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Race Riot Commission: Panel at odds on report details but agrees riot was inexcusable



By [RANDY KREHBIEL](#) *World Staff Writer*
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Otis G. Clark, who was a teenager when his neighborhood was burned in 1921, listens during Friday's meeting of the Tulsa Race Riot Commission.
STEPHEN HOLMAN / Tulsa World

Among other things, the Tulsa Race Riot Commission is a case study in how different people interpret history.

Meeting Friday for what it hoped would be the last time, the commission instead took scalpel and editing pencil to what historian Danney Goble called his "30th draft" of the commission's final report to the Legislature. Commissioners lauded Goble while taking issue with a list of details, including mentioning the number of confirmed dead one too many times and not mentioning conspiracy theories enough.

As a result, the commission will have to meet at least once more to go over Goble's "31st" draft and discuss its recommendations to the Legislature.

"One of the things I've learned is how difficult it is to reach consensus," Commissioner Eddie Faye Gates said. "Everybody sees things through their own eyes."

Chairman Pete Churchwell said, "I didn't think there would be as much discussion as there was,

especially over the same things. I'm not sure the changes are going to improve Danney's report, but my gut tells me that if I were black I would feel the same" as those



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who wanted the changes.

Goble, author of eight books, including a biography of Carl Albert and a history of Tulsa, said the 40 pages he's written for the riot commission have been the most difficult of his life.

"I sat at the computer for 12 hours one day and wrote two paragraphs. I threw them away the next day," Goble said.

At the same time, he was besieged by commissioners and assorted volunteer informants, each eager to steer Goble's report in the direction he or she wanted.

Sooner or later, the disputes boil down to whether the May 31-June 1, 1921, riot was the result of spontaneous combustion or a carefully built bonfire.

Standard history and contemporary accounts indicate that the black Greenwood district was burned and dozens of residents were killed in retaliation for the appearance of a number of armed black men at the Tulsa County Courthouse, then at Sixth and Boulder, on the evening of May 31, 1921. The men had gone there fearing that a black youth who was jailed there would be lynched.

For 80 years, however, many blacks and some whites have maintained that the destruction of Greenwood was part of a far-reaching plot to drive blacks out so the district could be converted to warehouses and a union railroad depot. A group of real estate men openly proposed such an arrangement following the riot, with black property owners to receive about \$1,700 for their old lots with the option of buying new ones for \$500 in an addition north of what is now Pine Street.

Few accepted.

Hard evidence is meager and mostly circumstantial, but rumors were so rampant after the riot that Tulsa hotelier and developer Tate Brady offered \$1,000 to anyone who could prove accusations that he had benefited from the calamity. Among black families of long standing in Tulsa, such charges have been accepted as fact for generations.

At Friday's meeting, commissioners struggled to shape the report and its presentation of more than 10,000 pages of evidence.

Some insisted that greater weight be given to evidence they say supports a conspiracy. Goble, for instance, was chided for overusing the confirmed death count of 26 blacks and 12 whites. When he pointed out that he accompanied the figure with a statement that the actual number killed was probably much higher, Commissioner Vivian Clark-Adams replied, "People who don't want what we want will look at that and say, 'See, it wasn't as bad as everybody says.'"

Gates and Clark-Adams also objected to language in Goble's report and in a supporting document by local historian Dick Warner concerning the use of airplanes. Warner had written that evidence on the use of air planes to bomb or shoot at Greenwood residents is inconclusive. Gates and Clark-Adams wanted language that suggested that aerial attacks might not have occurred to be removed or at least sharply modified.

They believe the use of the planes, which city officials said were for reconnaissance only, indicates that "elites" planned the raid on Greenwood.

Other commissioners find such arguments unconvincing.

"The personal problem I have is that as many people expressed shock and surprise as there is testimony that someone knew in advance," said Churchwell. "The fact some business organization expresses a desire for the land is not evidence of a conspiracy."

Such skepticism from Churchwell, who is supportive of reparations to the 118 known living Greenwood survivors, may bode ill for such arguments before a largely unsympathetic Legislature. So might the absence from Friday's meeting of the commission's two legislators.

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Curiously, these disagreements over details tend to obscure the commissioners' agreement on one essential issue -- that what happened was an inexcusable outrage.

They would be supported in that by Tulsa's leadership of 1921. Almost unanimously, they proclaimed a moral duty to make things right with the people of Greenwood.

Friday, the daughter of one survivor who is in failing health said, "People 85 to 100 years old are not going to live forever, but they are going to die with the knowledge they lived in a state that destroyed everything they had."

Randy Krehbiel, World staff writer, can be reached at 581-8365 or via e-mail at randy.krehbiel@tulsaworld.com.

By RANDY KREHBIEL World Staff Writer

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