

# A Sense of Place

## -- Downtown Tulsa

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The price we Tulsans pay for our mobility is high. In fact, there are those among us who would say it is exorbitant.

As seen from the air, downtown Tulsa looks like a patchwork of blacktop pastures nestled in amongst the buildings where metal mavericks graze. Huddling around the gouges for new construction in the northern portions of downtown are lots of what is called in the business "surface parking." It is what planners consider an "interim land-use," something that's there after something has been destroyed and before something else is built.

It's a bit sad that so much of what was once the thriving commercial center of Tulsa has to be used simply for "stabling automobiles." Particularly since the large majority of those vehicles are placed in lots at the beginning of the working day and removed at its end. Most of the cars are only needed to get to and from work, analysts of downtown tell us.

What was there before there were parking lots in downtown? Well, there was the Hotel Tulsa, the "New York Stock Exchange of Tulsa's Oil Industry," which used to sit on the northeast corner of Third and Cincinnati. There was the Akdar Theater, studied for possible renovation as a Performing Arts Center and rejected, which used to sit at Third and Denver.

And there are many other "Extinct Buildings of Significance," as they are listed by Tulsa's Landmark Preservation Committee.

The fate of Tulsa's Union Depot, a symbol for years now of the uphill battle of historical preservation, hangs in the balance as construction continues nearby for the Bank of Oklahoma monolith and the public-privately financed Performing Arts Center. Earlier plans to demolish the station to build a heating plant for the Williams Center went by the way when developers tied the center into the existing Thermal Systems. But the reprieve of this monument to the place of rails in Tulsa history may be short-lived unless some concrete plans and cold cash appear to restore utility to the building which became a beehive of activity when it opened in May of 1931.

But, like some of the older homes mentioned in last week's portion of this series, some of Tulsa's downtown buildings are being "adopted." The "adoption," however, is not necessarily a guarantee that restoration will take place.

### ADOPT A BUILDING

Announcements have been made in the last few weeks that at least two of downtown Tulsa's landmarks have been purchased. Public Service Co. of Oklahoma chose to exercise its option on the old Central High School, between Sixth and Seventh and from Detroit to Cincinnati. Plans are, spokespersons say, to renovate the sturdy structure to house PSC employees, presently scattered among several downtown offices.

Word last week was that another utility-related firm, Oklahoma Natural Development Corp., has purchased the

however, hit the street the following day, carrying what Patton called "a colored and untrue account" and a decision was made "that it would be best for the safety of the Negro to place him behind the bars of the County Jail.

Inflamed by additional news stories, one of which bore the headline "To Lynch a Negro Tonight," mobs began to gather and the Ku Klux Klan began to muster its strength. Blacks decided to arm themselves and surround the jail to protect Rowland, white groups arrived, and, despite urgings from black Deputy Sheriff Barney Cleaver, the crowd failed to disperse. A shot was fired and a small war began in Tulsa's downtown.

In the ensuing three days, "Little Africa" was the scene of a full-scale military confrontation. An estimated 6,000 rioters, black and white, left 35 city blocks of destruction in their wake. Marshal law, imposed by the Governor when he sent soldiers from Ft. Sill's 3rd Infantry, failed to prevent the reduction of more than 860 homes and stores to rubble, and hospitals listed 184 Negro and 48 white patients for surgery. Injuries during the riot hospitalized 531 additional casualties.

Mt. Zion Baptist Church had just been completed at a cost of \$84,000 and the congregation had signed a note for \$50,000 to finish paying for the building. Completely destroyed during the violence, the building was rebuilt and the \$50,000 note on the original building paid off 21 years later.

What had been a thriving, growing community lay in ruins and W.D. Williams made his way back to his family after being arrested and marched to Convention Hall.

#### THE SECOND GREENWOOD

Rebuilding began and, by the late 'twenties, Greenwood had never been so strong. Buses replaced Simon Berry's Jitney and a Directory of

Negro Businesses from the era listed more than 400 entrepreneurs.

A white man or mixed-blood Indian named Redfern opened the Dixie, giving Greenwood its second movie house; clubs and "speaks" nestled in among the shops lining the business district. And, as Mr. Williams recalls, one had to walk sideways down the sidewalks on Sunday through crowds on their way to church.

Other whites bought land and built, adding names like Hopper and Botkin to the stones above the doors, and housing remained a scarce commodity as blacks heard of Tulsa and boarded trains to find out if what they'd heard was true.

Former Booker T. Principal Henry Whitlow reports that porters on "Jim Crow" cars of incoming trains would announce "Tulsey-the Tush Hog Town, Greenwood - The Battlin' Ground."

It's hard to tell when Greenwood began declining, most say. According to some, the black business district remained strong into the 'fifties.

One thing is clear, however. That is, that Greenwood thrived in a culture marked with clear lines of racial separation. Blacks were, for the most part, prevented from doing business in white institutions, including banks. Money earned elsewhere had to be brought back into the community to be spent.

As integration slowly eroded the walls of black-white separation, the majority community began to see that blacks' money was just as green as theirs. Not only might integration make sense morally, they decided, it could also make sense economically.

There are many who contend that it was the loss of black loyalty that killed Greenwood. Brothers and sisters should have gone out of their ways to patronize black business, they say.

Currently, the old "Negro Wall Street" is under a voluntary demolition

for rooming houses above. Accommodations were scarce in those days as more and more blacks found their ways to Oklahoma.

