

Foreword

By the time I'd reached fourth grade, the lesson I dreaded most was our history unit on slavery.

I attended a predominantly white school in a predominantly white Missouri town, and more often than not, I felt like I fit in well enough. Some people went out of their way to point out my differences, like my highly textured hair that would curl and thicken at the scalp when my chemical relaxer started to grow out. Or they'd hold their arm up to mine when they'd gotten a particularly good tan, showing me that they were “almost as dark” as me. There were other microaggressions, of course—way too many to name here. It was southwest Missouri, and it was the 1980s. Racial sensitivity wasn't high on most people's list of priorities.

History class felt uninspired and repetitive for much of the

year, but the few days we spent learning about Black Americans were excruciating. I was embarrassed when our teachers talked about the African people who'd been stolen from their continent and brought to the United States to be part of a chattel slavery system; I didn't like the way both the teachers and the textbooks talked about enslaved people as if they weren't actual human beings with hopes and dreams and emotions and profound mental strength. I also didn't like that heads automatically swiveled to find me, to see how I was reacting to the lesson because I was one of the only Black people they'd ever met in their entire lives.

And, in retrospect, I hated that the room was uncomfortably silent during the lesson; that nobody asked why we never learned about anyone apart from basic biographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman; that no actual countries in Africa were ever named, which is likely why so many Americans still think Africa is a country rather than a continent; and that the lesson never explicitly stated how much the violent, genocidal foundation of this country shaped everything about how our nation operates today.

Perhaps the most insulting part about the units covering centuries of Black history is that they were so brief—we spent maybe a week on the topic, if that. Reconstruction was never explained in a meaningful way. The civil rights lesson was, again, focused on sanitized versions of two people: Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I never came across the names of voting rights activists Fannie Lou Hamer or Stokely Carmichael or John Lewis in our textbooks. And I can't remember

one mention of Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to Congress, as well as the first woman *and* Black woman to run for a major political party's nomination for president of the United States.

The fact that there was no separate, detailed lesson about the Trail of Tears, which ran *right through our hometown*, was particularly egregious.

I blame the history texts more than my individual teachers. For the most part, I know the curriculum was not up to them. And I know that some of them, all white women and men, were inherently uncomfortable teaching lessons about such traumatic times in our country's history. But all these years later, after meeting so many dedicated, progressive, and passionate educators around the country, I have to wonder: Why didn't just one of my teachers care enough to go off script? To sit in their discomfort so we could have honest conversations about our past? To not only challenge us to learn more but to challenge themselves as well?

When you are a Black person from Missouri, most people assume you grew up in St. Louis, which is nearly 50 percent Black. Or maybe Kansas City, with a population that's just under 30 percent African American. I've shocked many people when I tell them that I'm from Springfield, the third-largest city in the state, whose nickname is the Queen City of the Ozarks. (*City* is a generous word. When I was growing up, Springfield felt more like a big town, and even in 2019, the population was just over 167,000.) Springfield was about 3 percent Black during my childhood and teenage years, in the 1980s and '90s, and the

demographics haven't changed much since then. I didn't know about percentages when I was younger, but I did know that besides the Black church my family and I attended each week, I seldom saw other Black people outside my home.

Just a few weeks after I started second grade, my parents moved my brother and me to the south side of town, which was almost exclusively white. I'll never forget walking into my new classroom; every set of eyes that stared back at me came from a white face. The principal was white, my teachers were white, and for the majority of my time in elementary school, I was the only Black girl in my class. Junior high seemed a bit more promising; there were, at least, a handful of Black kids in my seventh-grade class. But people moved away or went to different schools, and that number didn't increase by much in high school.

It never occurred to me to wonder *why* the town was so white. It just was. But the older I got, I did start to wonder why my parents had chosen to live there. Sure, Springfield was affordable. They'd bought their first house together there, renovated part of it, and then bought their second home when I was seven years old. But why Springfield in particular?

My parents, who once would have been described as Black people who "pulled themselves up by their bootstraps," had grown up in Jim Crow Arkansas, thirty minutes from the town of Elaine, which, according to the *New York Times*, suffered "one of the worst episodes of racial violence in American history," in 1919. (My mother recently told me that some of our ancestors migrated from Elaine in the decades following the massacre to the town where she grew up, and I have to wonder

if they had been there to see the destruction and violence that took over their town.) My mom and dad grew up in poor farming families; they worked from a young age picking cotton in their parents' fields and shared beds with their many siblings. My mother is one of thirteen kids, my father one of ten.

