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A Perfect Storm: The Ocoee Riot of 1920

by Carlee Hoffmann and Claire Strom

On the morning of November 2, 1920, Moses Norman went to the polls in his hometown of Ocoee, Florida, to cast his ballot. Norman was a prominent black man in the small community, owning property that included a productive citrus grove. When he tried to vote, the poll workers turned him away and told him to go home, claiming that he had not properly registered or paid his poll tax. Norman then drove the thirteen miles to Orlando, where he met with John M. Cheney, a prominent Orlando lawyer, Republican candidate for the United States Senate, and trustee of Rollins College. Cheney counseled Norman to return to Ocoee and demand to vote because it was his constitutional right. When he tried this later in the day, an altercation ensued between Norman and some of the workers. Accounts vary. Some say Norman brought his gun with him when he confronted the workers; others claim that white citizens of Ocoee searched Norman's car and found the gun. Regardless, Norman was again denied his vote and told to go home, after which he instead left for the home

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of his friend July Perry. Perry was another prosperous black man in Ocoee, employed as boss of a labor gang.

In the meantime, a white lynch mob formed, led by Colonel Sam Salisbury, a well-known white Ocoeean and member of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The mob resolved to find Norman and inform him such behavior at the polls would not be tolerated. When the men arrived at Perry's home, those inside had already armed themselves in anticipation of trouble. Though it is disputed who fired the first shot (some sources argue it could have even been Perry's daughter), a gunfight broke out at the home. In the end, the confrontation left two white men dead and Perry severely injured. Norman fled the scene and was never seen again.

News of the altercation spread throughout the night, and a growing mob of more than two hundred and fifty whites, many of whom were Klan members, began to set fire to the black sections of Ocoee known as the Baptist and Methodist Quarters. In total they incinerated twenty-two homes, two churches, and a lodge. The next day, several of the mob members came for Perry, who had been taken to the county jail, and hung him from a tree in Orlando. To this day, the total number of blacks killed in the riot remains unknown. It is clear, however, that within days of the riot, nearly all blacks had left the town. For years, blacks went out of their way to avoid Ocoee and did not return to live in there until the 1980s.¹

1 The authors would like to thank the John Hauck Foundation and the Michael & Michelle Fannon Fund for support of this research.

This version of the riot is compiled from the following sources: Zora Neale Hurston, "The Ocoee Riot," *Essence* 19 (1989): 130-132; Walter White, "Election by Terror in Florida," *The New Republic* 25:319 (1921): 195; Walter White, "Election Day in Florida" *Crisis* 21:3 (1921): 106-109; James R. Fleming, Sr., "Orange County's Race Riot, November 2-3, 1920, Ocoee, Florida," 2002, Orange County Historical Society Library and Archives, Orange County Regional History Center, Orlando, Florida (hereafter OCRHC); Lester Dabbs, "A Report of the Circumstances and Events of the Race Riot on November 2, 1920 in Ocoee, Florida" (MA thesis, Stetson University, 1969); Dorothy Parrish, "A Guide to Local Historical Research" (Research project, Florida Technical University, 1979); Katherine Parry, "Constructing African American Histories in Central Florida" (MA thesis, University of Central Florida, 2008); Walter White, "Report of the Secretary to the Anti-Lynching Committee," Box C205, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter NAACP Papers); Walter White, "Lynching Ocoee, Florida," Box C353, NAACP Papers; State of Florida Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration, "Slave Narrative of The Ocoee Riot from the Federal Writers' Project (1936-1938)" (1936), Paper 24, Digital Collection—Florida Studies Center Publications,

The Ocoee Riot was a shameful and controversial event that the community elided for many years in an attempt to erase it from communal memory and move forward. As such, the sources available on the subject are scarce and contradictory. Two distinct narratives of the riot exist: from the white and black perspectives. This makes it difficult to present an objective account of the story; indeed, the task proves to be nearly impossible. Additionally, the incendiary nature of the riot may have resulted in document tampering. For example, the extant voter registration ledgers for Orange County do not show that Norman was registered to vote, though many other sources claim that he had registered and paid the poll tax. The *Orlando Morning Sentinel* reported on October 20, 1920 that seventy-eight blacks were registered to vote, whereas the ledgers list only three. Walter White, the assistant secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) who travelled to Ocoee to investigate the incident shortly afterward, surmised that someone had purposely tampered with the election records. Additionally, the reported number of casualties varies widely, ranging from three to three hundred. The number of black people killed in the racial violence of the early twentieth century has always been notoriously difficult to ascertain. Blacks, fleeing the violence and intimidation, often left the scene and tried to remain disassociated from the event in the public mind. White perpetrators had good reason to minimize the body count, playing down the terror while reasserting racial control. The riot in Ocoee was no different. White's NAACP report recorded around thirty dead. White's report is certainly more objective and accurate than the memories of either black or white participants in the riot, but the ultimate goal of the NAACP in collecting data on racial violence, to forward the mission of racial equality, has to be kept in mind. Ultimately, therefore, the contemporary contentiousness

