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Florida's Hidden Atrocity: Rosewood

On July 1st, 2022, House Bill 7 was put into effect in the state of Florida. Nicknamed the "Stop WOKE Act" among many Floridians, this bill prohibits teaching curriculum which makes students "feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress because of actions, in which the individual played no part." This bill effectively makes it illegal to teach students about slavery, the Reconstruction Era, and oppression against African Americans under the guise that white students will feel guilty about their ancestors' involvement in this history. Through this bill, Florida is officially hiding the reality of oppression in America, but this has been happening unofficially for years. In my experience in the Florida public education system, all we were ever told was that oppression happened, but were never given any details. The KKK existed, but what did they do? The Civil War happened, but why? Being a curious child, I went to the first people I ask all of my nagging questions— my parents.

They were the first people to teach me about oppression in America. Middle school-aged me was suddenly armed with the knowledge that America wasn't the "land of the free" that I was taught to believe. After learning more about the true history of the country and taking some time to process the information, I had one more nagging question for my mother: "What about Florida?" It seemed inevitable for white supremacy and violence to happen in the state because of its Confederate status, but I hadn't seen anything in my personal research. I had found well-documented instances of vile white supremacy in every state, including northern states, but no specific events in Florida. My mother's response began my interest in what I believe to be one of the most atrocious acts of white supremacy in Florida, and possibly one of the worst in United States history. She said: "I should tell you about Rosewood."

Rosewood was settled sometime in the mid-1800s by a majority black group of migrants from other southern states. Although small, with an estimated population of 100 to 300 residents, the town was one of few predominantly black communities in the south. It was a safe haven. The town had "at least one school, three churches, two stores and a Masonic Lodge." The residents of Rosewood, mostly former slaves, were free to pray, shop, get an education, and build a life together. Looking back on it, Rosewood almost seems like a fantasy. In my experience in Florida's public education system, I was taught that the majority of African Americans fled to the north due to violence in the south, so hearing about Rosewood made me happy, almost proud to be a resident of Florida. Even though we were a Confederate state, at least there was a chance that things may have improved for African American Floridians during the Reconstruction Era. Rosewood remained a safe haven for around 70 years. It was at this point that my mother told me about what happened one week in 1923.

Fannie Taylor, a resident of the nearby town Sumner, declared that she had been raped by a black man living in Rosewood on New Year's Day in 1923. While information about this event is scarce, there has never been any published evidence that her claim was true. Despite this, white supremacists around the area, even reaching outside of Florida and into Georgia, used Fannie's claim as a catalyst to begin hostility toward the residents of Rosewood. Over the next

week, up to as many as 1,000 white supremacists wreaked havoc on the small, peaceful town. According to newspaper reports at the time, Rosewood became the site of “lynchings, shootings, mass graves, mutilations and burnings.” The men, women, and children who survived the chaos were left hiding in the nearby swamps for days or taking shelter with some of the few white people who lived in Rosewood— the only people not targeted by the mob. At the end of the week, only one building remained. It was the home of a white shopkeeper. Although he saved lives by letting African American residents of Rosewood take shelter in his home and hide from the white mob, it’s important to remember that the only reason the building still stands today is because it was owned by a white man— a permanent reminder of the white supremacy that destroyed the town.

All it took was one week to traumatize the hundreds of residents of Rosewood. After the attacks, Rosewood residents kept quiet out of fear of being killed by one of the members of the white mob that destroyed their town. It took 49 years for anyone outside of the mob and Rosewood’s residents to know about the atrocity. Two women, Minnie Lee Mitchell Langley and LeRutha Bradley, shared their experience escaping Rosewood through the swamps as children to a journalist, Ted Bradley. Since then, the history of Rosewood has been pieced together through survivors’ stories told through themselves, their children, and their grandchildren.

So why was I never taught this? Florida’s choice of broad education left me, along with every other Floridian, completely unaware of the true nature of violence towards African Americans in Florida during the Reconstruction Era. If it weren’t for my parents introducing me to the topic of oppression in America and guiding me to the right resources to truly understand these topics, I would have missed out on an essential part of not just American, but world history. I fear that other children may not have it as lucky as I did and their parents may not educate them as mine did for me. Most kids’ only source for historical education is public school, and if policies like House Bill 7 continue to stay in effect, the cycle of hate present in this country will only continue until change is made.

Sources

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