

The Ocoee Massacre of 1920:

An Examination of Collective Memory of Racial Violence in America

Emily Evans

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Dr. Bory

The Ocoee Massacre of 1920 was a tragic event killing an unknown number of black citizens in Central Florida, which has been a changing subject of examination by journalists and academics for a century. Like all historical events, accounts from the time of the event can be starkly different from current interpretations. Some facts are agreed upon by most sources.¹ The massacre occurred on Election Day in retaliation to black voters, specifically Mose Norman, showing up to the polls. Norman was refused the right to vote, consulted a lawyer in Orlando, and returned, demanding this right. Norman was assaulted by poll workers. A white mob surrounded the house of July Perry, another black voter who sheltered Norman, which led to the shooting of two white men. Perry was lynched. A white mob burned down churches and houses in predominantly black sectors of Ocoee. Every black family in Ocoee fled within a week. However, there are variations in details of this story: Norman's possible use of a gun, Norman's voter registration, and the characterization of black and white individuals. The complicated nature of this story combined with a lack of modern-day discussion of it results in complex history.

Regardless of the details of this event, it was a mass lynching, one of many in the United States, that is not often discussed. I live 15 miles from Ocoee, and I never heard of the event before visiting the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. No classes I took in public school in Florida mentioned it, leaving the event relatively forgotten to many people. Our collective memory of racial violence is distorted; collective memory, in this

¹ Carlee Hoffman, and Claire Strom, "A Perfect Storm: The Ocoee Riot of 1920." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (2014): 25-43. Accessed April 3, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/43487653, 25-26.

Hurston, Zora Neale, and Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor. "The Ocoee Riot." *Essence*; New York. New York, United States, New York: Essence Communications, Inc., February 1989. 130

Bond, Bill. "FIERY BATTLE SMOLDERS IN CITY'S PAST." *OrlandoSentinel.com*, 1986. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-1986-09-07-0250220288-story.html>.

case, refers to the understanding of history by a majority of people and discussions it promotes and discourages. The United States education system influences collective memory, and often excludes large swaths of African-American history. Due to this distorted memory, massive lynchings, like the Ocoee Massacre, are seen as an event of the past, and many Americans believe we have moved beyond the racially-fueled violence of the Jim Crow Era. So how, today, can we still see mass acts of racial violence, like the 2015 shooting in the Charleston Church? In June of 2015, Dylann Roof went to Emanuel's fellowship hall during a Bible study and proceeded to repeatedly shoot at attendees of the predominantly black church.² His motivations for this event are deeply tied to motivations for racial violence of the past. However, our collective memory in the United States does not recognize the connection between racial violence of the past and present. The memory of racial violence, specifically in the Jim Crow era, is inaccurate and forgotten in America due to a lack of connection to and awareness of complex historical events.

Reports by journalists and scholars contain slightly differing depictions of the event and its motivations. One item of discussion was whether Norman was registered to vote. Bill Bond, a journalist in Orlando, wrote in 1980 that Norman was not registered to vote since he did not pay the poll tax.³ Bond gives no source for this claim other than FBI files, which were based on local election records. However, Hoffman and Strom, a graduate and professor of Rollins college, respectively, said the local newspaper reported "seventy-eight blacks were registered to vote, whereas the ledgers list only three."⁴ They said this inconsistency in local reporting and official

² Alan Blinder, Kevin Sack, "Dylann Roof Is Sentenced to Death in Charleston Church Massacre," *New York Times*, January 10, 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/10/us/dylann-roof-trial-charleston.html>

³ Bond *FIERY BATTLE*

⁴ Hoffman, Strom *A Perfect Storm* 27

records was due to tampering with the local election records before the lynching was investigated, making it seem as if Norman was not actually registered to vote. Zora Neale Hurston, a writer born in Florida, said Norman met with “Mr. Cheney, a well-known lawyer... [who said] the men who were interfering with the voting were doing so illegally,” since Norman was registered to vote.⁵ Hoffman and Strom confirm this fact, although Bond does not mention it.⁶ While Hurston, Hoffman, and Strom agree Norman was likely registered to vote and local records were inaccurate, Bond claims that Norman was not registered to vote.