University of South Florida, Scholar Commons; articles from *Orlando Morning Sentinel*, *Orlando Evening Reporter-Star*, *Florida Metropolis*, *Savannah Press*, *Orlando Weekly Magazine*, *Tampa Morning Tribune*, *New York Times*; Bianca White and Sandra Krasa, *Ocoee: Legacy of the Election Day Massacre* (Webster, TX: Wise Eye Media, Inc., 2008); author interview with Joy Wallace Dickinson, August 8, 2012, Orlando, tape in possession of author; Nancy Greenleaf interview with Mrs. Vernon Parrish, Vertical Files—Ocoee Race Riot, OCRHC; John Cheney file, Box 11, Trustee Records, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Olin Library, Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida (hereafter Trustee Records).

of the riot has important repercussions for those trying to limn its history.²

The riot in Ocoee was part of a spate of racial conflicts throughout the nation in the immediate post-World War I era. All of these riots were characterized by underlying factors, which fueled racial tensions, and by sparks that ignited the violence. Underlying factors included economic, political, or social phenomena of the postwar world. Ocoee is no exception in that the social, economic, and political circumstances preceding the event resembled those of other race riots of the time. The impetus for violence in most race riots, on the other hand, was typically allegations of a crime committed by a black person against a white person. In this respect, Ocoee was unique, as its spark was largely political: blacks attempting to vote, a precursor to violence that is most readily associated with the America of the 1960s.³

The year 1920 was full of change. As the nation attempted to recover from World War I, more Americans than ever before believed that they had a right to participate in the political process; after all, women had won the right to vote. Returning black soldiers thought they earned a spot as first-class citizens once and for all. The economy slumped, and yet some blacks still managed to thrive, presenting a threat to the traditional structure of white dominance. At the same time, racial attitudes towards blacks in the South and across the nation remained as hateful and discriminatory as they had been under slavery, ushering in an unprecedented era of violence and intimidation made evident by the expansion of the KKK and unprecedented numbers of race riots. Ocoee represented a microcosm of all of these elements; a perfect storm of racial violence was brewing in this small Florida town in the years and months preceding the riot that forced out its entire black population.⁴

Social structures and methods of social control contributed in large part to race riots of this era, such as the one in Ocoee. Perhaps the most important of these structures was the Jim Crow

2 *Orlando Morning Sentinel*, October 20, 1920; White, "Report of the Secretary." For information on determining deaths in a race riot, see, for example, Nan Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 101-103.

3 Allen D. Grimshaw, *A Social History of Racial Violence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1969), 368, 355-359.

4 Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2011), 13-14.

system of racial segregation and subjugation. By 1895, Jim Crow was in full force. This system included a series of *de jure* and *de facto* codes that blacks were either legally or socially bound to follow. Based on white supremacy—the idea that anyone not of Caucasian descent was inferior—these laws discriminated against blacks in all areas of life. Laws prohibited blacks from inhabiting many public places used by whites, and frequently separate places and services were created for blacks. Other rules were based on societal norms; for example, whites often required blacks to use only the back door when entering their homes.⁵

Whites also used Jim Crow to restrict black political and economic rights. In the years following the Civil War, the South had cemented into a one-party system dominated by white southern Democrats, known as the “Solid South.” Whites defended this Democratic bloc and restricted the black vote through methods such as poll taxes, separate ballot boxes for blacks and whites, and an all-white Democratic primary. Until the late 1960s, the Democratic Party dominated southern politics and seldom lost an election. Additionally, Jim Crow limited black economic rights, as it created a segregated labor force. “White work,” such as textile production, trade, banking, insurance, and brokerage, was off limits to blacks, and often times, even traditional “Negro jobs,” such as carpentry and painting, were taken over by whites. By 1930, only 7 percent of black males were employed in professional positions.⁶

When blacks threatened white control over all areas of their life, whites frequently reestablished their dominance with violence or the threat of violence. Southerners grew accustomed to news of lynchings. In the seventy-nine years between 1882 and 1951, nearly four thousand blacks were lynched in the United States. In Florida alone, at least one hundred seventy-six blacks were lynched between 1890 and 1920, putting the state ahead of the per capita lynching rates for Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Louisiana during those years. Whites also used riots—“generalized responses in which there is a categorical assault on persons and property by virtue of their racial membership”—to maintain their hegemony. Thus, riots often took place when whites perceived that blacks had

5 William J. Cooper and Thomas E. Terrill, *The American South: A History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 570.

