



Video Story Transcript

Surviving and Thriving: When Racism Destroyed 1920s Black Wall Street in Tulsa Oklahoma

By: Storyteller Shanta Nurullah
www.artistsofnote.com/shanta

Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqWDyHldJto>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Shanta. I'd like to tell you a family story. This story involves my father, Simeon Neal, Jr. who was born August 31, 1920. He was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma where his father, Simeon, Sr. had a tailor shop. The shop was on Greenwood Avenue, which in Tulsa was called Black Wall Street because there were so many thriving and successful businesses along that street and in the area around that street. There were also hundreds of homes in which most of the black people in Tulsa lived. Now, the year after my father was born, in 1921, on May 3rd, the first and incident occurred that changed the lives of everyone in Tulsa basically forever.

There was a young black man who worked downtown shining shoes in front of the Drexel building. And because segregation was very much in force in Tulsa, at that time, any black person who worked downtown or in that area had limited options when it came to just doing something like going to the bathroom. So, this young man, his name was Dick Rowland, when away from his shoeshine station to use the washroom and he was allowed to go only on the top of the, the top floor of the Drexel Building. In order to use the bathroom, and in order to get there, he had to take an elevator. And the elevators in 1921 were not like the elevators that we're used to where you just go in and press, press the button for your floor and you'd you taken to your destination. At that time there was always an elevator operator, who either controlled the elevator with, with a lever, like you might have seen in the cable cars of San Francisco, or with a wheel that would actually propel the elevator up or bring it back down. So the elevator operator on this day, May 31st, in the Drexel Building, was a young white woman whose name was Sarah Page. Now, the story doesn't say exactly what

happened. We don't know for sure. But when Dick Rowland went into that elevator, he either stumbled and fell into Sarah, or accidentally or maybe even on purpose, touched her. But by the time he made it back down to his shoeshine station, a rumor had started that he had assaulted Sarah and that was just not allowed. It was not allowed for a black man to touch a white woman even if he was a young boy. The penalty for doing such a thing was usually death. Sometimes ya get arrested before you die but usually you would be strung up and lynched, which was a practice that was very prevalent in the south for a long time. And we weren't even exactly in the south but it was Oklahoma. It was segregation. A black man cannot touch a white woman.

So white folks started gathering for the lynching that was going to take place because Dick Rowland had so-called assaulted Sarah Page. And it got to be such a big deal, as lynchings often were. Sometimes whole families would come out. People would have picnics. There was even a town where lynchings occurred on every Friday. But in Tulsa, on that day, the word spread so far that it reached the Greenwood Avenue District and the black people came to try to save him from what was surely going to be his fate.

Now, this was shortly after World War I and lots of the men who lived in the Greenwood Avenue District had been soldiers, had been fighters, and they still had that warrior spirit. So they went downtown to rescue Dick Roland and make sure that he was not killed for what might have just been an accident. The people who were intent on lynching Dick Rowland were armed and the black men were armed. Some with guns or rifles, others with sticks, bats, bricks, whatever they could get their hands on, and a big battle actually ensued between the white men and the black men. As the battle spread, the black men started retreating toward the Greenwood Avenue District and the white men followed. And when they got close to the area where black people lived, they started setting fires. And one burning building led to another burning building, to another one.

And the white men who had set those fires would not even let the fire department in to put the fires out. So Greenwood Avenue went up in flames. Burning not only the businesses, but the homes around it and the fire was getting close to Grandpa Neal's tailor shop. He had one customer, a white man, who had a horse and wagon and he offered to save my grandfather and his family by hiding them under the hay in that wagon. So if you could imagine, not having any time to gather up your belongings or your precious photographs or mementos or even clothes. If you could imagine, Grandpa Neal and his wife Susan, their, their daughter of three or four year old, four years old Marjorie and my father who was less than a year old, gathering them up, hiding them under the hay in this wagon, and leaving town just to survive. And it was a good thing that they did that because hundreds of people were killed on that two day spree of fires and gunshots and death and destruction. Between May 31st and June 1st hundreds of people, hundreds of businesses destroyed.

Now Grandpa and his family made it to St. Louis, initially, but really couldn't get a hold on establishing themselves there. So they went to Chicago next. And Grandpa Neal was able to establish another tailor shop. This time on 47th Street, which was a prosperous business district in Chicago at that time. And I remember visiting that shop and Grandpa Neal was still making suits. But he would also sell men's accessories, shirts, ties, socks. And I remember playing with, with the socks of the sock drawer. That was one of the things I would do while the adults were talking.

But more than that I remember how vibrant and exciting 47th Street was with, you know, music clubs and places to eat, all types of businesses. And it's those memories that become really in stark contrast to the 47th Street of today, although there is an effort to bring things back. There are so many vacant lots where, where businesses used to be. There are so many boarded up buildings where families used to live. And that poses the question of why? Why...Why does one community thrive when another one goes down? I don't have all of those answers but I have a, a night...What is this year? 2016...Example that could, could in a way, shed some light on that.

There's this grocery chain called Mariano's. I'm calling out names now. But when a few years ago, when the Dominick's chain went out, it went into bankruptcy, and went out of business, their stores were, the court

order was, that they couldn't sell all of their stores to just one of the grocery, grocer. They had to divide that between at least two or three different concerns. So Jewel got some of the buildings and Mariano's, which was just an up and coming chain at that time, got the other buildings. So there was this strip on 71st Street and Jeffrey, still on the South Side of Chicago, where there was a Dominick's. And years later now, three or four years later, no grocery chain has, has moved into that building. But Mariano's finally opened on King's Drive and Oakwood Boulevard. While this one Mariano's was being built, on the north side Mariano's stores were popping up literally everywhere. I mean, any time you would drive any distance on the north side of Chicago, you see yet another Mariano's. Now why is it that the North Side can have, at this point, probably 10 or 15 of these grocery stores and it took years for the South Side to get only one. Happenstance... or intentional? You tell me.