

Buck Colbert Franklin Letter about the Tulsa Race Massacre

From <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/long-lost-manuscript-contains-searin/>

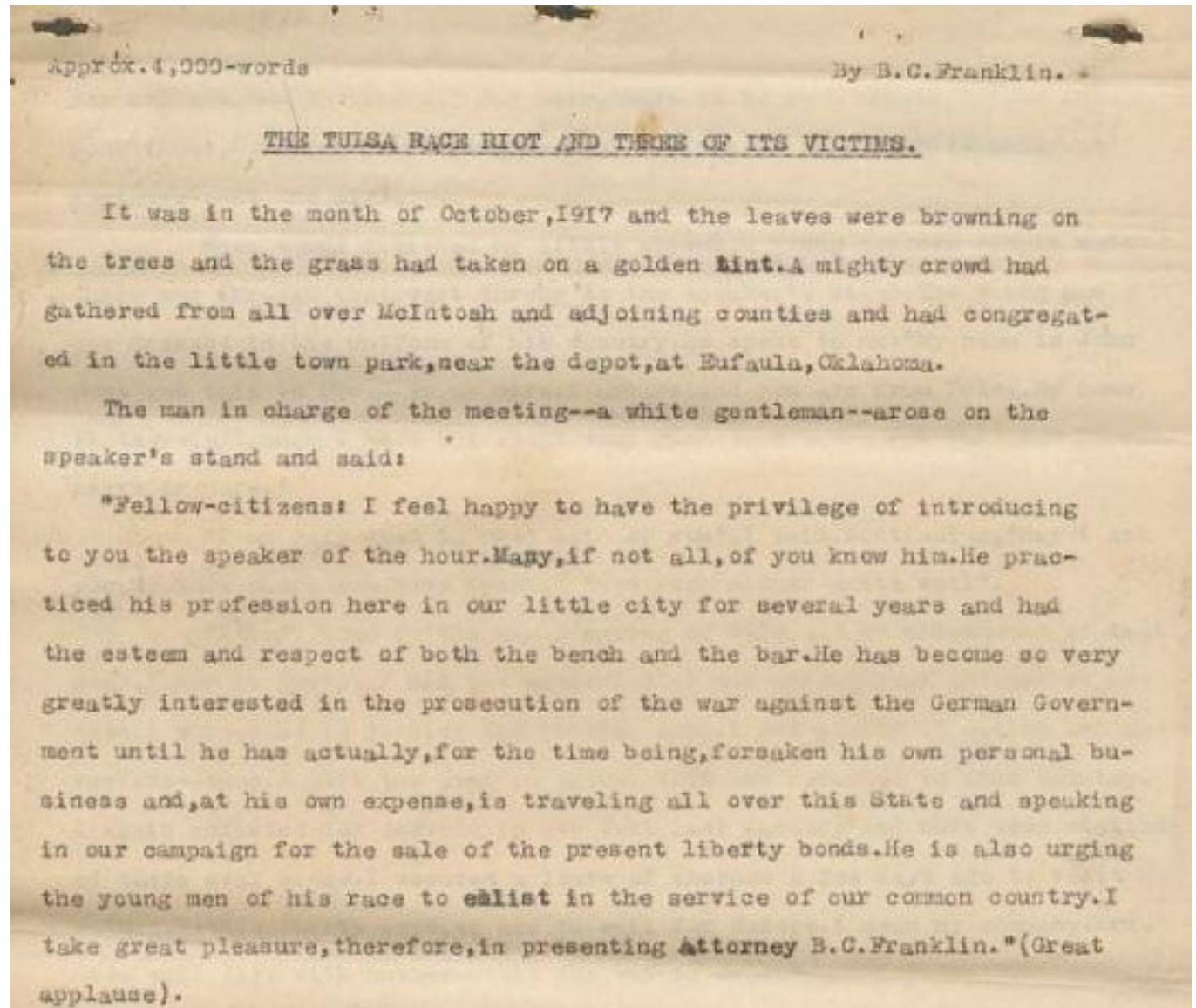
And so young Hoss returned to Europe and fought for his country until the armistice was signed. Over there, he, like hundreds of his buddies, was simply a cog in the great machinery of war. He did his bit in comparative obscurity--he was known only to a few. Providence was kind to him and he, like a few others--just a few others--returned home sound in mind and in body.

