872–1881          |
| Florida Transit and Peninsula Railroad | 1881–1884          |
| Florida Railway & Navigation Company   | 1884–1888          |
| Florida Central & Peninsular Railroad  | 1888–1903          |
| Seaboard Air Line Railroad             | 1903–1967          |

*Note:* Modified from Mohlman 2007:17.

Beach on August 1, 1856, and continued for five years as the railroad was brought through central Florida, reaching the Gulf Coast at Cedar Key on March 1, 1861, one month prior to the start of the Civil War (Pettengill 1952:22). The railroad was repeatedly attacked during the Civil War by Northern troops and rebuilt by 1867 (Hildreth and Cox 1981:33). The railroad company struggled initially, and ownership changed hands several times, resulting in a potentially confusing litany of names (Table 2.1). By 1903, it was named as part of a new company that increasingly managed large portions of Florida's railroads, the Seaboard Air Line Railroad (Mohlman 2007:17). The railroad brought increased opportunity to Levy County, and numerous towns sprang up along its path. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, towns along the railroad like Rosewood and Sumner grew quickly and took advantage of the ability to ship products to inland markets. This in turn brought industrial interests to the area, and the local population grew rapidly. The railroad remained vital to Levy County's economic interests until local sections were discontinued and tracks eventually pulled up beginning in the early 1930s (Pettengill 1952:22).

Although initially settled by a small group of White landowners, Rosewood's African American population continued to grow; by 1900 most the town's population was Black. This is partly related to an economic slump in the 1890s following the exhaustion of the local cedar, which drove down land prices and led many Whites to sell their land. The town's residents responded to the scarcity of cedar by fashioning a mixed economy. By the early twentieth century Rosewood boasted several Black-owned businesses, including the M. Goins and Brothers Naval Stores Company, which supplied raw materials such as turpentine and

lumber vital to fishing and naval industries in Florida and beyond. Like other industrialists of the time, the Goins family provided worker housing; theirs was referred to as Goins' Quarters (Dye 1997:29). Other members of Rosewood's community engaged in fishing, hunting, and citrus farming. Decades of hard work paid off, and by the 1910s Rosewood's majority African American population had carved a sustainable community out of the swamps of North Florida.

A large part of the sustainability depended on the railroad, which connected Rosewood with the Gulf Coast, larger towns in Florida, and ultimately urban centers across the country. The settlement's growing economic vitality supported local businesses and resulted in various improvements. A county-managed school for Whites opened in the 1870s (M. Jones et al. 1993:21), followed by a White Methodist church in 1878 and two Black churches in 1883 and 1886. While Rosewood initially resembled most White communities in rural Florida, by 1900 Rosewood's predominantly African American community boasted at least three churches, a Masonic hall, and a school where Mullah Brown, a privately hired schoolteacher, taught local African American children. The town was home to dozens of families living in a mix of two-story structures for large families, two-room buildings for smaller families, and several one-room shanties used by those working for local sawmills, turpentine stills, and other industrial interests (Jones et al. 1993:23). The town also boasted a successful Black baseball team that played both Black and White teams from as far away as Gainesville, 45 miles to the northeast. The team was fondly remembered by survivors and their descendants for the significant cultural role it played in the town's social life and relations with neighboring communities (D'Orso 1996:78–79).

Although Rosewood's African American residents recovered from the depletion of timber stores of the late 1800s, the economic fortunes of Rosewood began to slump again in the 1910s. This downturn was largely due to the arrival in the mid-1910s of the Cummer and Sons Lumber Company sawmill in neighboring Sumner, one mile west of Rosewood. The sawmill was a large operation complete with worker housing and a company store. Many families from Rosewood gained employment at the sawmill (M. Jones 1997:194). The Cummer and Sons sawmill had an adverse impact on Rosewood's economy as businesses and services relocated to Sumner. The post office and other businesses relocated to Sumner during the late 1910s (Polk 1918:499–500, 550–551). The disinvestment was exacerbated when

the Goins family, now one of the principal employers in Rosewood, closed its lumber and naval supply business and relocated to Gainesville within years after the Cummer & Sons sawmill opened. Prior to their move, the Goins family's industrial operation provided jobs for many of Rosewood's families following the arrival of the sawmill.

Although the economic rearrangements affected Rosewood, the town's mixed economy and history of Black landownership allowed its residents to weather the changes. The town's African American community continued embracing industrial and agricultural endeavors alongside traditional practices such as hunting, fishing, and small-scale gardening. Market gardens and orange groves dotted the local landscape. The economic downturn of the 1910s represented an unfortunate but not disastrous situation for Rosewood's residents. Even in the face of economic hardships, residents could enjoy a degree of freedom and local social mobility rarely afforded African American communities in the early twentieth century (M. Jones 1997:194). It is intriguing to ponder what might have become of Rosewood had it survived into the twenty-first century. Would the residents have remained in Levy County? Would the town have become a major economic hub in a county that remains economically challenged today? Would residents have moved to urban centers like many other rural African Americans of the time did? We will never know the answers to these questions. The town and community of Rosewood, with its half century of history, did not survive the first week of 1923.

### **The 1923 Rosewood Massacre**

Rosewood lingers at the edges of public memory. While many locals, some residents of Florida, and historians remained aware of Rosewood's existence throughout the twentieth century, the town's destruction did not receive widespread attention until the 1980s. A series of newspaper articles written by Gary Moore, a freelance journalist, and published in the *St. Petersburg Times* and elsewhere is often credited with uncovering the settlement's tragic history (Lauriault 1989:321). Rosewood was never truly forgotten, though, and tantalizing clues to its existence resurfaced every few years. The town continued to appear on railroad and highway maps of the area long after its destruction. It survived as folklore and ghost stories told across the state of Florida (González-Tennant 2016). The descendants commemorated the town's history in subtle ways, such as family reunions