

A&S Faculty Help Shed Light on Dark Days in Tulsa

Over the past seven years, several members of the College of Arts and Sciences have been collaborating to help uncover the truth about an infamous day in Tulsa history.

Bob Brooks, state archeologist and director of the Oklahoma Archeological Survey, received a request for help from the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission early in 1998. He readily accepted, feeling the importance of his assignment: to help determine how many deaths occurred in the riot that shook Tulsa from May 31 to June 1, 1921. He was one of several A&S faculty members called to help the commission determine what happened that day in the Greenwood area of Tulsa.

In addition to Brooks, Danney Goble, professor of classics and letters; Lesley Rankin-Hill, associate professor of anthropology and Damario Solomon-Simmons, Tulsa attorney and instructor for African and African-American Studies were joined by the late Alan Witten, professor in the College of Geosciences, to work with the commission to find and analyze evidence of the events that took place that May.

“It was a very moving experience,” Brooks said. “Meeting the survivors and the family members of the victims, and working with the volunteer experts was an experience I will always remember.”

It wasn't until 1997, 76 years after that tragic night that the state of Oklahoma passed House Resolution No. 1035, establishing the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission to investigate the causes and effects of the riot. The commission examined documentation and brought in expert consultants such as Brooks, Rankin-Hill, Goble and Witten to analyze their findings.

Brooks and Witten visited with commission members in early 1998. Research revealed that witnesses claimed to have seen mass graves dug to dispose of the bodies following “one of the worst race riots in United States history.” It became their duty to find evidence of these graves. In July 1998, during one of the hottest summers on record and in the depth of a drought, the two men worked with David L. Maki and Geoffrey Jones of Archaeo-Physics based in Minnesota to examine the sites. They used ground penetrating radar and a magnetometer over three sites possibly containing mass graves. The sites were located at Oaklawn Cemetery, Booker T. Washington Cemetery and Newblock Park. When doing the initial scan, they discovered some anomalies, possibly due to the intense heat affecting their equipment.

After meeting with the committee again, the team returned in December 1998 to Newblock and Booker T. Washington to remove core samples. There were no conclusive findings in the samples that would indicate a mass grave, but based on the samples, they did not discount the possibility of one existing at Newblock.

In spring 1999, new eyewitness evidence led the team to a different section of Oaklawn Cemetery. Clyde Eddy, a survivor of the riot, remembered witnessing white laborers at Oaklawn digging a “trench.” He recalled the area being in the white section of the “Old Potters Field” and pointed out the area during a visit. Witten brought out the magnetometer, electromagnetic induction equipment and the ground penetrating radar to survey the area. The electromagnetic magnetometer identified an area that demonstrated a past excavation that was approximately 15 square feet. After revealing their findings to the commission, commission members and the city of Tulsa decided not to excavate that site until further research could be done.

Rankin-Hill was brought in as a forensic anthropologist, trained to recognize and examine human skeletal remains for indications of sex, age, height, unique characters of the individual, features which might indicate how the person died and processes that affect the skeleton after death. Forensic anthropologists differ from forensic pathologists in that they focus more on bone, not on changes in soft tissue. Her services will be utilized in the case of unknown victims, should any be recovered.

Goble was giving a speech at the Oklahoma Historical Society when the president of the society, Richard Warner, approached Goble and asked if he would consider writing a summary of the findings of the various expert witnesses and documentation collected by the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot Commission. His first question to Warner was, “How many pages?” When he learned it would be around 25 pages, Goble agreed. What he didn’t realize was that it would take the better part of a year to sift through the more than 2,000 pages of information and over one month to write the report that would eventually be submitted to the commission.

“I was essentially a ‘hired gun’ writer. The final report was circulated three times before everyone could agree on it. It is a very emotional issue,” said Goble. “Culpability was a very hot topic. Some of the commission felt the state was very culpable, some felt differently since it occurred three generations ago.” He felt he was fortunate to be able to write the overview of the findings. Goble’s goal was to write to “standards of academic integrity.”

“There may never be answers to all of the questions regarding that day. We will never know the answers intellectually or emotionally,” said Goble.

A native of Tulsa, Simmons-Solomon was not familiar with the history of the race riot until he attended classes in African and African American Studies at OU. The injustice done to the black population in Tulsa has never left his memory and has fueled his drive to become a lawyer working in civil rights and reparations law.

In 2003, while Simmons-Solomon was interning at the Department of Commerce in Washington, D.C., he was asked to give a speech at a Martin Luther King Jr. Day event. His speech caught the attention of Adjoa Aiyetoro, a member of the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (NCOBRA). When she learned he was from Tulsa, she asked him to help with the research for the reparations case that she was working on with Johnnie Cochran, Charles J. Ogletree, Michael Hausfeld, Willie Gary and Michele Roberts. They filed the case *Alexander et al v. the State of Oklahoma* following the release of the state's commission report. When first filed, there were 165 survivors of the attack still living. Now there are fewer than 100. In May of 2005, the case made it to the U.S. Supreme Court. The justices ruled they would not hear the case. This has not stopped Solomon-Simmons from taking the story of the victims and their quest for justice to the public. Solomon-Simmons uses the information from his research to educate people around the country on what happened that day.

Together, the African and African-American Studies program, the Department of Anthropology, the Oklahoma Archeological Survey and Department of Classics and Letters have worked to the benefit of those who were affected by the riot that took place from May 31 to June 1, 1921. They are making a difference in the history of a city, state and nation in their quest for the truth. All involved agree that it is unlikely that every question will be answered. However, each individual is willing to step in again in order

to sort out any new findings by the now-functioning Tulsa Reparations Coalition. Brooks feels his part in the quest for truth has been satisfying. “I feel good that we tried; however we didn’t answer all the questions.”

For a complete copy of the commission’s report, visit <http://www.ok-history.mus.ok.us/trrc/freport.htm>.