I was in my twenties before I really comprehended my parents' origin story in the Ozarks. I learned that, after a brief stint in Louisville, Kentucky, my father's job at an electronics company transferred him to Springfield, Missouri, in the early 1970s. And that, once they arrived, they had so much trouble renting an apartment that my father had to ask his white supervisor to cosign the rental application—not because they were so young, but because they were Black. Fifteen years later, when they moved us to the white side of town, we were the first Black family to integrate our solidly middle-class street.

We traveled by car more often than plane, and when we did fly, it was usually out of the tiny airport in Springfield. But, if the price was right, we'd drive the three hours north to fly out of St. Louis or Kansas City. And, sometimes, we'd travel three hours southwest to fly out of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

I don't remember much about the Tulsa of my childhood; I probably didn't see much more than airport terminals, restaurants, and hotels. But when I drove cross-country to and from Los Angeles—twice in my twenties and once in my thirties—I never minded stopping in Oklahoma. Tulsa was a town where, as a young Black woman traveling alone, I was unafraid to stop for snacks or to fill up my gas tank, especially compared to the long line of conservative areas I had to travel through on that route.

Tulsa reminded me of my hometown: primarily white, and not necessarily an ideal place for a Black person to live, but it felt safe. I remember that, when I was a child, my parents had even considered moving to a town just fifty miles from Tulsa, when my father was being courted by an oil company. So it couldn't be worse than Springfield, right?

It wasn't until I was living in Los Angeles that I first read about the 1906 triple lynching in Springfield. Although the complex history of lynching hadn't been discussed in my history classes, either, I was well aware that it was a form of vigilante justice that had historically been used to intimidate and ultimately kill Black people, typically by hanging. On the one hundredth anniversary, my hometown newspaper, the *Springfield News-Leader*, ran a series of articles about the three murdered Black men: Horace B. Duncan, Fred Coker, and Will Allen. Duncan and Coker, coworkers and lifelong friends, had been falsely accused of assault and rape by a white couple and arrested. Once their white employer provided alibis, explaining they'd been at work at the time of the crime, they were set free.

But later that same evening, the white man who'd claimed they assaulted him now accused Duncan of stealing his watch. Both Duncan and Coker were arrested again, and this time, the people of Springfield decided they didn't need to know the truth before they sought their own justice. A mob of up to a thousand white people dragged the two young men from the city jail, hanged them from Gottfried Tower in the center of the public square, and burned their bodies in a fire at the base of the tower. By the end of the violent display, the overall crowd at

the square is estimated to have totaled around three thousand people.

But they weren't done. Drunk with power and high on violence, the mob returned to the city jail, where they found Will Allen—a Black man accused of murdering a white man—still locked in his cell. It wasn't long before he, too, was removed from the jail, given a mock trial, and lynched in the same spot as Coker and Duncan.

The *News-Leader* reported that Mayor-Elect James Blain climbed the tower and told the lynch mob: “Men, you have done enough. You have had your revenge. You [had] better go home.” They finally did, but not before they took pieces of rope, clothing, and bone to remember their gleeful lynching.

The next morning was Easter Sunday.

Before the lynching, about 2,300 Black people lived in Springfield, roughly 10 percent of the town's population. Black Springfieldians were city leaders, doctors, preachers, lawyers, teachers, and skilled tradesmen. They sat on the city council and the school board, held jobs in law enforcement, and owned popular and successful businesses. The largest grocery store in Springfield, Hardrick Bros., was owned by a Black family and carried several specialty items that were impossible to find at other stores in the area. And Walter Majors, a Black man who repaired violins and worked as a bicycle mechanic, built and owned one of the rare horseless buggies in town.

But the lynchings changed everything. Martial law was declared afterward, and a grand jury convened, eventually

finding Duncan and Coker “not guilty of assault.” The jury’s report went on to say that the sheriff had acted accordingly to stop the mob violence, but the jury condemned the police department, which “seemed to have no appreciation of their duties and responsibilities as officers of the law.” And although nearly twenty men were indicted for the lynchings—including a former policeman and individuals associated with the police department—all charges were eventually dropped. This was a clear sign of how Springfield felt about its Black residents—as well as how such racist violence would be handled in the future. The Black community recognized this and left town in droves.

The morning after the lynchings, the *News-Leader* reported that while white people visited the lynching site on their way to and from church “dressed in Easter finery,” Black Springfieldians “were scarce on public streets.” Some still attended church to observe the holiday, but the train station saw record numbers of Black people heading out of town, while others fled in horse-drawn wagons. Those who didn’t have access or means to transportation left on foot. About half the Black population departed in the years following the tragedy; the number declined even more in the following decades.