In addition, the characterization of Norman and the mob differs between these sources. Bond states Norman brought a shotgun to the polls, although this fact was not confirmed.⁷ Hoffman and Strom say that could be the case, but some witnesses said “white citizens of Ocoee searched Norman’s car and found the gun,” and he did not bring it to confront the poll workers.⁸ Hurston confirmed, after Norman parked and left his car to go to the polls, “some of the disorderly whites... searched [the car] and found a shotgun under the seat.”⁹ Bond also relies mainly on white witnesses for his narrative of the event, as he mentions the affidavit of three white men in Ocoee, who called Norman and Perry “troublemakers ‘among their own race, as well as... undesirable citizens as a whole,’” giving weight to the perceived morals of the men.¹⁰ Bond, however, does not report testimonies of black individuals of Ocoee; he also does not mention the man leading the mob, Sam Salisbury, was a member of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Hurston, however, said Norman was a “prosperous farmer and contractor,” and the white mob

⁵ Hurston, Smart-Grosvener *The Ocoee Riot* 130

⁶ Hoffman, Strom *A Perfect Storm* 25

⁷ Bond *FIERY BATTLE*

⁸ Hoffman, Strom *A Perfect Storm* 25

⁹ Hurston, Smart-Grosvener *The Ocoee Riot* 130

¹⁰ Bond *FIERY BATTLE*

was angry because he stood up for himself.¹¹ Hoffman and Strom also portrayed Perry and Norman as prosperous – they owned land - and said much of the white mob’s anger stemmed from jealousy of their success.¹² Bond’s portrayal of Norman makes him appear as an aggressive, violent man, whereas Hoffman, Strom, and Hurston use a variety of to describe Norman, including those that depict him as a successful, rational person.

Lastly, one factor was described differently by all three sources: the white mob that burned buildings, killed Perry, and drove black families out of Ocoee. Bond’s article does not mention the KKK once as an entity that took part in the massacre; this brings into question his biases and awareness of the circumstances of the massacre. In fact, Bond calls the group “a dozen or so whites armed with guns and sticks,” downplaying the mob mentality that led to a massive act of racist violence.¹³ Hoffman and Strom highlight a new branch of the KKK sprung up in 1920, which a majority of local law enforcement belonged to.¹⁴ They do not claim every individual in the mob was part of the KKK, but do acknowledge that the man who led it, Sam Salisbury, was a member of the KKK.¹⁵ Hurston states that the mob was primarily white citizens of Winter Garden, a nearby town; she said that they were “disorderly and unmanageable” before going to beat Norman.¹⁶ Bond avoids using language that actively condemns the white mob’s character, whereas Hoffman, Strom, and Hurston do not depict them as kindly. The inconsistencies of this historical narrative and its perception over time create complexity in its discourse, but the origins of these inconsistencies are important in our understanding of the

¹¹ Hurston, Smart-Grosvener *The Ocoee Riot* 130

¹² Hoffman, Strom *A Perfect Storm* 34

¹³ Bond *FIERY BATTLE*

¹⁴ Hoffman, Strom *A Perfect Storm* 41

¹⁵ Hoffman, Strom *A Perfect Storm* 26

¹⁶ Hurston, Smart-Grosvener *The Ocoee Riot* 130

event. The depictions in each of these works shaped collective memory of the incident, although Bond's article was likely the source that most people read, as it was in a local, trusted newspaper using government documents as source material; since Bond's article was more accessible to the public, his depiction of the event likely impacted collective memory greatly.

