

# Lesson Three

Decade Three: 1920-1930

## The Tulsa Race Riots

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### Summary of Topic

On May 30, 1921 Dick Rowland, a nineteen year old black shoe-shine man stepped into the elevator operated by a white seventeen year old girl named Sarah Page. What happened next, although still unclear to this day, was the spark that ignited a powder keg. The most commonly accepted story is that as Rowland entered the elevator he tripped over Page's shoe. In an attempt to regain his balance he reached out and grabbed for her arm (Patrick, 1999). Surprised, Page let out a scream that alerted nearby businessmen and frightened Rowland to the point he ran from the elevator. Shortly after the businessmen came to her aid the story had escalated to a sexual assault. Immediately, the police got involved and arrested Rowland. As soon as word hit the street that there was a possible rape of a white woman by a black man, many of the white citizens of Tulsa started pressing for a lynching.

Tensions in Tulsa escalated to the boiling point as a crowd of over 2,000 whites surrounded the courthouse demanding that Dick Rowland be handed over to them. Meanwhile across town in the all black section of Tulsa called Greenwood, about 25 men gathered and armed themselves in an attempt to protect Rowland. A contingent of African-American men arrived at the courthouse to offer their assistance to the local sheriff. Just as the African-American crowd was leaving, the spark ignited as a white man in the mob attempted to wrestle away a pistol being carried by a black World War I veteran. In the scuffle a shot was fired and the worst race riot in American history started (Givan).

Although the first shot was an accident, the ones that followed were not. Shots rang out from both groups as the African American men started to make a retreat back to Greenwood (Larsen, 1997). It didn't take long before the angry white mob turned their attention from lynching Dick Rowland to killing any African American they found on the streets. Fires were set by the white mob in the district of Greenwood. When the Tulsa Fire Department showed up to douse the flames they were turned away at gunpoint by the angry mob (Ellsworth, 1997).

While black Tulsans tried in vain to protect their homes and businesses, the numerical advantage and firepower of the attackers was too great as Greenwood also came under attack from the sky. Several planes appeared overhead, their occupants firing weapons into the area and in one report dropped explosives into the African American neighborhood (Ellsworth, 1997).

*"As the waves of white rioters descended upon the African American district, a deadly pattern soon emerged. First, the armed whites broke into the black homes and businesses, forcing the occupants out into the street, where they were led away at gunpoint to one of a growing number of internment centers. Anyone who resisted was shot. Moreover, African American men in homes where firearms were discovered met the same fate. Next, the whites looted the homes and businesses, pocketing small items, and hauling away larger items either on foot or by car or truck. Finally, the white rioters then set the homes and other buildings on fire, using torches and oil-soaked rags. House by house, block by block, the wall of flame crept northward, engulfing the city's black neighborhoods" (Ellsworth, 1997 p. 65).*

By early dawn on June 1st, large groups estimated to be between 5,000 to 10,000 angry armed white citizens had formed around the Greenwood area (Ellsworth, 1997). As the all-white National Guard arrived it became clear that they would not play the role of impartial peacemakers. Like many of their white Tulsa neighbors they viewed the situation as a 'Negro uprising' and referred to the black residents of Tulsa as 'the enemy' (Ellsworth, 1997). The National Guard set up a 'skirmish line' facing their weapons into the African American district of Greenwood.

In the end, there were thirteen white victims identified and estimates of those blacks killed range from 100 to 300 with no official count accepted. Many were buried in mass graves (Snow, 2001). The total destruction of Greenwood became even more apparent as the Black Tulsans were released from their imprisonment they returned to find their homes and business burned to the ground. Nearly ten-thousand Tulsans, almost the entire black

community, was now homeless. Despite the heroic efforts of the Red Cross, thousands of black Tulsans spent the winter of 1921-1922 living in tents (Larsen, 1997).

Almost as horrific as the riot of 1921 were the actions taken by the state of Oklahoma that followed. The first commission following the riot put the blame solely on Tulsa's black community. The city treated the riot as a bad memory that never happened and should never be discussed. This feeling continued for eight decades until Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating re-opened the commission 1997, to examine what really happened and why.

The Tulsa Race Riot was a tragic result of a city with volatile racial relations that reached its boiling point. What was even more appalling was the apathy and in some cases wanton actions of local and state law enforcement agencies that responded. It is a time in our country that we should look back upon with social embarrassment. With the conclusion of World War I, the United States had become a super power, but the state of our internal race relations was appalling. While the majority of white Tulsans did not take part in nor condoned the riot, it was the actions of a vocal minority that stained the cities image for decades to come. Not a single arrest or charge was ever filed against the Tulsa population that took part in the riot.

### **Acknowledgements:**

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### **References**

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Oklahoma Commission to study the Tulsa Race Riots for 1921 (2001). Tulsa race riots.

**Grade Level:** High School

**Subject:** Social Studies

**Topic:** Decade Three: 1920 - 1930

## **Tulsa Race Riots**

### **Standards**

**USA- Nat. Council for Social Studies: Nat. Standards for Social Studies Teachers:**

**A1: Thematic Standard: Culture and Cultural Diversity** Social Studies teachers should possess the knowledge, capabilities, and dispositions to organize and provide instruction at the appropriate school level for the study of Culture and Cultural Diversity.