6 Michael Gannon, *The New History of Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 374, 346; George Brown Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 161.

left their “place” in the established system. Between 1913 and 1963, the United States witnessed seventy-two race riots that affected entire communities and killed an unknowable number of African Americans.⁷

Whites in Orange County, Florida, home to the small town of Ocoee, shared southern racial attitudes. Newspapers frequently headlined articles about blacks who had committed or were involved in crimes and never carried positive stories or detailed black accomplishments. For example, in 1920, the *Orlando Evening Reporter Star* reported: “NEGRO BEING HELD FOR ASSAULT ON ORLANDO WOMAN.” The article refers to the black man as “a brute” who “inflicted a nasty wound” on the white woman. Another article discussed the murder of a black man who was “known about town as a bad character” and “was shot and instantly killed” when making a “false move” for a gun. Blacks also suffered from denigration and harsh criticism from whites. An *Orlando Morning Sentinel* article on August 27, 1919 accused blacks of too much “loafing” and claimed that “if the local Negroes do not benefit from the extraordinary times it is their own fault.”⁸

Racial attitudes in Orange County did not just play out in the pages of the press. Although the Ocoee Riot represented the first instance of racial violence on a massive scale in the town, blacks and whites had clashed before. In one instance, two months before the November riot, many whites had left the town to attend a dance in Clarcona, a small town just north of Ocoee. During their absence, a “gang of roving Negroes” reportedly traveled to white residences to intimidate those left at home. Sam Salisbury, leader of the mob on Election Day, threatened the gang with a pistol, but according to his own account, decided not to take any decisive action. Another story claimed that a young black man named Ronnie Petsey forced a white man off the road on two occasions; as punishment, he received a bullet to the leg. Additionally, white Ocoeeans reported that blacks frequently congregated at the local grocery stores and “precluded whites entering these establishments.” Salisbury also claimed that, “groups of Negro men would go to the homes of

7 Cooper and Terrill, *The American South*, 571; Michael Newton, *The Invisible Empire: The Ku Klux Klan in Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 33; Grimshaw, *A Social History*, 368, 354; Bernard Robinson, “The Sociology of Race Riots,” *Phylon* 2, no. 2 (1941): 167.

8 *Orlando Evening Reporter Star*, April 27, 1920, June 15, 1919; *Orlando Morning Sentinel*, August 27, 1919.

European [white] farmers to promote their labor broker services through intimidation.” Rumors circulated throughout the town of a black plot to store ammunition and take control of the city. Though full-scale violence only erupted in 1920, Ocoee was clearly rife with racial tension preceding the event.⁹

Ocoee was certainly not the only town where segregation and discriminatory attitudes led to racial violence; Jim Crow contributed to racial violence across the country in the early twentieth century. Other examples of riots in which segregation and discrimination played a large role were the Chicago Riot of 1919 and the Tulsa Riot of 1921. Chicago’s residential neighborhoods were rigidly segregated. Consequently, whites and blacks rarely made contact with one another, leading to the establishment of two separate worlds that misunderstood and stereotyped one another. In the months preceding the riot, overcrowding in black neighborhoods forced many to encroach on white-only areas, which often provoked small-scale violence in the public places that did not have delineated racial boundaries. When a massive riot broke out on July 27, 1919, many were not surprised.¹⁰

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, too, Jim Crow produced racial tensions that eventually exploded in a deadly riot. Oklahoman lawmakers had passed legislation in the early 1900s that required separate facilities for blacks and whites. Miscegenation was a felony and black suffrage was severely restricted through grandfather clauses and literacy tests. In 1916, the city of Tulsa deemed it illegal for “people of either race to reside on any block where three quarters or more of the residents were of the other race.” Though the ordinance did nothing more than institutionalize the status quo, many blacks were outraged and protested the law. Thus Tulsa was, by the time of the riot in June 1921, a deeply segregated city in which racial tensions had been mounting for years.¹¹

9 Interview with Sam Salisbury in Nancy Lillian Maguire, *A History of Ocoee and Its Pioneers* (Ocoee, FL: Ocoee Historical Commission, n.d.), 71, 72; Dabbs, “A Report,” 20-21; Fleming, “Orange County’s,” 2. It is unclear why Fleming used the term “European” here; he was referring to whites, but perhaps it was to avoid accusations of racism.

10 William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 103; Lee E. Williams and Lee E. Williams II, *Anatomy of Four Race Riots: Racial Conflict in Knoxville, Elaine, Tulsa, and Chicago, 1920-1921* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1972), 74.

11 James S. Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance: America’s Worst Race Riot and Its Legacy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 36, 41.