Joshua Inwood and Derek Alderman, two professors of geography, discuss the memory of racial violence in America. They focus on Karen Till's concept of "memory work," which requires members of society to recognize and "take responsibility for the failures of the democratic state and its violence," an idea that allows for reconciliation of a nation's mistakes.¹⁷ They also examine why nations do not often acknowledge upsetting history, citing "public avoidance of the traumatic memories."¹⁸ Inwood and Alderman criticize the removal of Confederate symbols from public places, if that removal does not spark a discussion; they believe that removal of these symbols is a step in the right direction, but is practically useless if we, in the United States, avoid discourse about the history of racial violence. Essentially, Inwood and Alderman believe that the nation has not done enough to confront the racial violence of the past because it is a complicated, upsetting subject. Jennie Lightweis-Goff, a professor who specialized in racial violence and literature, believes that white people are mildly aware of inequalities, but not in a way that greatly impacts the perception and discussion of racial violence. She also argues that many white individuals "acknowledge and declaim their whiteness," not to foster discourse about racial inequalities in the United States, but to

¹⁷ Inwood, Joshua F.J., and Alderman, Derek. "Taking Down the Flag Is Just a Start: Toward the Memory-Work of Racial Reconciliation in White Supremacist America." *Southeastern Geographer* 56, no. 1 (2016): 9-15. Accessed April 3, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/26233766. 10

¹⁸ Inwood, Alderman *Taking Down the Flag* 11

demonstration a self-serving, manufactured self-awareness.¹⁹ Inwood, Alderman, and Lightweis-Goff all argue that currently, many white people in the United States lack proper understanding and discourse of racial violence.

Acts of racially motivated violence still occur today because we do not properly discuss the racist ideologies of the past that continue to impact our present. While different details complicate the narrative, it was an event that was definitively motivated by racist ideology. Mose Norman was successful in Ocoee, among other black individuals, which was a “threat to the traditional structure of white dominance.”²⁰ In addition, the KKK was powerful in Florida at the time. There is no doubt that this massacre was a result of an attempt to stifle black political involvement and retain white political control. However, this event, like countless other lynchings, is not widely discussed; it is not taught in school, and therefore unknown to many people. Racially motivated violence is largely forgotten by the public, leading to a misunderstanding of racial violence today. Many people were shocked at Dylann Roof’s motivations for killing nine innocent black people. To many, it seemed random, unpredictable, and irregular; some blame these killings solely on Roof’s mental health. Roof’s mental health likely had something to do with his actions, but they were still predicated on racist ideals that are apparent in America’s past. Now, acts of violence like this are absolutely devastating to the communities surrounding them and the nation; since they do not occur every day, they are often seen as abnormal, described as “an outburst of extremist violence that shocked the nation.”²¹

¹⁹ Lightweis-Goff, Jennie. “Charleston is a Small Place” in *Literature and Tourism in a Season of Horror*: 57-69. Accessed April 21, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26484084>

²⁰ Hoffman, Strom *A Perfect Storm* 28

²¹ Alan Blinder, Kevin Sack, “Dylann Roof Is Sentenced to Death in Charleston Church Massacre,” *New York Times*, January 10, 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/10/us/dylann-roof-trial-charleston.html>

However, the motivations for this act of racial violence are deeply connected to racial violence of the past – the motivations of racial violence are unfortunately all too normal in the United States. Our collective remembrance of United States history does not recognize the lynchings of the past that connect to the modern acts of violence. The memory of racial violence, specifically lynchings, is inaccurate and forgotten in America due to a lack of connection to and awareness of historical events, biases in reporting on racial violence, and the maintenance of the status quo.