Life--sordid at times--is made up of many changes and vicissitudes, and so the scene shifts back to Tulsa.

It is now May 31st, 1921. The day is just beginning. Sweet-throated birds warble their songs of joy in the tree-tops, fanned by the refreshing zephyr, and the dew sparkles upon the grass like countless little diamonds, as old Sol rises above the eastern horizon and, shining in all his resplendent glory, thrusts his myriad rays upon the busy world below. An unbroken stream of pedestrians--male and female--passes down Greenwood Avenue. It is made up of laborers, some empty-handed and others with dinner pails, on their way to work. They hurry along as if they are late. A few of the more pretentious ones pass in their own cars, or in jitneys, or upon busses. Then comes a lull--a lull before the storm.

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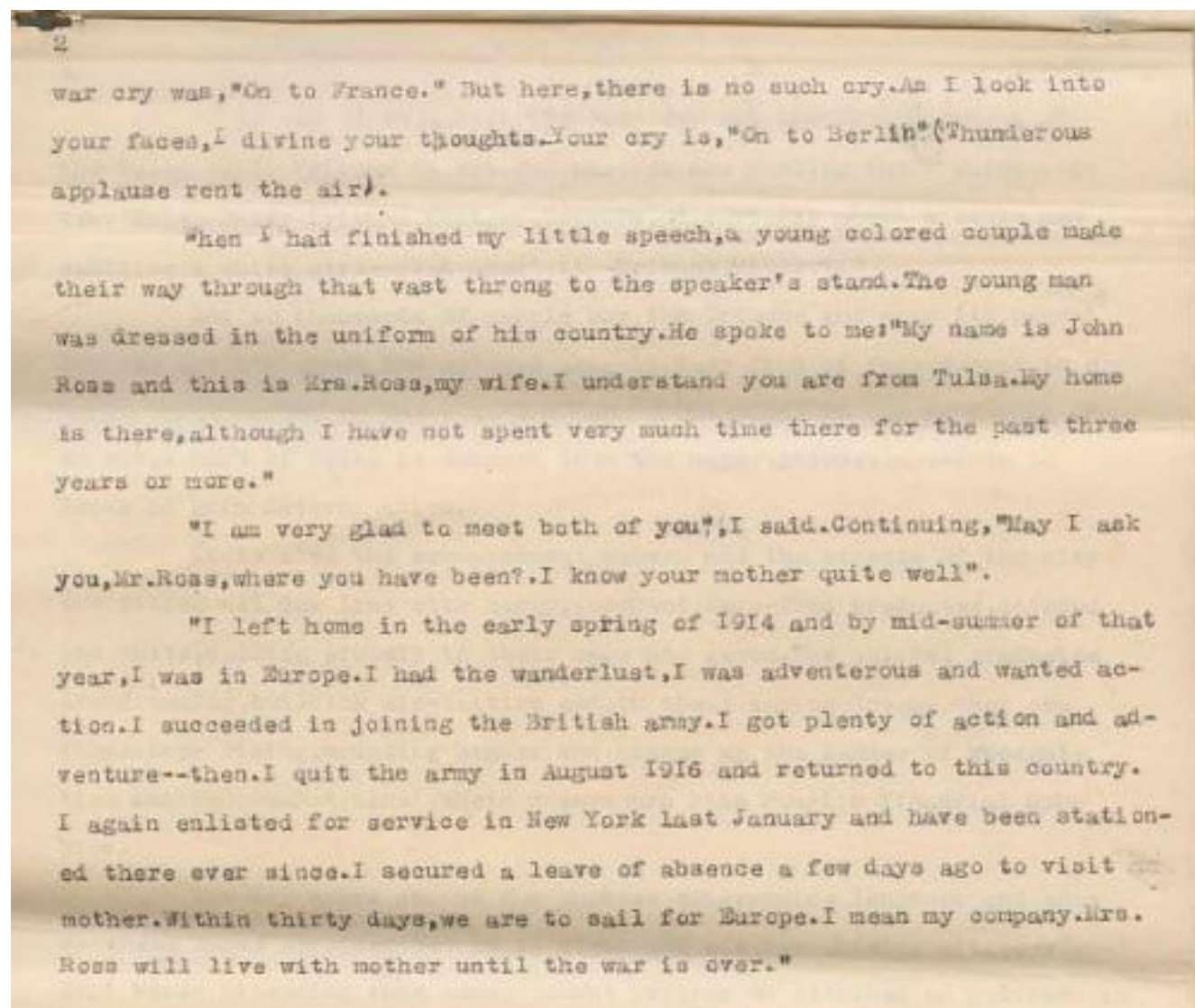
I spoke in part as follows: "Master of Ceremonies, and fellow citizens: We are met together here for a three-fold purpose, namely to impress upon you the importance of buying as many of these Fourth Liberty Bonds as possible, to urge upon you--young men--the imperative necessity of immediate enlistment and to bid farewell to these splendid young men here who are soon to entrain.