In addition to the virulent influence of Jim Crow, the economy also played a major role in the Ocoee Riot, as it had in riots across the country. Immediately after World War I, America experienced a small economic boom as a result of easy credit and international demand for American goods. However, this prosperity did not last; inflation ballooned and wages shot downward. Poor working conditions had been patriotically endured during the conflict, but laborers resented that they did not improve once it ended. Returning soldiers flooded a job market already contracting with end of war production. Unions mobilized the pervasive discontent. The year 1919 saw strikes involving four million workers, including a general strike in Seattle, where sixty thousand workers completely closed down the city for five days and a strike by Boston's police force that resulted in the whole force being fired and replaced. The strikes and labor unrest fueled an extant Red Scare born from the Russian Revolution of 1917. Many Americans, terrified by the specter of communism, saw it manifested in society's multiple disorders.¹²

Racial tensions exacerbated an already fraught labor situation. Black workers had been in demand in northern factories during the war because of the shortage of labor. The effects of Jim Crow on southern blacks made a move north attractive. Thus, when northern labor agents traveled south trying to recruit workers, they found African Americans hoping to gain better wages and a brighter future. The first wave of black migrants discovered somewhat better economic and social conditions in northern cities, and thus encouraged their friends and families to join them. This "great migration" continued well into the 1920s. In Florida alone, over forty thousand blacks left the South for northern promises of more opportunities for economic success and several degrees less inequality.¹³

Despite African-American patriotic productivity during the war, the enormous influx of blacks to northern cities produced racial tensions. These increased after the conflict when returning white soldiers found themselves competing with blacks for ever-scarcer jobs. Sadly, most blacks confronted the same hatred and

12 David Joseph Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 67; Nathan Miller, *New World Coming: The 1920s and the Making of Modern America* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2004), 38-39, 41, 43.

13 Goldberg, *Discontented America*, 90, 89; Cannon, *The New History*, 352.

violence in the North that they had known so well in the South. Many large-scale race riots that occurred in the North during the summer of 1919, such as the Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Omaha riots, were partly a result of this economic competition. Across the country in that bloody year there were twenty-five major riots; in some cities like Chicago, riots went on for days. Hundreds of blacks were killed, thousands were displaced from their homes, and whole communities were destroyed. The summer of 1919 became known as the Red Summer because of the unprecedented amount of racial violence that took place across the country.¹⁴

In the South, a slightly different economic situation arose. World War I had a profound effect on the South. Nearly a million Southerners left home to fight the war across the globe. Meanwhile, war industries expanded the South's domestic production. Business boomed as lumber, textiles, coal, iron, and steel were produced in unprecedented amounts. People of all backgrounds, including African Americans for the first time in their history, experienced marked prosperity. However, this newfound affluence bred a high level of economic expectation that imploded when the war no longer provided an impetus for growth. By 1920 the average prices of the southern staple crops, tobacco and cotton, had fallen by more than 50 percent. Additionally, the migration of blacks northward left a labor shortage in the South, and white employers grew desperate for the cheap black labor that northern industry had taken away. In Orange County, the black population declined from 7,604 in 1910 to 5,464 in 1920, while the total population increased by about seven hundred. Overall, the economic status of the average white southern farmer or business owner drastically declined after the war due to falling crop revenues and labor shortages, leaving discontented citizens searching for someone to blame.¹⁵

Though most of the American economy was suffering, certain sectors of the southern economy were flourishing. One sector was the real estate market; some areas of the South experienced a land boom as wealthy white Northerners migrated in search of a winter playground. Florida saw the apex of this land boom. Between 1919

14 McWhirter, *Red Summer*, 19, 13.

15 Tindall, *The Emergence*, 53-60, 111-112; McWhirter, *Red Summer*, 93-94; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920-Population*, Ancestry.com (accessed October 12, 2012); U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1910-Population*, Ancestry.com (accessed October 12, 2012).

and 1920, the number of real estate transfers and conveyances more than doubled in Orlando. In Jacksonville and Miami, the numbers were even more impressive. By 1920, Orange County's population had grown to fifty thousand, more than double that of 1925. In addition to the land boom, Florida had another economic advantage: the citrus industry. In 1919, Florida orange growers made more money from their crops than ever before; the fruit crop in the state was worth a record twenty million dollars. One Winter Garden man sold his orange crop from fifteen acres of land for over \$50,000, and a black man from DeLand reportedly sold his orange grove for \$18,000, impressive sums for the time. One orange grove could yield over \$2,000/ acre. In the midst of a darkening economy, the citrus industry seemed to be thriving.¹⁶

The town of Ocoee embodies the disparities that existed in the southern economy at the time. While many whites struggled to get by, several blacks seemed to be prospering; this bred tension between the races. Ocoee in 1920 was a small, unincorporated town of eight hundred fifteen people, including two hundred fifty-seven blacks. Most Ocoeeans participated in agriculture, and the majority of labor revolved around farms, particularly citrus groves. Unusually, more than one-third of black Ocoeeans owned their homes, and upward of 20 percent owned farms. The most notable black men in the Ocoee Riot, July Perry and Mose Norman, both held title to citrus groves and were prominent in the community. Norman's grove alone was valued at \$10,000, and he owned a car. Another well-known black man in the community, Valentine Armstrong, reportedly owned over sixty acres of property and had several citrus groves. Records show that he and Norman owned property together and that he bought land from Perry in 1912. Additionally, Perry also reportedly ran his own labor brokerage business in the town and controlled the black labor market in Ocoee. There is some debate over Perry's position in the community regarding whether he was simply the boss of a grove gang or a foreman of a grove, the latter being a more prominent position typically afforded to whites, but all accounts agree that Perry was in charge of a large portion of the black farm labor force

