

Holy Family a safe haven during the Tulsa race riot

BY JAMES O. GOODWIN



The Greenwood district of Tulsa burns during the June 1, 1921, race riot.

Editor's Note: This article was originally published in the May 2014 edition of the EOC in commemoration of the centennial anniversary of the construction of Holy Family Cathedral.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of construction of Tulsa's Roman Catholic Holy Family Cathedral. The cathedral, parish school and parishioners have lived through the joys and sorrows of Tulsa's everyday life, but they also have witnessed the dramas of the city's history. Among those dramas was the Tulsa Race Riot in 1921, a drama in which the cathedral and its parishioners not only witnessed horrors, but also acted with courage and compassion in ways that should inspire hope and pride for all Tulsans.

The facts of the riot and the explosive atmosphere of Tulsa's race relations at the time bear remembering. When rumors spread that a teenage white girl operating the elevator in the Drexel office building downtown had been assaulted by a black teenage boy, Dick Rowland, rioting by Tulsa's white population broke out and began a 16-hour reign of terror.

The rioters invaded the black Greenwood area just north of downtown, which, at the time, was the wealthiest black community in America, and began their progress of stealing, destroying and murdering men, women and children. When the rioters had finished, almost 10,000 of the area's 11,000 residents were homeless. Two days later, knights of the Klu Klux Klan met on

a hillside to celebrate the carnage by burning a large cross, a trademark of the Klan.

According to Tim Madigan's book, *The Burning*, Holy Family Catholic School was having its graduation exercises at the convention hall (now known as the Brady Theater) when the rioting began. In attendance were 1,000 relatives and friends of Holy Family students. On stage was 7-year-old Ruth Zigler Avery, who wore her new white dress. She was lined up across the stage with the other kids, arranged youngest to oldest. She had just finished speaking her single line from "The Nicest Dolly in all of the Town," when suddenly onto the stage came Father John Heiring, Holy Family's pastor.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but everyone must take your children and return home immediately. A vicious race riot has erupted. Your lives are in great danger. When I am through with this announcement, please go straight home. When at home, pull down all of your window shades to keep anyone from seeing you. Do not leave your homes until advised by the newspapers that it is safe."

Fleeing the hall, Ruth, her younger brother and her aunt rushed to a trolley car stopped nearby. They immediately crouched down on the trolley's dirty floor, cutting their hands on glass from its shot out windows, and traveled in silence. Once they arrived at their stop, they ran to their home a block away, pulled the curtains and lit a small candle.

Ruth got into bed that night with her new white dress still on and lay in bed listening to the sound of gunfire outside. Early the next morning, she heard an unusual sound – trucks passing by the house. Peering carefully out the window, she saw two cattle trucks inching along with dead bodies hastily placed on the flatbeds. She recalled afterward seeing a woman's leg hanging from one of the flatbeds and said she wondered if it would topple onto the ground. And she saw the face of a young boy, his eyes fixed open and his mouth gaping. She could see that the dead boy on the flatbed was about her age, and she wondered if she might someday herself be put in a pile of bodies.

Not every white person in Tulsa participated in the riot, of course, and many of those who did not remained safely and silently in their homes. Only two white churches downtown opened their doors to shelter black refugees fleeing Greenwood: Holy Family and First Presbyterian.

According to an article published in *The Tulsa Tribune* on June 6, 1921, Holy Family's nuns of the St. Vincent de Paul Society and its Knights of Columbus council provided food, clothing and shelter to 400 black victims of the riot. Twenty-five babies were bathed and given clean clothes. The sisters of Holy Family served some 475 meals over the next three days and pledged to assist in the permanent relief and reconstruction of the Greenwood district.

Mary Parish, whose book chronicled the events of the riot, told about Mrs. George W. Hunt, a cosmetologist, who credited her many white friends from Holy Family for protecting her during the riot. Others slept in the church basement. Among them was Wilhelmina Guess, her sister Bernice, her mother Minnie Mae and her father, the renowned attorney H.A. Guess, who valiantly helped to keep a lynch mob away from the teenage boy accused of assaulting the elevator operator. The nuns fed and clothed the Guesses, who in days following the riot had been interned along with hundreds of others in McNulty Park.

Aiding black victims of the riot was not free of risk for the cathedral and its parishioners. The message sought to be conveyed by the rioters was that Tulsa's white society had no room for the black man, and the rioters' attitudes towards Catholics were little better. But the courage displayed by the people of Holy Family was a reply to the rioters' message. The cathedral's people were saying that all men and women are children of God and entitled to receive the protection and help that all God's children deserve. †

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