"We who are too old to enlist, or who are exempted from enlisting for any other cause, should remember that it is both our moral and financial duty to see to it that these young men and others like them shall not want for anything while "over there" fighting our battles."

"Young men, you are here in answer to your country's call to duty. Yours is an honorable heritage; yours is a remarkable reputation to uphold and defend. You have come from the loins of a race that has never produced a traitor, nor a coward when summoned in the defense of this nation and its flag. It is gratifying to note the spirit of comradeship already in evidence here and to see the smiles with which your faces are wreathed. A few days ago, I attended a similar meeting, the difference being that the other gathering was composed of all white people, except myself. At that other gathering, the

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3.

It is now 11:30, A.M. of the same day and the first edition of the Tulsa Daily Tribune is out. The newsies are hawking their wares. Listen: "Tulsa Daily Tribune, Mister?, Tribune, Mister?, All about a Negro assaulting a white girl--read about it--Tribune, Mister?."

And so thousands of people buy the Tribune and scan its pages for the article about the alleged assault. They find it tucked away in a small space on one of the inside pages of the paper. In the twinkling of an eye, a part of Tulsa is changed from the happy, joyous, care-free to looks of grim determination.

It is also the commencement season and the streets of the city are filled all day long with happy, innocent, care-free graduates, colored and white, walking proudly in their caps and gowns. The colored graduates are dreaming, building air-castles and, in their waking dreams, they see themselves rising, mounting higher and higher up the ladder of recognition and renown. But, alas', their dreams are like Ponsi's financial bubbles.

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The day wears on, and the shadows of evening lengthen and soon darkness comes on apace. Now it is night and all law abiding citizens, except those attending some commencement program or detained on business in shop or office, are at home. Possibly a few are out with their families for a drive in the cool of the night. The night grows a little older and a few shots are heard--in the distance. One first thinks its fire signals. The night grows older and the shooting increases and becomes less intermittent. One becomes, by the peculiar working of one's mind, slightly disturbed and distressed. One's mind goes back to that news article about that purported assault, and then still farther back--about a month--to the lynching of that white man in West Tulsa. (This white man was taken from the Tulsa County jail by a mob and hung, I believe, to a telephone pole.) My mind becomes thoroughly aroused.

I had had an unusually hard day of it at court and in my office. By noon, I had finished the trial of a land case that was begun two days before. I had spent the entire afternoon briefing a law suit docketed for trial the following week, and so, I retired rather early. But the shooting continued. I arose, dressed and went to the 'phone to call the sheriff's office to find out the trouble. I could not make connection. The next thought was my office and to it I hastened. Upon reaching Greenwood Avenue, the same street upon which my office was then, and is now, located, I