Like the massacre that would take place in Tulsa fifteen years later, the lynchings in Springfield were spurred by racial tension that had been growing for some time. In 1901, two Black men were arrested for the murder of a white woman in Pierce City, a town fifty miles west of Springfield, by the Oklahoma border; one of the men, William Godley, was lynched. After a mob burned and terrorized the Black neighborhood,

the nearly three hundred Black people who lived in Pierce City left within a day, never returning to their home. In 1903, the Black community of Joplin, another small city in southwest Missouri, was forced out of town when a young Black man named Thomas Gilyard was accused of killing a white police officer and lynched by a mob before any sort of trial could take place.

And Springfield, which had previously served as a refuge for Black people who felt unsafe in nearby towns, began to show signs of the same type of racial intolerance shortly before the three lynchings. In 1904, a Black man rumored to be the biological father of a married white woman's mixed-race child was arrested for attempted assault and burglary. He was eventually sentenced to thirty years in prison but only narrowly avoided being lynched by the woman's husband—a police officer—and hundreds of other white men. The sheriff, sensing there would be an attempt at vigilante justice, had moved him to the jail in the next county over. (The woman's husband, Jesse Brake, was the former policeman indicted in the 1906 lynchings just two years later.) In December 1905, two Black men were arrested—likely with little to no evidence—as suspects in the murder of a local white man. And just a month later, in January 1906, two Black men were similarly arrested for the murder of a white Civil War veteran.

For many years, no one talked about this violence or its long-term effects on the racial diversity of the region. It had been news to me, and I'd been born and raised there, living in Springfield for twenty-two years. But once people learned about

their history, they began to speak up, to seek truth and justice for these unpunished crimes.

In August 2002, amid controversy, the city of Springfield erected a bronze plaque in the square that reads:

ON APRIL 14, 1906, THREE BLACK MEN,
HORACE B. DUNCAN, FRED COKER
AND WILL ALLEN
WERE LYNCHED WITHOUT A TRIAL

I visited the plaque in 2018. It is small—just four inches by twelve inches—and difficult to find, even when you are looking for it. I didn't know it at the time, but 2018 was the same year that Joplin residents memorialized lynching victim Gilyard, with plans to send a jar of soil to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, which acknowledges victims of racial injustice from the nation's past.

A year later, in October 2019, a large crowd gathered in my hometown's square once again, this time to celebrate the dedication of a new historical marker commemorating Duncan, Coker, and Allen. Set on a pedestal, the marker is large, bold, and easy to find.

This history is painful. It angers me. It hurts to see just how many ways my life and my ancestors' lives have been affected by white supremacy. But I am grateful for historians, social justice activists, and politicians who have made it their mission to ensure this history will no longer be buried. I am grateful for educators who continue to do the difficult work of teaching

their students the complicated, sometimes brutal history of this country's past. Because, as I have learned, the fight to remember and acknowledge the shameful parts of our past is just as challenging as many other components of the battle for racial justice.

I still have so much to learn, especially when it comes to Black history. But I no longer dread learning about it. Because, now, I'm not limited to studying one subject over the course of a few days. I can learn about the beautiful parts of my ancestors' lives, along with the pain they had to endure. And I know that the more I can learn and share with others, the better off I—and hopefully they—will be.

The Tulsa Race Massacre was a shameful, completely preventable tragedy, like so many incidents in United States history. But the Greenwood District is proof that Black people have always been willing to work hard, to make the best out of unequal treatment and unjust laws, and to thrive in our community when others won't let us into theirs. And the legacy of Black Wall Street is one that endures, even one hundred years after its destruction.

It is a privilege to continue telling the stories like those from my hometown and Tulsa so that they cannot be forgotten.

May 30, 1921

Memorial Day 1921 began just like any other in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with many shops and stores closed for business as townspeople prepared for the big parade that would proceed down Main Street that morning. But one business that remained open on the busy street was a shoeshine parlor that employed a nineteen-year-old Black man named Dick Rowland.

Rowland had lived a rough life in his two short decades. His birthplace is unknown, but he was born Jimmie Jones, and had two older sisters. By 1908, the three siblings were living as orphans on the streets of Vinita, Oklahoma, a town about sixty-five miles northeast of present-day Tulsa. Forced to seek shelter in the woods and under bridges, Jimmie and his sisters regularly begged for food to survive.

