

# SUNDOWN TOWNS, THE KKK, AND THE EVER-PRESENT THREAT OF WHITE VIOLENCE



Courtesy of Ball State University

## WORDS TO KNOW

**Reconstruction**

**sundown towns**

**persecution**

**lynching**

**neighborhood defense**

**segregation**

**alien land laws**

**terrorism**

**martial law**

**ordinance**

## THINK BEFORE YOU READ

**Have you ever felt afraid in your own neighborhood?  
Of whom or what?**

**Have you ever been afraid in a neighborhood you didn't know well?**

**Have you ever decided not to go somewhere  
for fear of your own safety?**

Cover: A Ku Klux Klan gathering in Muncie, Indiana, 1922.  
Courtesy of Ball State University

## THE TULSA RACE MASSACRE

In 1921, six-year-old Olivia Hooker lived with her family in Greenwood, a wealthy Black neighborhood in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Her father managed the department store Eliot Clothing, Furniture and Shoes, one of the large stores in the business district people called the “Black Wall Street.” One May afternoon while at home, Olivia saw a group of White men enter her backyard with torches. Her mother quickly hid Olivia, her sister, and her two brothers under a heavy dining room table and covered it with a tablecloth. The men came into the house with an ax and hacked apart the piano, her father’s record player, and other furniture.

*Olivia later remembered, “It was a horrifying thing for a little girl who’s only six years old.”*



Tulsa, Oklahoma. 1921. Left: The Greenwood business district before the attack. Right: Greenwood during the Tulsa Race Massacre.  
Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society

The Hooker family’s experience spread throughout Greenwood. With guns, torches, and firebombs, the mob burned and destroyed 35 square blocks and killed about 300 people. The Black community watched the businesses and homes they had built go up in smoke. The loss totaled over \$200 million in today’s money, robbing families of everything they had worked for. Greenwood residents tried to sue the city and insurance companies to recover their losses, but their claims were denied.

## A CONSTANT THREAT

Violence went hand in hand with segregation—not only in Tulsa but throughout the country. During the era of “segregation mania,” people of color were targeted for violent acts and threats. The constant fear of being the next to be attacked restricted behavior and limited the freedom to move.



Emergency surgical ward in Red Cross hospital, set up to care for those injured in the Tulsa Race Massacre, 1921.  
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

## ANTI-ASIAN VIOLENCE IN THE WEST

White workers' fear of competition for jobs drove many Chinese people out of western towns and cities. In 1885, an armed mob of White miners attacked a Chinese neighborhood in Rock Springs, Wyoming. Angry that the Chinese workers were willing to work for less money, the rioters killed 35 people, wounded 15, and chased more than 700 others from town, then burnt down their neighborhoods. Over time, continuing **persecution** drove most remaining Chinese people from the state. In 1870, Chinese workers made up one third of Idaho's population. By 1910, there were almost no Chinese residents remaining.



Illustration titled "Massacre of the Chinese at Rock Springs, Wyoming" by T. de Thulstrup, published in *Harper's Weekly* magazine, 1885. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

## THE RED SUMMER OF 1919

In 1919, White mobs terrorized Black communities in at least 60 cities and small towns, killing hundreds of people. There were so many attacks that it came to be known as the "Red Summer." Black veterans returning from World War I used their war wages to establish new homes and insisted on their rights. In response, angry Whites mounted attacks in at least 18 states in the South, Midwest, and Northeast. In Chicago, tensions over housing, jobs, and policing ignited into five days of violence. It led to the deaths of 23 Black residents and 15 White residents.



Armed National Guard troops confront several Black men during the Chicago race riot in 1919. Courtesy of the Chicago History Museum

The rioting began when thousands sought comfort from the heat in the water of Lake Michigan, including Eugene Williams, a Black teenager. When he inadvertently drifted across an invisible racial dividing line in the water, a group of White swimmers threw rocks and caused his drowning. When the police refused to arrest the White man considered responsible for Williams' death, the crowd started fighting. As the violence escalated, an understaffed police force, largely sympathetic to White rioters, was not effective. The Illinois National Guard was called in to halt the violence.

