

## A “Forgotten” Racial Slaughter Goes Online

*EDITOR’S NOTE: The written word is often our only bulwark against oblivion, yet paper too succumbs to the ravages of time. That’s the problem University of Tulsa library director Francine Fisk faced. A bound master’s thesis from 1946 was virtually the only extant scholarly account of a murderous 1921 race riot, but decades of use by historians (and more recently, the legal system) left its ongoing availability in question. Fisk’s solution? A new ProQuest program that digitizes old documents and offers them on the Web—after first filming them for the permanent record.*

As the Terry Nichols’ trial for the 1995 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City unfolded, the residents of nearby Tulsa witnessed the settlement of a lawsuit seeking restitution for a long-ago racial massacre that took even more lives. Largely unreported at the time and fast passing from living memory, the incident is once again accessible to researcher’s thanks chiefly to a decades-old master’s thesis now accessible via the Web.

On the afternoon of May 31, 1921, hundreds of white citizens assembled in front of Tulsa’s courthouse, drawn by rumors that a black prisoner—charged with assaulting a white woman—was about to be lynched. Black citizens had heard the same rumors; intent on preventing the lynching, they armed themselves and marched on the courthouse. As the two sides met, a white man attempted to take a gun from one of the black men. In the scuffle, the gun discharged.

What ensued was the most devastating race riot in U.S. history, and the destruction was staggering: close to 300 Tulsans killed, nearly all of them black; upwards of \$4 million in property damage; an entire borough of the city, the impoverished and exclusively black Greenwood District, reduced to ashes.

Following the initial chaos, the accounts of calculated formations, charges, and retreats read like a battle narrative. The systematic looting and destruction of the Greenwood District and the violence perpetrated against its residents stand among the most shocking cases of racial brutality in post-Emancipation America.

Perhaps even more shocking than the riot itself is the fact that it went virtually unreported and unexamined for over 75 years. Initially, reports of the riot ran in most major newspapers around the country, but the Tulsa establishment’s deliberate suppression of information—including the sheer number of dead and wounded and the scope of the destruction—led to distortions in the historical record. The riot was depicted as just one more in a series of racial uprisings in the years following World War I, and the story quickly faded from national consciousness.

Some 25 years passed before the first serious scholarly analysis was attempted in the form of Loren L. Gill’s 1946 master’s thesis, *The Tulsa Race Riot*, from the University of Tulsa, and it would be another half century before the events of May 31, 1921, were revisited and critically reconstructed. And while Gill’s thesis bears the signature of its time, there

can be no doubt that his work is the basic foundation for cultural awareness and an indispensable point of reference for scholarly discussion on the subject.

Indeed, the Tulsa Race Riot Commission—an 11-member fact-finding committee formed in 1997—relied heavily on Gill's thesis, citing it numerous times in its final report, which maintains, "The Tulsa Race Riot was, all told, an exceptional piece of work....Gill worked diligently to uncover the causes of the riot, and to trace its path of violence and destruction....Few have matched his determination to uncover the truth." Ultimately, the Commission was able to locate over 300 survivors and descendants, thanks in no small part to Gill's meticulous effort.

The formation of the Tulsa Race Riot Commission and the subsequent reparations lawsuit led to increased interest in the subject and increased demand for Gill's original thesis, according to Francine Fisk, Director of Libraries at the University of Tulsa. "This topic has become extremely popular, and it's really gotten high visibility recently," she notes. However, she was concerned about circulating the bound paper copy of Gill's thesis, which had never been microfilmed. The work was showing signs of wear and tear, Fisk says. "Individuals had marked it and underlined passages and the binding was looking worn."

Worse, the book had been "disappearing" on and off for lengths of time, Fisk says. "Even 'in house' there were occasions when I'd go look for [Gill's] thesis in the open stacks and it was gone. We were afraid we'd lose it or someone simply would keep it, so we'd been very judicious about whom we loaned it to in recent years. In fact, we had been toying with the idea of not lending it any longer."

The competing demands of access and preservation have been resolved by digitizing the thesis and mounting the text online through the [ProQuest Digital Archiving & Access Program \(DAAP\)](#). Today scholars can download the full text of Gill's thesis, as well as two later theses on the race riot from the University of Tulsa, by way of [ProQuest Dissertations and Theses](#).

Fisk made the move in fall 2003, when she learned about DAAP from Laura Janover, ProQuest senior product manager. Because of her concerns about Gill's thesis, Fisk says, "we really jumped on the idea!"

Her foremost goals in digitizing Gill's work were preservation and access, Fisk says. "It would give it a lot more visibility and we would know that that intellectual property would be protected through ProQuest. Laura worked out a process where we photocopied our bound text and sent it to her personally to have it digitized."

Now Fisk is an ardent supporter of preserving the scholarly record through digitization. Previously, her only preservation option was storing paper copies of theses and dissertations in the Library's Special Collections and Archives area. Digitizing the scholarly works within the Library system was not an option. "We're a small institution, and our resources are limited. It's such a labor-intensive process to digitize."

Following the digitization of *The Tulsa Race Riot*, Fisk made it her mission to preserve hundreds more scholarly works housed at the University of Tulsa and successfully enlisted the support of University administrators. "ProQuest ran a report for us on those titles of interest that were abstracted in its Dissertation Abstracts database but weren't offered

digitally in full text. We had all the University's dissertations written between 1968 and 1997 digitized and made available through ProQuest Dissertations and Theses," she says. "We quite frankly had not subscribed to ProQuest Dissertations and Theses ourselves at that point. We were still receiving Dissertation Abstracts on CD-ROM because of financial constraints, but after Laura's presentation about full-text availability online, it all kind of went together and we inquired about subscription rates. It was quite affordable, so as a result we added these particular dissertations from the University of Tulsa and subscribed to the online version."

The decision to digitize Tulsa's archived dissertations and theses and to make them available online has proved to be a tremendous benefit for all involved. "We've been very, very pleased and we've had a lot of positive comments from researchers, faculty, students, and anyone else who has used it," says Fisk. "As far as pointing people toward the online product, they are very amenable to that because they can do it from home or office. I think our reasons for wanting to do this and our success with it would be the same for all libraries."

The challenges universities face in preserving their scholarly record are daunting. "It's the same thing you always hear," says Fisk. "We have decreasing space in our building so that's one concern. Preventing mutilation or theft is something we can't always be successful with. And digitization is the whole mode of research anymore. Scholarly publications are increasingly available in digitized format and people have come more and more to expect that."

With cost-effective digitization, offsite backup, and online availability, universities both large and small can now ensure that the base of knowledge laid by scholarly work—such as Gill's seminal 1946 thesis—will be preserved.

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