*Teacher Expectations* Teachers of social studies at all school levels should provide developmentally appropriate experiences as they guide learners in the study of culture and cultural diversity. They should enable learners to analyze and explain the ways groups, societies, and cultures address human needs and concerns;

*Expectations:* guide learners as they predict how data and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference;

*Expectations:* encourage learners to compare and analyze societal patterns for preserving and transmitting culture while adapting to environmental or social change;

*Expectations:* enable learners to give examples and describe the importance of cultural unity and diversity within and across groups

**A2: Thematic Standard: Time, Continuity, and Change** Social studies teachers should possess the knowledge, capabilities, and dispositions to organize and provide instruction at the appropriate school level for the study of Time, Continuity and Change.

*Expectations:* help learners apply key concepts such as time, chronology, causality, change, conflict, and complexity to explain, analyze, and show connections among patterns of historical change and continuity;

*Expectations:* enable learners to identify and describe significant historical periods and patterns of change within and across cultures, such as the development of ancient cultures and civilizations, the rise of nation states, and social, economic, and political revolutions

*Expectations:* provide learners with opportunities to investigate, interpret, and analyze multiple historical and contemporary viewpoints within and across cultures related to important events, recurring dilemmas, and persistent issues, while employing empathy, skepticism, and critical judgment;

**A4: Thematic Standard: Individual Development and Identity**

Social studies teachers should possess the knowledge, capabilities, and dispositions to organize and provide instruction at the appropriate school level for the study of Individual Development and Identity.

*Expectations:* help learners to identify, describe, and express appreciation for the influences of various historical and contemporary cultures on an individual's daily life

*Expectations:* assist learners to describe the ways family, religion, gender, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, and other group and cultural influences contribute to the development of a sense of self

*Expectations:* guide learners as they examine the interactions of ethnic, national, or cultural influences in specific situations or events

*Expectations:* enable learners to analyze the role of perceptions, attitudes, values, and beliefs in the development of personal identity;

*Expectations:* enable learners to examine factors that contribute to and damage one's mental health and analyze issues related to mental health and behavioral disorders in contemporary society.

**A5: Thematic Standard: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions**

Social studies teachers should possess the knowledge, capabilities, and dispositions to organize and provide instruction at the appropriate school level for the study of interactions among Individuals, Groups, and Institutions.

*Expectations:* help learners understand the concepts of role, status, and social class and use them in describing the connections and interactions of individuals, groups, and institutions in society;

*Expectations:* help learners analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture in both historical and contemporary settings

*Expectations:* assist learners in identifying and analyzing examples of tensions between expressions of individuality and efforts used to promote social conformity by groups and institutions

**A6: Thematic Standard: Power, Authority, and Governance** Social studies teachers should possess the knowledge, capabilities, and dispositions to organize and provide instruction at the appropriate school level for the study of Power, Authority, and Governance.

*Expectations:* enable learners to examine the rights and responsibilities of the individual in relation to his or her family, social groups, community, and nation

*Expectations:* help students to understand the purpose of government and how its powers are acquired, used, and justified;

*Expectations:* have learners explain conditions, actions, and motivations that contribute to conflict and cooperation within and among nations

*Expectations:* challenge learners to apply concepts such as power, role, status, justice, and influence to the examination of persistent issues and social problems

## **USA- Nat. Council for Social Studies: Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies**

*Strand I: Culture:* Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity.

*Strand II: Time, Continuity, and Change:* Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ways human beings view themselves in and over time.

*Strand III: People, Places, and Environments:* Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of people, places, and environments.

*Strand V: Individuals, Groups, & Institutions:* Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions.

*Strand VI: Power, Authority, & Governance:* Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance.

### **Objectives:**

- To develop an understanding of the events leading up to the Tulsa Race Riots
- To develop an understanding of the two Tulsas that existed prior to the riots
- To understand the sequence of events of the riot
- To develop an understanding of the degree of devastation caused by the riots
- To understand the level of denial regarding the Tulsa Race Riots
- To develop an understanding of how denial impacted the lack of healing after the riots

### **Essential Questions**

- What events occurred in the previous decade that could impact this decade?
- What issues remained unresolved from the experiences in World War I?
- How was conflict handled in the previous era that might continue to be a difficulty in the next decade?

### **Culturally Responsive Resources**

<http://www.tulsareparations.org/TulsaRiot.htm>

<http://www.ok-history.mus.ok.us/trrc/freport.pdf>

### **Lesson Plan Activity #1**

#### **Oklahoma Commission Report**

##### **a. Summary of Activity**

Students will investigate the social and cultural climate leading up to the Tulsa Riots in 1921. Students will serve as members of the Oklahoma Commission investigating the Tulsa Riots and make recommendations to the state on methods of reconciliation. By simulating the investigation and actions of the Governor appointed Commission, students will be able to search through the archives of this difficult time and help develop reconciliation strategies. Through investigative techniques students will try to uncover the real story of the Tulsa Race Riots.