16 Tindall, *The Emergence*, 103; Homer Vanderblue, "The Florida Land Boom," *Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* 3, no. 2 (May 1927): 113-131; Joy Wallace Dickenson, *Orlando: City of Dreams* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2003), 50; *Orlando Evening Reporter-Star*, January 29, February 27, December 29, January 13, 1919.

in Ocoee. Some people referred to Perry as a “straw boss”—a sort of assistant foreman.¹⁷

Many whites in Ocoee considered Perry and Norman to be “too prosperous ‘for nigger(s).’” Whites in the town “grew weary of the power and influence” that these two black men had in the community and resented their control over black labor. In fact, one black Ocoee woman speculated after the fact that the entire riot was “a pre-arranged affair to kill and drive the colored people from their homes as they were more prosperous than the white folks.” It was certainly not acceptable to most southern whites that blacks should fare well financially, which both placed them beyond white economic control and in direct competition with white interests. Thus, African-American economic prosperity in Ocoee led to growing racial tensions, which largely contributed to the riot on Election Day.¹⁸

As in Ocoee, economic problems exacerbated race relations and led to violence in many places across the United States after the Great War. One such outbreak of violence took place in East St. Louis, Illinois, in 1917. Overcrowding due to increased migration of southern blacks, coupled with poor living conditions in black neighborhoods of the heavily industrialized town, meant that blacks began to “infringe” upon white neighborhoods after the war. Additionally, industrialists exacerbated the already tense economic situation by hiring black workers in place of white union members and as strikebreakers. A massive riot broke out in July 1917 when white workers of the Aluminum Ore Company “lost a strike that began when union sympathizers were replaced by Negroes.”¹⁹

In Elaine, Arkansas, white economic exploitation of blacks and the consequent black struggle against this oppression helped spur a riot in October of 1919. Elaine was an agricultural town where cotton sharecropping was the dominant practice. In the aftermath of World

17 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920-Population*; Parry, “Constructing,” 13; Property Records for July Perry and Mose Norman, 1890-1923, Orange County Courthouse, Orlando, Florida; Dabbs, “A Report,” 21-22; White, “Election by Terror in Florida,” 196; Fleming, “Orange County’s,” 2; Anon. to Huntington, January 14, 1921, Box C353, NAACP Papers; Walter White to Huntington, January 21, 1921, Box C353, NAACP Papers; Allan Breed, “Riot Survivor, 93, Returns to Ocoee for the First Time,” *The Lakeland Ledger*, February 18, 2001.

18 White, “Election by Terror in Florida,” 196; Dabbs, “A Report,” 21-22; Mrs. J. H. Hamiter to Mrs. Huston, Ocoee file, NAACP Papers.

19 Elliot Rudwick, *Race Riot at East St. Louis, July 2, 1917* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 218.

War I, cotton prices rose sharply and, despite the best efforts of white landlords, black sharecroppers shared in the newfound prosperity. Additionally, northward migration meant that there were smaller numbers of black farmers in Arkansas and that their cotton was in greater demand. In 1919, these farmers formed the Organization of the Progressive Farmers' and Household Union of America to protest the exploitative system of the white landlords and protect their hard-earned profits. Whites were threatened by this alliance and spread rumors that the farmers meant to start an "uprising" and kill whites in the area. The situation became violent when, at a gathering of the union members, gunfire broke out between armed black guards at the meeting and white passersby, sparking the riot.²⁰

In Ocoee, as in other locations across the United States, political concerns compounded racial attitudes and economic competition. With the election of 1920, the United States experienced the first major national political contest since the end of World War I. In August of 1920, women gained the right to vote under the 19th amendment. While most southern whites were reluctant to endorse women's suffrage, they ultimately saw it as an opportunity to turn out more white than black voters. On August 1, 1919, the *Orlando Evening Reporter-Star* boasted that there were, "MORE WHITE WOMEN IN THE SOUTH THAN ENTIRE NEGRO POPULATION." It explicitly praised state measures in the South that restricted the black vote and reasoned that giving women the right to vote would in fact help to overpower black voters. They continued to adamantly reject black suffrage and opposed it by any means necessary. Blacks, however, had gained a renewed desire to break free from their subordinate role and were determined to assert their constitutional right to vote. The "war for democracy" that the United States had fought abroad caused many of its citizens to question the integrity of democracy at home and call for improvements to their own democratic system. The attitudes of blacks in Florida were the same. Over half of Florida's soldiers in the Great War were black, and they thought that their war service merited rights at home. It was these attitudes that drove blacks across Florida to begin a proactive voter registration drive.²¹

20 McWhirter, *Red Summer*, 210-211; Williams and Williams, *Anatomy*, 39-40.

21 Goldberg, *Discontented America*, 52, 10; *Orlando Evening Reporter-Star*, August 1, 1919; Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 145.