This was how he met a young, divorced Black woman named Damie Ford, who operated a small grocery store and lived alone. After feeding Jimmie a meal and listening to his proposition to help her around the business in exchange for food, Ford checked with Jimmie's sisters to make sure it was okay if she took in Jimmie, who appeared to be about six years old. They readily agreed, as that would be one less person they'd have to worry about in their hard-luck family.

Jimmie, who called his adopted mother Aunt Dame, quickly made himself useful, shelving products and cleaning the one-room grocery store and endearing himself to Ford's customers. However, though Ford was generous in spirit and made sure Jimmie was clothed, fed, and housed, the store didn't bring in a lot of money, and she struggled to support the two of them. About a year after Jimmie came to live with her, they moved to Tulsa, where he met Ford's family, the Rowlands, and where Ford hoped for more opportunities in the booming oil town.

Ford moved to the Greenwood District, a thriving Black community in Tulsa across the train tracks from where most of the white homes and businesses were located. At the time, Oklahoma was still heavily enforcing Jim Crow laws: mandates that segregated Black Americans from white Americans. This included housing, and because Black people were often banned from moving into white neighborhoods, they created their own district. Greenwood was founded in 1906, when a Black businessman named O. W. Gurley purchased forty acres of land to establish an all-Black residential and business district.

The landmark 1896 US Supreme Court case *Plessy v.*

Ferguson, which established the legality of Jim Crow legislation, stated spaces and accommodations segregated by race were legal as long as they were comparable; this is where the standard of “separate but equal” was born. The “equal” part rarely came to fruition with Black spaces and accommodations; Greenwood, however, was something of an anomaly in this respect. By 1914, the neighborhood boasted all kinds of Black professionals, from doctors and lawyers to business owners, educators, and newspaper publishers—and they kept their wealth within the community, continually supporting the businesses of what became known nationwide as Black Wall Street.

After moving to Greenwood, Damie Ford initially worked various jobs to make ends meet, eventually buying her own home on Archer Street. She rented out rooms to tenants to bring in money; Jimmie cleaned these rooms and also took on odd jobs to help out with expenses.

Maybe it was the change in location, or maybe it was getting to know his adopted family, but Jimmie soon took on a new name. His first day in elementary school, he introduced himself as Dick Rowland, and at home, he asked that Aunt Dame use that name for him, too. As a young kid, Rowland was a good student, but his interest in academics waned the older he got. By the time he was a teenager, he was known more for high school football—he would drop out of school at times when the football season was finished—and his participation in Greenwood’s nightlife scene.

Rowland began ditching classes at Booker T. Washington High School to take a job shining shoes at a white-owned

establishment in downtown Tulsa. He made a decent amount of money at the shoeshine parlor with generous tips from its white clientele and so found no reason to get his high school diploma and work toward a higher-paying, higher-status job, as Aunt Dame encouraged him to do.

On Memorial Day 1921, Rowland found himself in the Drexel Building on Main Street, where he had to go to use the restroom, as there were no “colored” bathrooms in the shoeshine parlor. Back then, elevators required manual operation to run up and down the floors of buildings, and the elevator operator that day was a young white woman named Sarah Page. While little is known about Rowland’s life, even less seems to be known about Page. She had supposedly already been married and divorced by the time she was seventeen, in 1921, and had moved to Tulsa from Kansas City, Missouri, to start over, renting a room in a boardinghouse on North Boston Avenue.

It is rumored that Rowland and Page had known each other prior to that Memorial Day, which would make sense, as Rowland had to visit the Drexel Building to use the facilities during his work shifts and would likely run into Page sometimes. But it was also said by some, including Rowland’s Aunt Dame, that they had, perhaps, been romantically involved—and one of the biggest taboos in early-twentieth-century America was a relationship between a Black man and a white woman. Black men were routinely met with threats, violence, and murder for dating white women. In fact, the majority of lynchings that occurred at the time were of Black men arrested for unproven accusations of raping white women—some of which were cover-ups

for situations in which white women were caught in consensual relationships with them.

Few details have been confirmed about what happened in that elevator on May 30, 1921—Rowland and Page may be the only ones who actually knew. But what is known for sure is that Rowland used the elevator that day, which Page was operating. The police later determined that Rowland tripped while entering the elevator, reached out, and caught Page's arm for balance, causing her to scream out in surprise. A salesclerk from Renberg's clothing store on the first floor of the building heard the scream, saw Rowland hurrying out of the building, and called the police, assuming Page had been the victim of an attempted rape.

There are no records of what Page told the police, but the damage was already done by the time they spoke to her and the Renberg's clerk. They had a description of an alleged assailant.

Dick Rowland was a wanted man.