

*Speech of Henry C. Whitlow  
at T.C.H.S. Meeting  
3/29/73*

*Corrected  
Copy is at  
office  
much  
better*

Might I say from the beginning that most of the material for this talk was taken from the following sources:

1. A study of the Social and Economic conditions of the Negro population of Tulsa, Oklahoma - conducted for the Tulsa Council of Social agencies, by the National Urban League, J. Harvey Kerns, Survey Director, 1945
2. Historical Development of The Negro in Oklahoma, by Nathaniel Jason Washington; Published by Dexter Publishing Co. 1948.
3. A paper, "A Short History" B. T. Washington High School, by W. D. Williams.
4. The Racially Changing Community by Kari Thiele, A Thesis for Masters Degree at Oklahoma University - 1962.

I would also say this talk could be made into a book - but I am not the one to do it - thus this talk will be short.

*(All "ad libs" recorded on tape are written in.)  
R. Avery*



## THE HISTORY OF THE GREENWOOD ERA IN TULSA

After agreeing to a title for this talk, I am sure we should talk about an Era rather than Area. The period of time in which this area was flourishing and making its contribution to the growth of Tulsa. Historically, we are talking about a period of time from the beginning of Tulsa until the late fifties.

Since territorial days, Negroes have been a part of the organized life of Tulsa. Though Negro slaves were owned by some of the early pioneers and later by Indian tribes, slavery was never a flourishing industry in Tulsa or the State of Oklahoma.

Negroes in Tulsa first settled on 1st Street at Madison and Lansing Streets, near the site of the old Midland Valley Depot. In 1905, a strip of land on Greenwood beginning at Archer Street was sold to Negroes. This was the beginning of the naming of the whole Negro community, Greenwood. Until recent years, <sup>the "old timers"</sup> local whites would refer to it as "over in Greenwood," although the Tulsa World Newspaper would tab it as "little Africa", the Tribune's name was "Ole Nigger Town". The Train Porters <sup>their</sup> in announcing the stop in the Jim Crow car would say Tulsa, the Tusk-Hog Town - "Greenwood the Battling Ground".

In 1908, this site on Greenwood was developed by Negroes as the first permanent business development. The early Negro migrants to Tulsa came from Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, hoping to better their conditions by coming to this new territory and State.

The bondary lines for living <sup>were</sup> ~~was~~ set very early. The Negro could buy land, live and operate businesses North of the Frisco Railway tracks. Thus, the early community grew along Archer Street -- West to Boston Street and East to Lansing and North to Marshall Street. The Negro was welcomed to work at common labor, service and domestic jobs as Tulsa grew. They were not welcome to patronize the



businesses south of the tracks. Thus began what became the fastest growing Negro owned and operated businesses in the Nation at that time. This was probably one of the earliest neighborhood shopping centers <sup>as they are called today.</sup> These businesses furnished all the daily needs of the Negro community except clothing (There was only one dry goods store). Hardware and building material could be purchased just across the track on 1st Street. The first business to be established by a Negro was a grocery store owned by O. W. Gulley. It was located at the corner of Archer and Greenwood Streets. Thomas R. Gentry was the first Negro pioneer in local real estate. For several years, he maintained an office on North Detroit Street. His family still lives on that site. The Rev. C. L. Netherland, a baptist minister came to Tulsa from Arkansas in 1905 and had a barber shop on Boston where the John 3:16 Mission is now. Before statehood, Negro Ministers and Negro Professional men came to the growing community. The first Negro Physician was R. T. Bridgewater (one of the buildings he built still stands in the 300 block on Greenwood). The first Dentist was Dr. J. Littlejohn. Both of these Doctors came to the city just prior to statehood.

Ten years after the establishment of the first business a grocery store, Greenwood was a thriving and growing business district as shown by a picture taken in 1918, looking north from Archer Street. There were one, two and three story brick buildings located on both sides of the street for two blocks. The buildings served as offices for the Doctors, lawyers and real estate as well as hotels, undertakers, drugstores, grocery stores, Dry good stores, cafes, newspaper, recreation parlors, theater, and beauty parlors -- hair dressers - they were called in those days - while along Archer Street, east and west of Greenwood, other businesses were established. Brick churches were build in *various* sections of the community.



