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Historian digs for stories of black settlement and its massacre

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Last September, historian Marvin Dunn and a partner quietly purchased five acres of land in Rosewood, a black, self-made settlement that perished in a fury of hate more than eight decades ago.

The Rosewood massacre unfolded in a burst of racial violence that stretched through the first week of 1923. By its end, six blacks and two whites were dead -- although scholars and historians insist such numbers are woefully low -- and Rosewood was abandoned in ashes, its wretched, final chapter buried.

Now, the state of Florida has awarded Dunn's Miami-based community organization a grant to conduct an archaeological survey of the site. He believes he is the first black to buy land in Rosewood, 40 miles southwest of Gainesville, since it burned.

"It's such a powerful story, this black town and its success and its horrific end," says Dunn, a retired Florida International University professor. "The place and its history draw you in."

Dunn expects to find the bones of a rich 19th century culture -- artifacts, pottery and utensils, and traces of the Seaboard Air Line Railway and the depot that had served as a community center before becoming an escape route for some residents during the riots.

Whatever bits of Rosewood that researchers unearth will form the foundation of an exhibition to be based in South Florida. Dunn also hopes to reconstruct the depot.

WHAT USED TO BE

"This is where they would go to sell turnips and tomatoes and eggs. This is where friends would hang until the train's arrival, which ended the night," said Dunn, who has produced a documentary, *Remembering Rosewood*. "This is where the town came together."

An empty, low-lying wooded patch of oaks, cedar and scrub, Dunn's property lies along a dirt road on the eastern end of Rosewood.

"The Rosewood story is an important part of our history," Dunn said. "I didn't want a house to be built on the land and we lose its historical significance."

First settled in 1845, Rosewood became home to about 100 blacks who had migrated from the

Carolinas, lured by solid work at the lumber mills. For two decades, it prospered.

Residents had a school, three churches, turpentine and sugar-cane mills, a Masonic hall, the Rosewood Stars baseball team, and two general stores, one white-owned.

Families owned their land and livestock and made a decent living hunting, fishing and working at the mills.

On New Year's Day in 1923, a white woman accused an unnamed black man of assaulting her. In retaliation, white vigilantes attacked the residents of Rosewood. The town was looted and, ultimately, torched. Some residents fought back; some escaped on a train headed to Gainesville. Others fled into the woods.

Rosewood never really recovered. Over the years, a smattering of whites moved back into the area, but it never developed commercially.

For some two generations, one of the most extraordinary stories in Florida history remained cloaked in fear and silence until an investigative reporter named Gary Moore discovered the story in the early 1980s, launching Rosewood into the national spotlight.

Several years later, Dunn would begin traveling there as he researched Florida's history of racial violence. He has since been back dozens of times and has interviewed several of the survivors.

PRESERVING THE PAST

In 1994, the Florida Legislature passed a \$2.1 million compensation bill, acknowledging neglect in protecting Rosewood's black residents during the massacre. Three years later, director John Singleton made a film about the tragedy.

In 2004, the state declared Rosewood a Florida Heritage Landmark, and a historical marker now stands on State Road 24 in front of the only house that survived the riots.

Levy County records show that Dunn and his friend James Cornett, who is the CEO of a music park in Live Oak and is the majority owner, paid \$44,000 for the land they bought.

Then the Florida Division of Historical Resources awarded Dunn's Roots in the City organization a grant of almost \$50,000 to do research and conduct the archaeological survey. Dunn is working with a team from the University of Florida's Department of Anthropology.

``We are trying to dig out the truth," Cornett says.

Already, a swath of scrub has been cleared, and the team has located the three-foot berm where the railroad tracks once lay.

``The depot tells the best part of the story," Dunn said. It sat right behind the house of a white family that, at great danger, hid black women and children from the rioters and helped them escape by train.

``This is one part of the story that has not been given fair shrift," Dunn said. ``All of the whites in

the area did not support what was going on."

James Davidson, the UF assistant professor of anthropology leading the survey, said the researchers will create a grid and conduct shovel tests. They expect to find objects just below the surface.

The year-long project would be Rosewood's first.

"From the time of the destruction to now, no one has gone in and scientifically examined the grounds," Davidson said. "If we find [the depot] and other objects, it will give us some sense of the flavor of the time. It will provide some context of life *before* Rosewood was ruined."

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