# THE KU KLUX KLAN

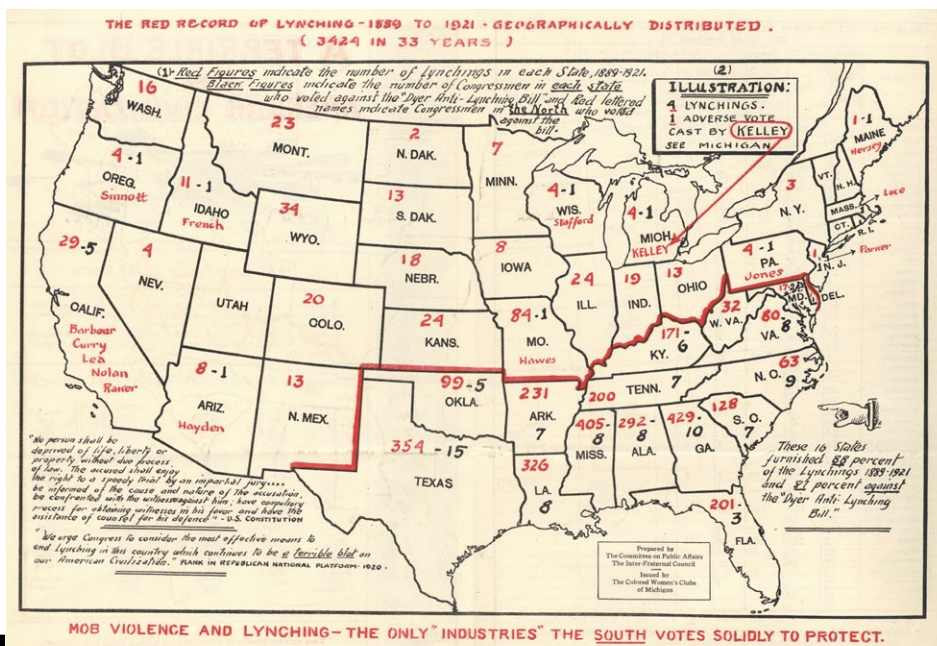
In the 1920s, White communities seeking to intimidate people of color brought back an old organization from the **Reconstruction** era: the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). In 1871, in response to reports of widespread threats against Black people, President Ulysses S. Grant declared the KKK a terrorist organization and signed a law forcing it to disband. But in the 1920s, a new version of the KKK (the Klan) and Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK) were founded. It recruited up to five million men and half a million women, most of them native-born White Protestants. The KKK had chapters in almost every state of the U.S. and was especially popular in the Northeast, South, and Midwest. Almost 45% of its members lived in Illinois, Ohio, and Indiana. The Klan invited police officers, judges, ministers, and elected officials to become members. That gave its brutal and murderous acts credibility and the power of law. To the White community, the KKK put forward an image of themselves as friendly and patriotic, offering potluck dinners, parades, and gifts to the poor. But their core purpose was to scare, harass, and attack people they considered enemies.



Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan leading over 30,000 Klan members in a parade in Washington, DC, 1926. Courtesy of the Library of Congress

In addition to African Americans, the new KKK and WKKK expanded the targets of their hate to include Catholics, Jews, immigrants, and others. They used a range of tactics to intimidate: they wore costumes with white robes with insignia and hoods, burned crosses, and held marches. They also used force and violence, from assault to **lynching**—the illegal public killing of a person without a trial. Klan members held huge rallies that brought hundreds

of White residents out in a show of force. In the 1920s and 30s, Klan rallies in the state of Washington incited mobs to evict Filipino and Japanese farmers who had resisted the state's **alien land laws** by buying farmland from the Yakama Nation. Mobs terrorized them with beatings, arson, and dynamite, destroying cars and buildings.



Representative Leonides Dyer (R-MO) introduced anti-lynching legislation in 1918. His bill passed the House but was defeated by a Senate filibuster by Southern Democrats. After over 200 attempts since 1900 to pass anti-lynching legislation, the Emmett Till Anti-lynching bill finally passed both Chambers and was signed into law by President Biden in 2022. Courtesy of the National Archives

## SUNDOWN TOWNS

Some White communities made it clear, either by **ordinance** or by word of mouth, that any Blacks and other people of color needed to leave town every day before dark or face dire consequences. Later, these places came to be called **sundown towns**. Residents in these towns could rely on the labor of workers of color during the day yet prevent them from moving in, going to school, and voting.

By the late 1800s, residents in sundown towns across the North and West targeted Blacks and sometimes Latinos, Native Americans, Asians, Jewish people, and others. Some sundown towns posted threatening signs at the town line or blew a loud siren at sunset to warn targeted groups that it was time to leave town. More often, sundown town policies were unwritten and unspoken, but keenly understood.

**EDMOND**  
"A GOOD PLACE TO LIVE"  
6,000 Live Citizens  
No Negroes  
Home of  
CENTRAL STATE  
TEACHERS COLLEGE  
Rated as One of the  
Nation's Best.  
Public School System  
Surpassed by None  
Eight Active Churches  
Seven Attractive Parks  
Beautiful Homes with  
Ideal Living Conditions  
300 Blocks of Paving  
Santa Fe Railroad  
Hourly Interurban Service  
40 Bus and Truck Lines  
Municipal Light and  
100% Pure Water  
Rodkey Flour Mills  
Van's Baking Co., - Gins  
Ice Plant  
Grain Companies  
Dairying  
Agricultural Center  
The Edmond Oil Field,  
Three Miles West is one of  
the Best in Southwest.