I use to ask myself why all these brick buildings? The answer was the brickyard -- (Acme Brick Co.) just two blocks north on Greenwood -- bricks were easy to secure and probably cheaper than lumber. The Negro craftsmen lived in the area and were accessible. Another question -- Where did they get the money to build? As stated before the Negro could work south of the track but spent most of their money only on the north side of the track -- thus the booming economy. As the city grew, there were more demands for laborers and service workers; *therefore, the negroes had more work*.

Along with the growth of business in the Greenwood area, the education of Negro children were not forgotten. It was in 1905, that Jake Dillard, a Negro constable and businessman, opened the first school for Negro children in a small Baptist church building located near Archer and Kenosha Streets. (This, of course, was part of Indian Territory).

In 1908, a year after statehood, the board of education realizing the need for more adequate facilities, built a two room frame building on Hartford Street between Cameron and Easton Streets (where the present city street department warehouse is located). Rev. G. L. Prince and Mrs. Lula Sims were the first two Negro teachers to staff this building. By 1910, the population of Black Tulsa had increased to a point that it was necessary to build on the same site an eight room two story brick building. It housed grades 1-8. J. W. Hughes was named Principal of Dunbar School. The faculty members were J. W. Hughes, Lula Sims, Marie Martin, S. D. McCree, Jane Johnson, Birdie Farmer and Mrs. R. T. Bridgewater. (Incidentally, this was the same building in which my formal education began).

At the end of the school year in 1912, eight (8) students had completed the Elementary grades and were in need of high school education. In that year, Messrs. Hughes and McCree comprised the faculty that taught these eight students. That same year, E. W. Woods was offered the job as Principal and was able to



except in early 1913. In mid-1913, a four room frame structure was erected on a site located at Fifth Place and Boston. W. Woods, along with Lula Sims and Bertie McKeever moved into the building with fourteen (14) students. The building was named after Booker T. Washington, the first teacher in Tulsa's "colored" school.

THE WHITE PEOPLE SAW THE COMPLETION OF A TWO STORY BRICK BUILDING CONTAINING SIXTEEN (16) ROOMS. I remember in this building the students and teachers gave the school a big sense of pride and developed a school spirit that has lasted through the years. As enrollment increased, additional rooms were added until the school rambled over every available space on that piece of ground. This included a separate elementary school. Today, these

buildings are now known as the Charles S. Johnson Elementary School. *As of the Fall of 1958 classes opened in the new Booker T. Washington High School on Woodrow PL and St. Louis Streets*

After World War I, as after every war--and then, the Negroes began demanding equal treatment under the law, saying "if they had equal rights to die for their country--they should have equal rights to live with dignity in it".

This only worsened the already bad relationship between the two communities, *North and South Tulsa*

The tender box was hit on the night of May 31, 1921 when the worse riot in Oklahoma history broke out. It was ended on June 1, when the military was called in to stop looting and burning by whites. The Tulsa Tribune reported the loss in property, estimated between one and one-half and two million dollars. Five hundred Negro homes were destroyed in addition to the entire Negro business district, also Dunbar School and two brick churches. The white dailies laid all the blame for the riot on the Black community. "They had no business in white town with guns". Even though a white man was lynched with the aid of the police, less than a year earlier. Probably one of the most insightful accounts of the Tulsa riot is that by THE NATION. *June 29, 1921* In an article entitled, "The Eruption of Tulsa",

Walter S. White *who* points out three (3) causes of the riot.

1. Resentment of wealthy Negroes by some white people.
2. The denunciation of Jim Crow by Negroes and,
3. Rotten Political conditions *that existed at that time.*



Within the community they furnished impetus, being a resource for the development of programs and planning. They were a strength among the weak although they were weak among the mighty of the business world. When the rest of the city accepted rank discrimination and prejudice as ordinary and usual--like pain, to be deplored but accepted as part of nature, the builders of the Greenwood area were laboring day and night to overcome the handicaps placed on them.

If you have never known poverty, dejection, dissolution, vicious denunciation, hatred, and slander directed toward you, you cannot appreciate the achievements of the Negro during the Greenwood era.

Even many who have labored for a half century to make Tulsa a better city for human beings to live in, realize that many battles were fought and won during the Greenwood era--but are very sad to realize the war is still going on because of the resistance to change *in Tulsa*