An examination of the Ocoee Massacre and the Charleston shooting yields a strikingly similar racist ideology. Roof told the victims of the church that he was shooting because “you blacks are killing white people on the streets every day and raping white women everyday.”²² This perceived threat that Roof imagined is similar to the motivations of the Ocoee Massacre; local white families felt “threatened” by black prosperity coupled with increasing political involvement.²³ It also resembles the Rosewood Massacre of 1923, another mass lynching in Florida, in which a white woman alleged that a black man raped her; this led to mob violence that killed at least eight people and burned down the predominantly black town.²⁴ White people in certain communities fearing and stereotyping black men as “dangerous,” with no evidence of assault, is unfortunately a common trend in history. In these situations, including the Ocoee and Rosewood Massacres, angry white mobs formed and resolved their fears, rooted in racism, with major acts of violence, ensuring that black people fled the towns. Roof holds a similar irrational and racist fear. Even just the start of his statement, “you blacks,” is incredibly inflammatory and prejudiced, reflecting a hateful ideology buried in America’s past. His use of “you” is a direct

²² Blinder, *Dylann Roof is Sentenced*

²³ Hoffman, Strom *A Perfect Storm* 30

²⁴ Dye, R. Thomas. "Rosewood, Florida: The Destruction of an African American Community." *The Historian* 58, no. 3 (1996): 605-22. Accessed April 22, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/24449436. 608

attack on the innocent people he shot. To Roof, the act of being black warranted retaliation. His beliefs represent the dangerous and racist ideologies that fester in the United States. To end this racist ignorance and hate, ideologies of the past need to be acknowledged and discussed; without recognition of the dangers of racist ideologies of the past, there will continue to be tragic incidents of racial violence in the future.

The lack of recognition and understanding of historical racial violence is due, in part, to our education system not promoting awareness of and discourse about racism in the past and present. For example, many schools teach students that the Civil War was fought on the basis of states' rights, rather than over slavery; the president of the NAACP in Texas said that "'kinder' way to describe the war's origin masks racism."²⁵ Hiding history from students, even at a young age, can create a large misunderstanding of racism in America, in its roots and its legacy. A fundamental misunderstanding of the Civil War, a turning point in American history, creates a misunderstanding of modern racial tensions and violence. Since students are not taught the underlying racist ideologies – those of white supremacy and black inferiority that began with slavery - there is minimal discourse about the links between Roof's shooting and earlier lynchings, like the Ocoee Massacre. Inwood and Alderman claim that the Charleston shooting showed the general public ignores "the connections between the material realities of white supremacy and its grounding in historical memory."²⁶ Our education system often fails, in that it does not connect racism experienced today to its roots in American history, creating ignorance and a tainted collective memory. This does not yield productive discourse, holding the nation

²⁵ Associated Press, "How is the Civil War taught in school? Depends on where you live." *The Florida Times Union*, August 22, 2017.
<https://www.jacksonville.com/news/national/2017-08-22/how-civil-war-taught-school-depends-where-you-live>

²⁶ Inwood, Alderman *Taking Down the Flag* 9

back from reconciling our racist past with acts of racist violence today. The collective memory of racism in the United States is distorted by a lack of understanding of our past and its relation to our present.

However, it is possible for the general population to link historical events to one another; historical racial violence should be no different. It's obvious to most people, for example, how the bombing of Pearl Harbor led to America's entry into World War II, or currently, how the COVID-19 pandemic is leading to a recession. These historical relationships are easy for most people to understand, as they are major events. However, in America, we lack connections between historical and modern racial violence. There is a connection between the ideologies of lynchings and racial discrimination of the past to recent events, like the Charleston shooting, but it is often not observed. This may be because the lynchings of the past were often small and scattered; however, they happened on a large scale and warrant discourse. Also, this phenomenon of not making a historical connection is due to a lack of teaching it in schools. Students do not learn about many lynchings, and therefore, there is no proper discourse about racial violence. Since acts of racial violence are not taught or discussed, many Americans lack an understanding of their connection to racial violence today.

The recognition of the impact racial terror has had on the United States is imperative to collectively move forward as a nation. To ignore these acts of the past, our collective memory is tainted, and history is bound to repeat in the future. The general public needs to learn about the history surrounding racial violence and lynchings in schools so we can recognize the origins of current acts of violence. Understanding the origins of these acts, which stem from slavery and the Jim Crow Era, can help prevent racist ideology from festering in our future.

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