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Ocoee Riot, circa 1937

Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration for the State of Florida

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THE OCOEE RIOT

Ocoee Riot 2/3
2/3

This happened on election day, November 2, 1920. Though the catastrophe took place in Ocoee, and it is always spoken of as the Ocoee Riot, witnesses both white and Negro state that it was not the regular population of Ocoee which participated in the affair. It is said that the majority of whites of the community deplored it at the time and have refused to accept full responsibility for it since.

According to witnesses, the racial disorder began in Winter Garden, a citrus town about three miles from Ocoee. There had been very lively electioneering during the Harding campaign, and the Negroes who were traditional Republicans were turning out in mass at the polls. Some of the poor whites who are traditional Democrats resented this under the heading that the Negroes were voting jobs away from the local people. It was decided with a great deal of heat to prevent the blacks from voting, which was done. Over in Ocoee, the blacks and the whites were turning out to the polls with great enthusiasm and no trouble was contemplated. In the afternoon, however, many of the whites of Winter Garden came on over to Ocoee celebrating election day. Seeing the Ocoee Negroes swarming to the polls, they began to urge the Ocoee whites to stop them, citing the evil happenings of the Reconstruction. Finally the Negroes were being pushed and shoved at the polls. Then they were ordered away, but some of them persisted.

The first act of physical violence occurred when Mose Norman came up to the polls to vote in defiance of the warning for Negroes to keep away. He was struck and driven off. But he did not let the matter drop so easily. He got into his automobile and drove to Orlando, the County seat to see one Mr. Cheney, a well-known lawyer there and told him what was happening. He advised Mose Norman that the men who were interfering with the voting were doing so illegally and that it was a very serious matter indeed. He instructed Mose to return to Ocoee and to take the names of all the Negroes who had been denied their constitutional right to vote, and some say he advised Norman to also take the names of the whites who were violating the polls. Mose Norman returned to Ocoee and parked his car on the main street of the town near the place of polling and got out. While he was away from the car, some of the disorderly whites from Winter Garden went to the car and searched it and found a shotgun under the seat. When he returned to the car, he was set upon and driven off. His speedy foot work was the only thing that saved him from serious injury. When this got around, the Negroes generally stayed away from the polling place ~~XXXXXX~~ and began to leave town for the day. Two or three more were hustled and beaten however during the afternoon. Then the white mobs began to parade up and down the streets and grew more disorderly and unmanageable. Towards sundown, it was suggested that they go over to Mose Norman's house and give him a good beating for his officiousness and for being a smart-aleck. But some one going around the lake had seen him visiting July Perry, a very prosperous Negro farmer and contractor and they decided, come nightfall they would go to the home of Perry and drag Mose out and chastise him.

In the meantime, The Black Dispatch (grapevine) had published all that was happening and most of the Negroes had left town or hidden out in the orange groves. July Perry armed himself and prepared to defend himself and his home. His friends all took to the woods and groves and left him to his courage. Even his sons hid out with the rest. His wife

and daughter alone remained in the house with him. Perhaps they were afraid to leave the shelter of the house. Terrible rumors were about. Two of the three churches had been burned. The whole Negro settlement was being assaulted. It was cried that Langmaid, a Negro carpenter had been beaten and castrated. But one thing was certain, Mose Norman, who had been the match to touch off the explosion could not be found. He had thoroughly absented himself from the vicinity. When asked by some of the Negroes why he had had the gun under the seat of his car, he explained that he was doing some clearing out at Tildenville for Mr. Saddler, and always had his gun handy for a little hunting. At any rate, no Negro except July Perry had ~~ka~~ maintained his former address. So night dusted down on Ocoee, with the mobs seeking blood and ashes, and July Perry standing his lone watch over his rights to life and property.

The night color gave courage to many men who had been diffident during the day hours. Fire was set to whole rows of Negro houses and the wretches who had thought to hide by crawling under these buildings were shot or shot at as they fled from the flames. In that way Maggie Genlack and her daughter were killed and their bodies left and partially burned by the flames that consumed their former home. The daughter was far advanced in pregnancy and ~~xxxxxxx~~ so felt unequal to flight since there was no conveyance that she could get. Her mother would not leave her alone as all the others ~~fx~~ vanished out of the quarters. They took counsel together and the old woman and her pregnant daughter crept under the house to escape the notice of the mob. Roosevelt Barton died of fire and gunshot wounds when the barn of July Perry was put to flames. He had thought that that would be a good hiding place, but when the fury of the crowd swept over the Perry place, the barn was fired and when Roosevelt tried to rush out he was driven back by a bullet to die in the fire. But this only happened after a pitched battle had been fought at Perry's house, with July Perry against the mob.

He loaded his high powered rifle and waited, at the same time unwilling to believe that the white people with whom he had worked and associated so long would permit the irresponsibles from Winter Garden to harm him or his things. Nevertheless he waited ready to do that which becomes a man. He could not know that the mob was not seeking him at all, that they had come there because they thought that Mose Norman was hiding about the place. Perhaps if the mob had not been so sure that Mose was there that it was unnecessary to ask, all might have been different. They might have called out to him and he might have assured them by word of mouth or invited them in to see for themselves. They did not know that Norman had only spent a few minutes at the Perry home and then fled away to the groves. So they there outside began the assault upon the front of the house to gain entrance and Perry defended his door with all that he could command. He was effective. The mob was forced to retreat, and considered what was best to do. It was decided that while some kept up the harassment at the front, others would force an entrance through the back. Never had any of the mob suspected that Perry was alone in the house. They thought from the steady fire that several Negroes were at bay in there. It was Sam Salsbury who took a running start and kicked the back door open. Perry had not expected this, but he whirled at once and began to shoot at the gaping mouth of the door. His daughter terrified at this new danger tried to run out of the door and was shot in the shoulder by her father who had not expected her to run into the line of fire. But the next bullet struck Sam Salsbury in the arm and the rear attackers retreated. ~~It xxxxxxxxxx council~~ ~~xxxxxxx called xxxxxxxx~~ But not before Elmer McDonald and a man named Overberry had lost their lives. The council decided that reinforcements were necessary to take the place so the whole fighting force withdrew. Some phoned to Orlando to friends to come and help. Some phoned to ~~Apoka~~ and to other points. Some went in cars to bring help. So there was

~~xxxxxx~~fighting

a lull in the fighting for two or three hours.

July Perry had not gone unhurt. A bullet or two had hit him. So in the lull his wife persuaded him to leave. He was weak from his hurts so she lent her strength to get him away from the house and far down into the cane patch where they felt he would not be found. When the re-inforced mob came back the ~~xx~~ doors were open and the searchers found only Perry's wounded daughter there. They did nothing to harm her but began an intensive hunt for Perry. It was around dawn when they found him weak and helpless in his hiding place and he was removed to the jail in Orlando. It was after sun-up when the mob stormed the jail and dragged him out and tied him to the back of a car and killed him and left his body swinging to a telephone post beside the highway.

That was the end of what happened in Ocoee on election day, 1920.