Beginning in Jacksonville on January 1, 1919, blacks throughout Florida started to hold secret educational meetings, staged marches to demand their right, registered blacks to vote, and prepared to make a difference once and for all on Election Day. Prominent African Americans around the state led the fight. Women activists such as Eartha White, who directed the Negro Republican Women Voters in Jacksonville in 1920, and Mary McLeod Bethune, teacher and president of the Florida chapter of the National Association of Colored Women, were actively involved. The popular black fraternal order, the Knights of Pythias, played an instrumental role in forging a statewide movement by issuing a resolution in which members vowed to pay their poll taxes and register to vote. Joseph E. Lee, Jacksonville's first black lawyer and a Republican politician, sought to transform the Republican Party into a "party of human rights" that would forever alter the Solid South. The movement was relatively successful; as early as April of 1920, an Orlando newspaper warned white Democrats that, "over 25 per cent of [registrations] are negroes." Later in the year, however, the same paper told of 1,341 blacks registered to vote, but boasted: "In some precincts in Orange, there is not one single negro voter."²²

Amidst the context of the black voter registration drive, the re-emerging Republican Party also provided a threat to white Democratic supremacy. White Democrat fears were evident in the Orlando newspapers: on June 19, 1919, the *Orlando Morning Sentinel* reported: "the Republicans will...conduct a campaign which...will eclipse all prior efforts in that direction." Indeed, the two white politicians from Orlando involved in the Ocoee Riot, John M. Cheney and William Russell O'Neal, the latter also a Republican and fellow trustee at Rollins College, held meetings and conducted speaking campaigns for the Republican Party throughout 1920. This activism combined in many white Democrats' minds with the growing fear that blacks would turn out in large numbers to vote for Republicans. Such an event, if it was allowed to occur, would break the Solid South and reduce white hegemony. In 1920, one newspaper told whites that, "The Republican party, with which negroes have been affiliated since their emancipation is using every power at its command to pile up a great vote among the colored people."²³

22 Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed*, xiv, 177, 179; *Orlando Evening Reporter Star*, April 13, October 20, 1920.

23 *Orlando Morning Sentinel*, June 19, 1919, January 27, September 4, 1920; *Orlando Evening Reporter-Star*, October 6, 1920; William O'Neal file, Box 39, Trustee Records.

The voter registration numbers and election results largely confirmed white fears of black and Republican activism. On September 14, 1920, the *Orlando Evening Reporter Star* reported: "TEN NEGRO WOMEN REGISTER HERE TO EVERY WHITE WOMAN." It warned: "If white women of the county continue to keep their names off the registration books, the negro votes in this county will more than hold the balance of power in Orange County." On October 20, 1920, just days before the election, black voters made up nearly 23 percent of the registrations in Orange County and 38 percent in Ocoee. Clearly, whites in Florida were concerned about the growing possibility that blacks would turn out to the polls, and they had reason to be concerned.²⁴

On the national stage, the Democrats lost out on Election Day when Republican Warren G. Harding won the presidential election. More worrisome to the Solid South was that Republican votes increased in every southern state, and the Republicans even gained a majority in Tennessee and Oklahoma. In Orange County, too, the Republicans had a good showing. By the end of the election, Cheney had gained nearly 40 percent of the county vote. He noted that Republicans had "showed a gain of 160 percent over four years ago to a corresponding gain of 48 percent of Democratic votes." To the white Democrats in the area, these black and Republican successes were a shock.²⁵

In Ocoee, the new, unstable political climate was also evident. Before Election Day, rumors spread that Cheney, along with O'Neal, was registering blacks to vote at several secret meetings at black churches in the town. Historians have debated these allegations, but it is not so unbelievable that Cheney would have engaged in this type of activity. In fact, as an attorney, Cheney already had represented a black man in a murder trial, a job most white lawyers would have avoided for fear of tarnishing their reputations. Many stories of the riot also allege that, after being turned away from the polls in Ocoee, Perry and Norman drove to Orlando to consult with Cheney, who reassured them and sent them back to the polls with a personally signed note. Lastly, it has been rumored that the Ocoee

24 *Orlando Evening Reporter-Star*, September 14, October 20, 1920.