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found the street congested with humanity and vehicles of all kinds and descriptions. Everybody, except the business men, was running about excitedly. The business men remained in their places of business, looking distressed and deeply concerned. Pushing and elbowing my way through the crowd, I finally reached my office. Again I tried to call the sheriff's office and again I failed to get connection. I was puzzled. I of course knew that there was trouble--that a race riot--or race war, as it afterward proved to be--was in the making and that we would soon be in the midst of a great catastrophe if something was not done at once to avert it. I went down upon the streets and tried to get the heads and tails of things. I found no one in any mood to talk with me about the trouble, except a few of the business men and they could tell me nothing and knew nothing that they could do or assist me in doing. We were not organized for such an emergency. No one could reach the sheriff's office and no one knew where he was. I started to town; but did not get very far before I concluded that such a move was both foolish and suicidal. I could do neither myself, nor anybody else any good by attempting such a course. So, after remaining on the streets for an hour or more, I returned to my room. I slipped out of my top shirt and lay down and tried to think--sleeping was out of the question. I soliloquized, "Here I am, a peaceable and law-a-

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bidding citizen, I have harmed no one--just like thousands of others of my race here--and yet I cannot now walk the street, upon a peaceful mission, in safety." This seemed hard to me. You see, I had never been in a mob before. Up to then, I knew absolutely nothing about mob-psychology. Since becoming a man, I have always been kept busy and never had had an occasion to study the mob-spirit. I had thought, foolishly, I suppose, that a peaceable, law abiding citizen could go wherever he had business--upon the streets. I was rudely disillusioned.

About mid-night, I arose and went to the north porch on the second floor of my hotel and, looking in a north-westerly direction, I saw the top of stand-pipe hill literally lighted up by the blazes that came from the throats of machine guns, and I could hear bullets whizzing and cutting the air. There was shooting now in every direction, and the sounds that came from the thousands and thousands of guns were deafening.

When the eastern sky redened, announcing the approach of day, I was still standing on that upper porch thinking--thinking--thinking. And how different was the coming of this day from that of the day before. Now,



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one could see no stream of laborers passing down Greenwood Avenue, happy and care-free as on the morn before; no birds warbled their sweet songs, or, if they did, their voices were hushed in the din of battle. The grass was wet again with the morning dew and the sun rose again to travel the path known to his feet since time began, but neither had any charm on that morning for the sons of Ham in Tulsa.

I went from the front porch into the bath room and washed my face, and thereafter went into my room and dressed. I left the building for my office. As I reached the side-walk a shrill whistle sounded from the direction of stand-pipe hill. And then, immediately thereafter, five thousand feet, it seemed, were heard descending that hill in my direction. On they rushed, whooping to the top of their voices like so many cow-boys, and firing their guns every step they took. I quickened my pace and, cutting across vacant lots and dodging behind buildings, I finally reached Frankfort Place, about the middle of the three hundred block. Just as I emerged upon the street, I came face to face with a fine looking young man, with soldiery bearing, leading an elderly woman and with a young lady following close behind. I knew mother Ross, but at the time did not recognize the other two.

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"Why,hello Lawyer Franklin",the young man spoke between clenched teeth.His face was grim and bore a determined look and his eyes sparkled and flashed defiance.He continued,huridly,"I have not seen you since you delivered that memorable address at Bufaula in October,1917.How different is this occasion of our meeting from that.Then we were all filled with patriotism--love of country--and-standing erect--were recognized as the equal of our other fellow men.Now,now",he continued choking with rage,"we, after going through hell once for our country--now,I say,we are chased, driven and hunted as wild,hateful,dangerous things."

"What in the world,Hoss--where have you been and where are you going",I hurried to ask him.For I now recognized both the soldier and his wife,the young lady with him and his mother.

"Just some more of my wanderlust,I suppose",he answered hurriedly,"I have been out of the State until this morning.Yesterday I became restless. Something within me told me that all was not well at home.I followed my mind.I reached Tulsa not more than one hour ago.How I got through the mountain of white men on the other side of the city,will always be a miracle to me.Judge,we are literally surrounded.I reached Greenwood and,luckily for me,I found my mother and my wife wandering about the street,panic

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stricken. In terror, they had fled from home. I'm going back home to defend it or die in the attempt." And, without another word, he grabbed his aged mother in his arms and fled on toward his home.