Longtime Booker T. Washington teacher W.D. Williams recalls what it was like when his family lived on the second floor of the building they had built at Greenwood and Archer. That building, which housed Williams' Confectionery and sported North Tulsa's first gas pump, was rebuilt after the 1921 riot and remains today among the muted reminders of Greenwood's past.

Williams was born in 1905. His mother "carried" him to Hot Springs, Arkansas, in her womb and "carried" him back in her arms. There was no Negro doctor in "Tulsey."

As Williams grew, he watched the life of a community form up around him. His father, J.W. Williams, had come from Mississippi skilled in working with boilers after jobs as a locomotive fireman. He got a job in an ice cream plant and began to gather his resources.

By 1912, the family was living in the three-story brick building at Archer and Greenwood, with their Confectionery downstairs. Lawyers and a dentist rented space upstairs.

Next door, Dr. A.L. Bryant had opened his drugstore and, beyond that, Vaden and Gourley had a building which housed George Butler's Pool Hall. On up the street were a chili parlor run by a Mexican and a shop owned by Dr. Hughes which featured near beer, light wine and beans. Mrs. Bell also ran a restaurant in a building erected by Dr. Bryant.

On the site of the present-day Oklahoma Eagle was the Palm Garden. A speakeasy in the front was off-limits to youngsters, but what lay behind was not. In the rear was an indoor arena where everyone was invited to come learn how to box.

Matches were scheduled twice a week.

Beyond the Palm Garden were McGregor's Grocery and Mrs. Morgan's Boarding House.

It was Williams' mother, he recalls, who pushed for building the community. Plans for a garage with rooming house above fell apart when it was learned a City ordinance prohibited housing people above such a facility. Plans were altered and the result was the Dreamland Theater, completed in 1914, listing Mrs. Loula T. Williams as proprietor. "The Finest Colored Theatre in the Southwest," handbills declared. The movies were in black-and-white.

As prosperity dawned for Tulsa's "Negro Wall Street," tensions began to grow. A racial skirmish erupted in 1919, but that only served to further kindle the head of steam. Then came 1921 and the kettle exploded.

#### NIGHT OF THE PROM

W.D. Williams, treasurer of his class at the new brick Booker T. Washington School which had opened in 1920, had ten dollars in his pocket as he worked in the Confectionery on the afternoon of May 31, 1921. He had collected the money for the BTW Prom which was scheduled for that evening.

The Prom was never held but, Williams says, the money came in handy.

The day before, a young Negro bootblack named Dick Rowland, a former classmate of Williams who had dropped out of school, was riding an elevator in the Drexel Building at Third and Main. The operator, a white woman named Sarah Page, later told police that "when he grabbed my arm, I screamed and he fled." Street talk at the time was that he stepped on her foot and heated words were exchanged.

According to then-Chief of Detectives James Patton, an investigation was begun in a quiet way. Newspapers.

dow, there is a block of limestone, resting on Ionic columns and bearing the inscription "Tribune." A modern pre-cast fortress facing Main Street between Second and Third now houses the staff of both Tulsa daily newspapers.

And, the only reason for most Tulsans of recent years to cross the mythical boundary between North and South has been to listen to the trains at the "Old Lady of Brady" or "get down" to rock and country-western music at Cain's Ballroom.

The "Old Lady of Brady" was built as Tulsa's Convention Hall in about 1914. It was the home of the International Petroleum Exposition starting in 1923 and served as a refugee camp for captured Negroes following the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. Its fate hangs in the balance as work progresses on a Performing Arts Center in the Williams Superblock as a new home for the Philharmonic and the

Tulsa Ballet.

Cains, built by Tate Brady in about 1924, has a long tradition reflected in the photos of country-western stars which line its walls. Recently re-discovered (once again) by those of the present younger generation, and with rumors of Tulsa fast taking its place in the world of country music across the nation, Cain's promises to go on and on.

Most areas of Tulsa's Near Northside, however, have been relegated to the winos and bums. The once vibrant shopping areas have fallen into the lethargy of "making do," moving from one drunken stupor to the next.

Rumors have persisted that the Near Northside, including the heart of old Greenwood, will be very important areas when such things as the Williams Center are completed.

In the meantime, things just continue. Preservation and urban conservation have yet to cross the tracks.

## -- 'Little Africa'

Some say it finally crumbled to the pressures of survival in a racist society. Some say a costly race riot in 1921 took too much out of the Greenwood Community that couldn't be put back in. Some say the backbone that was there with the feisty settlers of Greenwood is gone, dissipated by the "easy living" of those to whom the riot is nothing but a grandmother's story.

Some say things were fine until an expressway cut its way mercilessly through the old "Negro Wall Street," and that things have gone downhill since the interchange was set for Detroit and Cincinnati, rather than Greenwood. Some say that it died the natural death of an economic institution founded on the principle of racial separation in a culture moving multiply toward integration.

"Yes, Virginia," they all agree, "once there was a Greenwood."

Fed by blacks fleeing the racial turmoil of the Reconstructed South, Tulsa's Greenwood, along with other clusters of blacks on the western frontier, grew through the early years of the Twentieth Century. A healthy commerce had begun and buildings were going up in Greenwood well before statehood.

Some were freedmen, slaves set free by Indian owners, many of whom opted to become members of the tribes. But most of them were immigrants, looking for the opportunity to hew out their own lives in the way they wanted.

### THE FIRST GREENWOOD

By 1918, shops and stores lined Greenwood Avenue, most with offices