

Tulsa Race Riot (Massacre) Commission

Survivor testimony interviews

Interview with Joe Burns

Interviewer, Eddie Faye Gates.

April 16, 1999

Gates Mr. Joe Burns, Riot Survivor number 11. April 16, 1999. Mr. Burns is our Riot Survivor who is on the Tulsa, on the Oklahoma Legislative Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot. The law requires that at least one member be a survivor, and Mr. Burns is our survivor. He attends the meetings, he is a member of the Survivor's Committee. So Mr. Burns, today our what we have been doing is interviewing eye witnesses, that's one of our tasks at the Commission is to recording the testimony of eye witnesses. And we are asking you to tell us what you know, I know you were young at this time, but you can, you may remember what happened that day, or if you certainly heard your parents talk about it, or others older talk about it. So just tell us what it was like that day, May 31st, 1921 when that Riot started and the next day June 1st when it accelerated, and the next day, June 2nd when the National Guard came in and regained control. And just anything else about that even that affected your family.

Burns Well, there was a lot of commotion around. I remember my mom was very excited about what was going on, all the noise. My dad, just got in from work and went back on and went to sleep She woke him up and said, 'I don't think you ought to go to sleep, there's too much going on. I understand there is a group of people going down Dumas down to Greenwood to follow the commotion, you ought to go down there and see what is going on. We'll stay here and wait for it.' So, dad had an old pistol around the house and he put it in his pocket and took off. He didn't want to go, but he came on down. Went down as far as Greenwood, Deep Greenwood, they called it. It's the Oklahoma Eagle's office, wasn't the Oklahoma Eagle office then, I think it had another name. And he just hung out there to see what was going on. He heard that they were trying to lynch a Black boy down by the courthouse, six an O, I believe. Then he came back home. Stayed there for just a little while. He was gone three or four hours, got back just before daybreak. And he had a cousin who had come here from Dumas, AK about 2 years before he did. In fact he had promised to look after Dad and the kids until Dad got him a good job. And he came in, and he was really excited. He had two pistols. He told my dad, whose name was Newton, said 'Newt, you had better get your wife and kids on out of here because being here on this street isn't going to be safe come daybreak.' Said 'if I was you, I would take these kids out to the park. Go throw some.....' Would have been Golden Gate Park, which is now Duck Butter....Dirty Butter Creek. Every time I pass it on Apache, I think about it. Said 'take those kids to the park.'

At that time, see when you hit Pine, you ran into a lot of trees. Undeveloped area. The railroad track was there, but the left side of the railroad track, which would be the west side, there was a lot of trees. Thick as a jungle, all the way down to Apache and even farther. And they had Golden Gate Park. This Golden Gate Park, was a waterway that ran through there and it looked like it was deep enough with enough of a coverage to hide.

So there was a lot of them hiding in there. SO dad took his family in there. There was about five of us all together. Three boys and two girls and my mother and dad. Of course he had his sister-in-law with him, and she had one kid. No she was just pregnant, she hadn't had a kid yet and her husband. And they got down in there and it looked like there was too much light, they couldn't hide enough. And Dad thought he would get out and do a little scouting to see if he could find a place that would give him more cover. And while he was gone, daybreak came in and light cleared. And then there was a truck stopped at the top of the road, which would have been Apache, and they hollered down there 'Hey, watch you guys doing down there?' And Dad told them he had his family down here. And he said 'one of you come up here and talk to us?' They looked like they were soldiers, but they weren't dressed as solders. They only had one or two items a soldiers' on, like a shirt or hat and wearing a helmet and had rifles. So Dad went up there to talk to them and my uncle Will, my uncle went up there and talked to them too. And he said 'We're going to have to take you boys downtown.' And he said 'no, you can't take us here and leave the women and kids together. They got to have to have somebody here to protect them.' He said 'well, they'll be alright, we will leave someone here with them, in fact we will send a truck back to pick them up.' So that is what they did, they took my dad and uncle away from them and left us down there in the gutter. Wasn't long before they had another truck with some soldiers in it to pick us up and put us all in it and took us down to the convention center. Once we got down to the convention center, they started feeding us apples, I felt real good then. Gave me something to eat, cause I hadn't had anything to eat all night long. My mom was with me, my aunt was with me, my sisters and brother were with me. Three of other kids and the two women folks. We didn't see dad for a couple of days, course I heard later on what had happened to him. They had taken him over to what you now called, it's a whiskey store down there, used to be called fairgrounds.

Cameraman McNulty?

Burns It is McNulty Park. That is where they took him. There was a bunch of negro men down there. They left him there in that park for a couple of days. Mom was working for a white family, she got in touch with them and they went down and got him out. And brought him over back to the home. By that time we had gotten back into the house. (unintelligible) I wondered if we were going to get there to live there for a while, but we didn't get a chance to work that out because the man who owned the house came over and told dad that he was going to have to have the house, because they set his house on fire. He was in the house next door. He had a lot of good furniture, piano and stuff like that, you know, So I guess they set a fire. And they didn't have time to build a house for him, but they did give a parameter tent, so they were living in a tent and we were living in his only rent house.

Gates So that affected you, you had to move out, huh?