When young Ross and his family left me, I pushed on toward my office. On the way, I thought of those stirring words of our war president, "We must fight to make the world safe for democracy". I repeated those words aloud and they sounded like hollow-mockery. They seemed to have rattled like those dry bones in the valley, spoken of in the scriptures. I thought too of that other saying found in the scriptures, "He saved others; but himself he cannot save." That saying seemed so applicable to my race. We had saved others any number of times. We had saved, or helped mightily to--save, this nation from the enemy upon countless battle fields. And now, young Ross and I and the whole race were unable to save ourselves. The thought was bitter--it chided me and made me feel ashamed. Then my face burned with anger. But what could I do? I was unarmed--did not have even a pocket knife. I was not looking for such as was happening all around me and was therefore unprepared. My thought reverted to Ross again and my bosom swelled with pride and hope for the Race. Here was one young man who regarded it as a solemn duty to die, if needs be, in the defense of his home--for the protection of his fire-side. There must be others like him who think to

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lose their lives in such undertaking they shall find them again in greater abundance. Surely any man who fights to protect his home and fire-side from pollution and desecration of barbarians and infidels is doing the will of the Master.

I reached my office in safety; but I knew that that safety would be short-lived. I now knew the mob-spirit. I knew too that government and law and order had broken down. I knew that mob law had been substituted in all its fiendishness and barbarity. I knew that the mobbiest cared nothing about the written law and the constitution and I also now knew that he had neither the patience nor the intelligence to distinguish between the good and the bad, the law abiding and the lawless in my race. From my office window, I could see planes circling in mid-air. They grew in number and hummed, darted and dipped low. I could hear something like hail falling upon the top of my office building. Down East Archer, I saw the old Mid-Way hotel on fire, burning from its top, and then another and another and another building began to burn from the top. "What, an attack from the air too?" I asked myself. Luxuriant flames roared and belched and licked their forked tongues in the air. Smoke ascended the sky in thick, black volumes and amid it all, the

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planes--now a dozen or more in number--still hummed and darted here and there with the agility of natural birds of the air. Then a filling station farther down East Archer caught on fire from the top. I feared now an explosion and decided to try and move to safer quarters. I came out of my office, locked the door and descended to the foot of the steps. The side-walks were **literally** covered with burning turpentine balls. I knew all too well where they came from and I knew all too well why every burning building first caught from the top. I paused and waited for an opportune time to escape. "Where, oh where is our splendid fire department with its half dozen stations?", I asked myself. "Is the city in conspiracy with the mob?", I again asked myself. As I stood there in contemplation of these and other gruesome facts, I saw two sights that will live in my memory to my dying days. One was a woman on the opposite side of the street. She was traveling south, -hair disentangled and disheveled--in the very path of whizzing bullets. She was calling wildly to a little tot that, a few moments before, had dashed in panic before her and turned off Greenwood on Archer at the corner. I hollered to her, "Turn back woman, for God's sake turn back. You will be mown down". Never turning her head, she answered, as she hurried on, "I must follow my child". And so she did follow her child and not a bul-

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let touched her although they literally rained down the street. This brave self-denying mother lives today here in Tulsa and with her that tot--now a splendid young lady--whom she risked her life to save. The other sight was occasioned by the Piro building catching on fire from the top. (This was a frame building then). The fire dislodged those in the building--a woman, two children and three men. They emerged in wild confusion and came on in my direction. The little children--they were both girls--out ran the others and passed the place where I was standing with the speed of the wind. The woman ran across the street and into the foot of the steps of my office building--right where I was standing--and fell upon her knees and commenced to pray, totally oblivious of my presence. I don't think she ever saw me. And such a prayer'--She asked God to save her and her children from whom she had just been separated. This prayer was uttered over and over. I am unable to say whether that prayer was answered or not. I have lived in Tulsa continuously ever since that memorable morning, but I have never seen that woman since. I know I would know her if I were to meet her, even today. The three men--one of whom lugged a heavy trunk on his shoulder--were all killed as they were crossing the street--killed before my very eyes. The

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man who carried the trunk was very old. Likely, he had in that trunk many things of great value (Negroes in Tulsa then were as a rule, very wealthy) and thought as much of the contents thereof as he did of his own life. When the old man was hit--no doubt by a dozen bullets--he dropped his burden and shrieked and fell sprawling upon the hard paved street. Blood gushed from every wound and ran down the street. I turned my head from the scene.