##### **b. Procedure:**

##### **Materials Needed:**

<http://www.tulsareparations.org/TulsaRiot.htm>

<http://www.ok-history.mus.ok.us/trrc/freport.pdf>

**Time Needed:** 3-4 class times

Students will simulate service as members of the Oklahoma Commission assigned in 1997 to investigate the Tulsa Riots. Based on the Oklahoma's Commission report students will be assigned roles in the investigation of the Tulsa Race Riots of 1921.

The investigation can be divided into 11 task groups as the Commission investigation was or divided into task groups based on class size. Each of the task groups will be assigned to investigate a particular situation surrounding the Tulsa Race Riots. Suggested topics are listed below.

After Commission assignment research is completed all task groups will present their information simulating the "Commission Report".

Based on the information of the Commission Report the class will make their own recommendations for reconciliation to the State of Oklahoma.

*Suggested Research Teams based on the Oklahoma Commission Report:*

1. Original reports and newspaper articles written immediately following the riots in 1921.
2. Historical sequence of events
3. Property Loss
4. Death Toll and reality of mass graves
5. Events leading to these riots
6. Involvement of the Ku Klux Klan
7. Military and/or private use of airplanes for bombings
8. Investigation of the actions of the police
9. The Racial segregation of the City of Tulsa
10. The rationale this investigation didn't happen till 1997.
11. Repercussions to the community and country for not acknowledging this travesty.

**c. Differentiation of Activities**

- Google searches of key terms provided by the team members
- Have students make a choice in how they will present the information (e.g., PowerPoint, graphics, font style)
- Consider use of differentiated technology (e.g., newspaper articles via PECS, enlarged text)
- Ask the students to practice sequencing the events in the lesson plan activities

**d. Debriefing**

- What were some of the precipitating factors for the Tulsa Race Riots?
- What cultural fears helped create this travesty?
- What were some of your feelings as you investigated these riots?
- How did your commission handle the investigation?

Were there differences or similarities between your recommendations and those of the original Oklahoma Commission?

**Lesson Plan Activity #2**

**Summary of Activity #2:**

The Tulsa Riots of 1921 had a severe and damaging impact on the entire city. Victims of this tragedy were not the only ones who suffered. Learning to admit mistakes and trying to repair the damage emotionally and physically can help individuals and communities in the healing process. This project offers students a chance to help the wounds heal from this event. Students will be asked to participate in rebuilding Tulsa, a city that was torn apart by bigotry and prejudice. This rebuilding project will allow students to be involved in a collaboration and inclusive process where all members of a society are honored as contributors to a positive community.

Prejudice and discrimination were the major contributing factors to the Tulsa Race Riots. While researching these events can be emotional for many, instead of minimizing or denying these events we must learn from them and not be destined to repeat these horrific mistakes. The riots in Tulsa in 1921 left scars not only on the victims, but on the community and state and even in today's society. This Rebuilding Tulsa project allows students the chance to be involved in a healing process. Through understanding the meaning of segregation and the mob mentality of

these tragic events students will develop an understanding of inclusion, not exclusion, so that this type of action will never be repeated in our society. Students will be involved in rebuilding Tulsa to be a more inclusive community. Students will work collaboratively identifying the necessary components of a cooperative and collaborative community. Students will then draft a proposal on Rebuilding Tulsa after the riots utilizing collaboration and more cultural awareness in developing an effective community.

**Materials needed:** Oklahoma Commission Report

**Time needed:** 2-3 class periods

As large group, students will identify the necessary components of a collaborative community, suggestions are provided below. Small task groups of three-four students will be assigned to each of the collaborative community components. Each task group will present their suggestions for a collaborative and inclusive community. Students will then develop a plan regarding how to repair the damage done during the riots. This should include social/emotional damage as well as physical damage. The plan will need to be inclusive of all members of the community, no matter what race, ability, religion, age of the community members. Students will also develop a plan on how to teach the children in the community about respect for all.

Suggestions for collaborative communities:

- businesses
- schools
- entertainment
- community education
- housing
- transportation

**c. Differentiation of Activities**

- Provide hands-on experience in building a model of a city (students can use boxes, cartons, cubes; they could also practice using architectural software by clicking/dragging the images)
- Personal reflections (parental permission may be necessary) - via a cooperative learning group activity, ask the students to describe the struggles they have faced (e.g., disability challenge, family situations/circumstances, cultural diversity)
- As an introduction to the lesson, the teacher builds a city and then immediately destroys it. The class is then asked to rebuild the city with items of their choice.

**d. Debriefing:**

- What issues came up within each task group in attempting to include everyone in their collaborative community?
- How was this collaboration on Rebuilding Tulsa different from how the city responded to the riots in 1921?
- What have we learned from this experience that will keep it from ever happening again?

**Essential Questions:**

- How were your predictions for this decade different than or similar to the actual events?
- What are your thoughts concerning the Tulsa Riots?
- How can we Americans keep from repeating this mistake?
- What are your predictions for the next decade?