25 Dewey W. Grantham, *The Life & Death of the Solid South: a Political History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 70; Report of the Secretary of the State of Florida, 1920, <http://archive.org/stream/reportofsecr19191920flor#page/n5/mode/2up> (accessed October 12, 2012); John Cheney to Slep, November 29, 1920, Box 1, Cheney File, Rollins College Archives, Olin Library, Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida.

lynch mob hung July Perry from a tree directly across the lake from Cheney's family home, perhaps as a warning sign for him to stop his work amongst blacks. Though some ambiguity surrounds Cheney's involvement, accounts agree that whether Cheney had been present or not, Perry and Norman had helped register blacks to vote on their own accord. Perry encouraged black Ocoeeans, telling them "If you want to be a first-class citizen, it's time for you to get registered and vote."²⁶

Whites in Ocoee became concerned about what their future might hold if all seventy-eight blacks who were registered turned out to vote, and voted Republican, on Election Day. They did everything possible to discourage black voters. For example, some white Ocoeeans decided to send Robert Bigelow, the supervisor of the election in Ocoee, on a fishing trip on Election Day so that he would not be present should any black desire to register or pay a poll tax that day. In the political context of a highly contested election, a growing black voter registration movement, and increased Republican activism, tension continued to mount in Ocoee.²⁷

Political tension was a contributing factor in nearly all outbursts of racial violence in the United States in the post-war period. One example of this was the Washington, D.C. riot of 1919. Blacks in Washington, D.C. were more politically active than their counterparts in the rest of the South. Political groups such as the National Race Congress and the NAACP sought to mobilize blacks and fought for equality. By 1916, the Washington Branch of the NAACP was the largest in the country and was contesting legislation, such as a ban on interracial marriage, which aimed to limit black freedoms. Many whites felt that the NAACP was "urging the colored people to insist upon equality with white people and to resort to force, if necessary, in order to establish their rights." This political tension eventually boiled over into a full-scale riot on July 19, 1919, after rumors had spread of two black men attacking a white woman.²⁸

The riot in East St. Louis was also largely precipitated by political tensions. East St. Louis in the early twentieth century witnessed a

26 Dabbs, "A Report," 18; *Orlando Evening Reporter-Star*, May 22, 1919; Interview with Richard A. Franks in Maguire, *A History of Ocoee*, 75; Interview with Joy Wallace Dickinson; Parrish, *A Guide*, 9, 10.

27 Interview with Sam Salisbury in Maguire, *A History of Ocoee*, 72.

28 McWhirter, *Red Summer*, 97, 160, 98-99.

great amount of black political activity; blacks exercised their right to vote, petitioned white politicians for patronage, and even ran for office. Black political clubs advocated for social reforms and organized their communities around activism. White political bosses in the town, who controlled all business and real estate interests, grew increasingly hostile to black success, as they believed it to be a threat to their own power. Thus, the riot that erupted in 1917 was largely a result of the white struggle to eliminate black political activity and subsequently gain control of East St. Louis permanently.²⁹

Yet another factor in Ocoee's "perfect storm" was the newly formed KKK branch of West Orange, including Winter Garden, Ocoee, and Orlando. In 1915, D. W. Griffith's movie, *The Birth of a Nation*, glorified the Civil War-era KKK and portrayed blacks as pernicious and unintelligent. The movie represented the attitude held by many Southerners of the time, and historians credit it with the growth of the "new" Klan, a similar version of the old organization that had terrorized blacks during Reconstruction. Initially the new KKK grew slowly, but the fears and concerns of Americans in the post-war era were fertile ground for hate. Many Americans were already suspicious of foreigners, and the poor economic conditions led many to blame "inferior" races for their problems, encouraging the growth of the Klan, whose slogan was "One-Hundred Percent Americanism." Prior to 1920, the Klan had only been active in Alabama and Georgia but the spring of 1920 saw a huge increase in publicity and membership due to a large-scale propaganda effort that tapped into Southerners' deepest fears and racial prejudices. By 1921 the Klan's membership numbered more than 90,000 nationwide. It routinely began practicing lynching and other forms of racial violence as a means of protecting white female purity and as a white defense against the black race as a whole.³⁰

In Florida, the KKK grew as a result of the budding black voter registration movement. Its sole purpose was terrorizing and discouraging black voters. Though Jacksonville and Tampa were the main hubs of Klan activity, the third branch of the Florida

29 Charles L. Lumpkins, *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 5-7.

30 Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 2-4; Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 9-11; Tindall, *The Emergence*, 189, 170.