From every direction, except the North, we were surrounded, and the mob was closing in upon me. Across the street, directly in front of me, stood the Gurley Building, property of a very wealthy and--up to that time--a very influential, colored man. I heard shots fired from behind that building and heard angry and profane voices, saying "Come out of there, Gurley--you black s--c--a--b." I saw an opening to move on and so I sped North, out Greenwood Avenue. About one hundred yards on the way out, I was joined by I. H. Spears, another colored attorney and we proceeded on together. I thought that maybe I could make it back to my hotel and find a gun of some sort there--in some of those rooms. At the intersection of North Greenwood and East Easton--the point at which I intended to turn west--I looked across to my left and there, in stone's cast, stood the Ross residence--burning from the top. On the front porch stood Mother Ross, with outstretched and

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trembling hands, begging a mob that was approaching from the northwest to spare her home and family (Evidently she had not then discovered her house on fire). From within I could hear the report of some high-powered rifles. I remembered the words of young Ross that morning and knew that he was making good his threat. Every time there was a report of a gun from within, one of the members of the mob would fall, never to rise again. I somehow, felt happy. I cannot explain that feeling. I never felt that way--before nor since. I looked North and directly in front of us stood a thousand boys, it seemed, with guns pointed at our heads. They commanded us to "right about face". Then one half starved ruffian came forward to search us. Finding no weapon, he started to take my money. At this I balked. This was the last straw. I had endured about all I could and decided then and there to die, if necessary before I would be robbed by that bunch of hungry out-laws. I have always thanked my God that none of the other members of my family were in the city. My wife and three children were down on the farm--one hundred miles away--and my oldest child--a daughter--was in college in Tennessee. The next day, I got a chance to route her away from Tulsa on her trip from school.



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The ruffians marched us back down Greenwood to First Street, thence on First Street to Main Street, thence on Main Street to Brady Street and thence on Brady Street to convention hall. You see, this was one of the many places of detention, refuge or whatever you wish to call it, to which my Race was taken when dislodged from its home. Here, those who cared to accept the fare, the people were fed and watered like so many cattle by the benefactors(?) who had allowed the mob to take their government away from them and trample their laws and constitution under their unhallowed and barbarous feet. Here, I saw the colored lady of refinement, culture and good breeding placed on an absolute equality with the prostitute and street walker of the Race. Here, I saw some of the fine matrons of the Race wrapped only in their night gowns, having been ejected from their homes so hurriedly until they did not even have time to dress. Here, I saw a mother, in a dark corner of that mammoth building, giving birth--premature birth--to a babe and I heard its husky cries, for the first time, amid this strange, unseemly and wicked surrounding. And from sun rise to sun set, I passed through scenes and experiences that baffle description. They were like unto--if not worse than--The Last Days of Pompeii, as described by Bulwer Lytton. During that