"From Dawn to Dawn We're Never Gone" Air Conditioned

ROYCE B. ADAMSON  
OWNER

ROYCE CAFE Edmond, Okla.

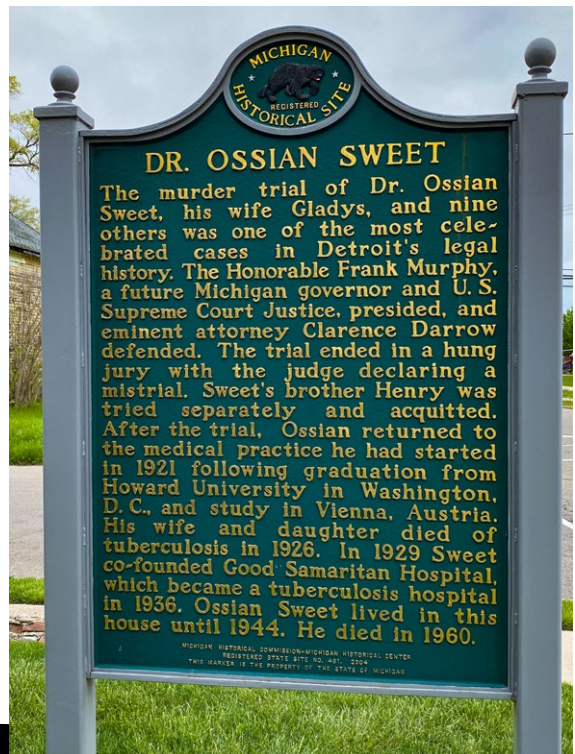
Edmond newspapers described the Oklahoma town as 100% White in the 1920s. Local businesses like the Royce Cafe, one of Edmond's most popular restaurants from the 1930s until 1970, also included this message in their marketing. Courtesy of Edmond Historical Society and Museum

## FIGHTING BACK

Black Americans defended their own homes, often in the face of intense pressure. In 1925, a White mob surrounded the Detroit home of Dr. Ossian and Mrs. Gladys Sweet. Along with nine other friends and family members, the Sweets remained there for two nights as the mob threw rocks through the windows. Someone, never identified, fired shots from the second story, killing one attacker and injuring another. All 11 people in the home were charged with murder.

When the case went to trial, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) hired famous lawyer Clarence Darrow to defend Dr. Sweet—and won. This rare verdict affirmed that Black people had the right to defend their lives and their property.

But the Sweets' victory did not stop the violence. Between 1945 and 1965, White mobs protested and vandalized the homes of more than 200 other Black families who had moved into the Sweet's neighborhood. The threat of violence was always there. Even when it did not flare up into attacks, it had a chilling effect on behavior that prevented people from testing the boundaries of **segregation**.



The Ossian Sweet House is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a Michigan Historical Site. Courtesy of HMdb.org, Photographed by J.T. Lambrou, May 5, 2021

## NEIGHBORHOOD TERRORISM

Some White communities organized **neighborhood defense** groups to prevent integration. Their tactics ranged from social pressure to **terrorism**. Between 1917 and 1921, White supremacists in Chicago firebombed the homes of at least 58 Black families, bankers, and real estate agents. In 1951, a White building owner in Cicero (a suburb of Chicago) rented an apartment to a Black World War II veteran and his family. On the night the family moved in, a mob of more than 4,000 White people laid siege to the building. They threw bricks, rocks, and burning wood through the windows, tossed the family's furniture into the street, and pulled sinks from the walls. Fighting spread through the streets. The governor of Illinois declared **martial law**, bringing in the military to restore order. It took the National Guard three days to bring the violence under control.



National Guardsmen forming a cordon around a mob during the race riot in Cicero, Illinois, July 13, 1951  
Courtesy of the Chicago History Museum,  
DN-N-7955; *Chicago Daily News* Collection

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What were the goals of people who used violence or the threat of violence to control the movement of people of color? What were the goals of people of color who resisted?
- How would a destructive event such as the Tulsa Race Massacre affect the future of a family such as the Hookers?
- In a democratic society, how should communities deal with the threat or reality of racially motivated violence?
- What could have contained or prevented these attacks?
- Why did people turn to violence to enforce segregation? How did violence interact with other efforts to segregate society?

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