KKK was founded in Orange County in 1920. Many prominent members of Ocoee and the Orlando area became members of this new branch. According to Sam Salisbury, nearly 90 percent of law enforcement personnel in West Orange County joined. In the days preceding the election, the Klan held several parades around the state in Jacksonville, Daytona, and Orlando. Winter Garden, a small town immediately to the west of Ocoee, also witnessed a smaller parade. Most blacks heeded these warnings for fear of their lives. The Grand Master of the KKK in Florida also took note of the voter registration campaign that was taking place in Orange County, sending a threatening note to John Cheney and William O'Neal that read: "I was informed that you are in the habit of going out among the negroes of Orlando and delivering lectures, explaining to them just how to become citizens, and how to assert their rights.... We shall always enjoy WHITE SUPREMACY in this country and he who interferes must face the consequences." More evidence of the Klan in Orange County surfaced in 1921 when, on the eve of a city election almost a year after the Ocoee Riot, the KKK held a demonstration in Sanford, in response to the threat of a "large negro vote." Clearly, then, Klan action was in direct response to the threat of large numbers of blacks at the polls. In 1920, white citizens of Ocoee and the surrounding area had made it clear that, were blacks to vote, they might face severe consequences. Although Ocoee had managed for many years to avoid widespread violence, all of the elements necessary for a riot were looming, simply waiting for the Election Day spark to set them off.³¹

Ocoee was certainly not the only town where the KKK had significant influence; another riot in which the KKK played a large role was the Rosewood Massacre of 1923. Rosewood, Florida, was a small community almost entirely populated with black citizens. In the nearby town of Cedar Key, the Klan had a strong presence. On the day before the riot, the Klan had conducted a parade in neighboring Gainesville, burning a cross and carrying a sign that read: "First and Always Protect Womanhood." Thus, when rumors began to spread that a black man had raped a white woman named

31 Newton, *The Invisible Empire*, 36; Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed*, 207; Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan*, 82; Dabbs, "A Report," 19; *Florida Metropolis*, October 29, November 2, 1920; *Orlando Morning Sentinel*, October 31, 1920; Grand Master Florida Ku Klux to Mr. W. R. O'Neal and Judge John M. Cheney, Cheney Family Papers, OCRHC; Chase to Landis, December 6, 1921, Box 173, Chase Collection, University of Florida.

Fannie Taylor in her home, and that blacks in Rosewood were harboring the man, the white lynch mob that formed contained numerous Klan members and was eager to find the alleged assailant. On January 4, 1923, a full-scale riot erupted when the original vigilante mob of twenty to thirty whites grew to two hundred and eventually killed up to twenty-seven blacks, burning down the entire town of Rosewood in the process.³²

Tulsa was another town where the prevalence of the Klan played a role in rioting. By 1919, Klan membership in Tulsa numbered in the thousands, and attracted white men from all professions and classes. The KKK frequently held rallies in public places such as the local courthouse. Post-war job competition and economic decline, coupled with newfound black prosperity, fueled Klan participation in Tulsa, just as it had in Orange County, Florida. Additionally, crime in Tulsa, including gambling, robbery, and prostitution, grew to unmanageable amounts, causing many white men to take up the vigilante cause of the KKK to "protect" their families from the supposed black enemy. The pervasiveness of the Klan in Tulsa undoubtedly played a major part in the precipitation of the riot that occurred there in 1921.³³

The riot that took place in the small town of Ocoee, Florida, on November 2, 1920 was unlike any racial violence Central Florida had ever experienced. In the aftermath of World War I, blacks, having served their country faithfully, felt a growing sense of citizenship that entitled them to equal rights in the social and political arenas. This, coupled with increasing economic prosperity among blacks, caused racial tension to mount across the country. In many northern cities, black southern migrants competed with whites for scarce jobs, and race riots seemed to spread like wildfire in the summer of 1919. In the South, black activism confronted the entrenched Jim Crow system of submission and segregation; white Democrats used all the tools in their power to prevent blacks from voting in the 1920 election. However, with the hope of electing Republican officials to once and for all overthrow the Democratic "Solid South," blacks gained valuable ground in the voter registration movement. In the midst of this turbulent atmosphere, the KKK was quickly gaining popularity, using violence and

32 R. Thomas Dye, "Rosewood, Florida: The Destruction of an African American Community," *Historian: A Journal of History* 58, no. 3 (1996): 8-15.

33 Tim Madigan, *The Burning: Massacre, Destruction, and the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 65-67.

intimidation in the hopes of keeping blacks away from the polls on Election Day.

Ocoee became a microcosm of the mounting nationwide racial tension. Though blacks remained the minority in the small town, many were prosperous and prominent in the community, and whites were threatened by their affluent status. Additionally, approaching the 1920 national election, blacks in Ocoee collaborated with local Republican candidates to register unprecedented numbers of black voters. Lastly, in early 1920, many white public officials had formed a new branch of the KKK in West Orange County; these men made it their personal mission to ensure blacks would not cast their ballots on Election Day. And so the scene was set for the bloody battle that became known as the Ocoee Riot. When Mose Norman turned out to vote on November 2nd, only this small spark was needed to ignite the fire that had been brewing in Ocoee for many months. Like nearly every other race riot of the time, the Ocoee Riot was caused by a combination of underlying social, economic, and political factors that eventually led to the death of unknown numbers of people and the destruction of a thriving black community.