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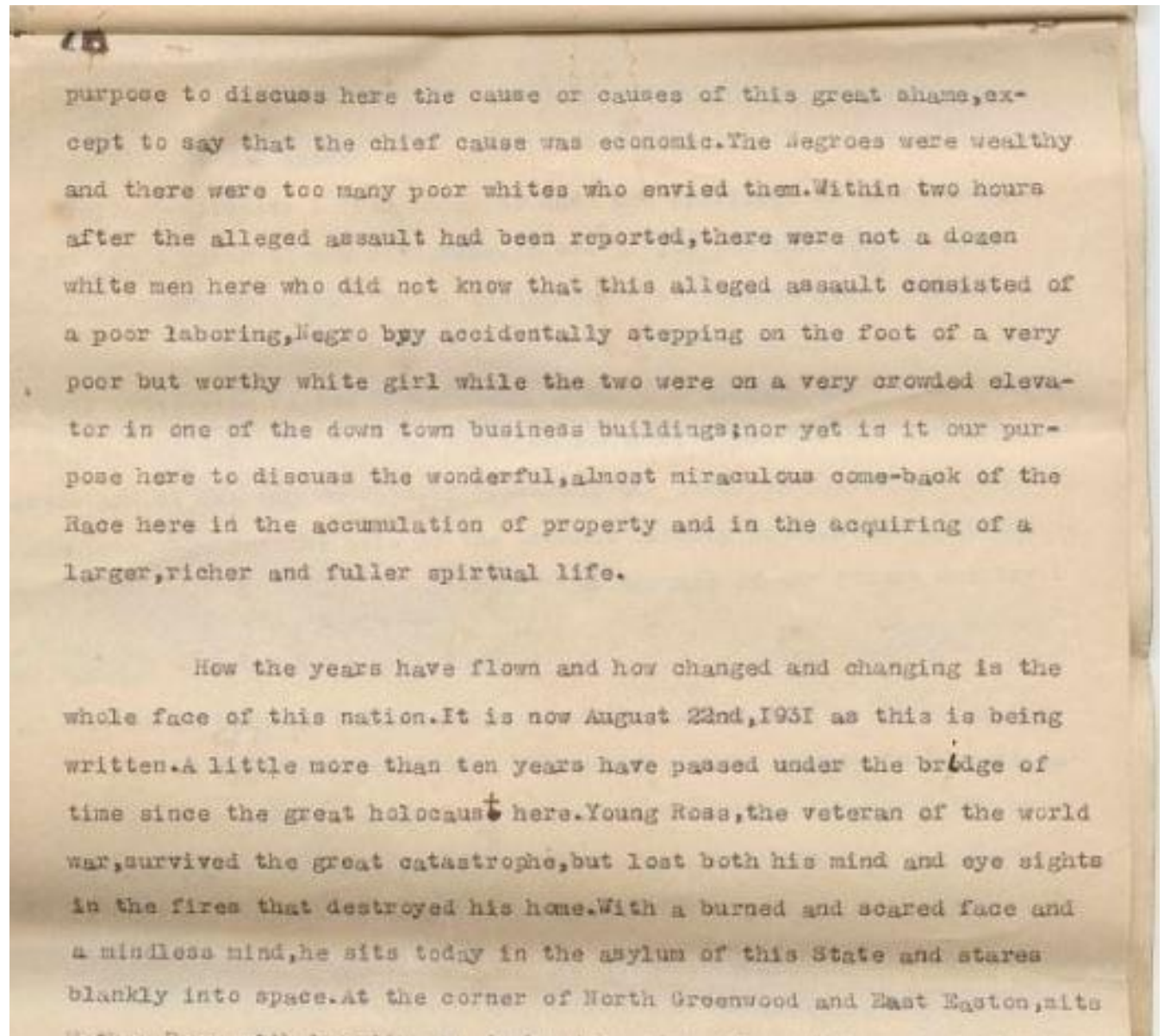
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bloody day, I lived a thousand years, in the spirit, ~~at~~ least. I lived the whole experiences of the Race; the experiences of royal ancestry beyond the sea; experiences of the slave ships on their first voyage to America with their human cargo; experiences of American slavery and its concomitant evils; experiences of loyalty and devotion of the Race to this nation and its flag in war and in peace; and I thought of Ross back yonder, out yonder, in his last stand, no doubt, for the protection of home and fire side and of old Mother Ross left homeless in the even-tide of her life. I thought of the place the preachers call hell and wondered seriously if there was such a mystical place--It appeared, in this surrounding--that the only hell was the hell on this earth, such as the Race was then passing through.

For fully forty eight hours, the fires raged and burned everything in its path and it left nothing but ashes and burned safes and trunks and the like where once stood beautiful homes and business houses. And so proud, rich, black Tulsa was destroyed by fire--that is its buildings and property; but its spirit was neither killed nor daunted. It is however not within the purpose of this true story to dwell on this; nor is it our

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Mother Rose with her tin cup in hand, begging alms of the passers-by. They are nearly all new comers and have no knowledge of her tragic past, hence they pay her little attention. Young Mrs. Rose is working and doing the best she can to carry on in these times of depression. She divides her visits between her mother-in-law and her husband at the asylum. Of course, he has not the slightest recollection of her or of his mother. All yesteryears are only blank pieces of paper to him. He cannot remember one thing in the living, breathing, throbbing present.

*B. C. Franklin*  
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