

Key Vocabulary

Red Scare

Communists

Industrial Workers of the World

Alice Mary Robertson

impeachment

martial law

Tulsa Race Massacre

Greenwood

Osage Allotment Act of 1906

headright

Osage murders

Indian Citizenship Act 1924

Meriam Report

Learning Outcomes:

The learner will be able to...

- Describe how the Red Scare impacted state politics and Oklahoma citizens.
- Describe the significance of “Black Wall Street” in Tulsa.
- Identify the factors that contributed to the Tulsa Race Massacre.
- Evaluate the impact of the Tulsa Race Massacre and the aftermath on Black Tulsans and the Greenwood District.
- Explain how labels like “riot” and “massacre” reflect historical understanding of events in Tulsa.
- Explain how the headrights system of mineral wealth contributed to the events known as the Osage Murders.

Compelling Question:

- How does learning about episodes of racial injustice help communities heal?

Chapter Overview

By the 1920s an oil boom in Oklahoma produced great wealth. But corruption, political instability, and violence marked the decade. In this chapter, we will learn that the Tulsa Race Massacre led to massive casualties and the destruction of Black Wall Street. In the “Reign of Terror,” Osage people were murdered by white men in plots to gain control over inherited mineral rights. This period in Oklahoma’s history was marked by violence and suspicion. Students will consider how conflicts in the early statehood period resulted in instability and uncertainty for different groups of Oklahomans.

“I feel that this damnable affair has ruined us all,” said Carrie Kinlaw as she described her frightening experience in the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. Kinlaw’s statement referred to the significant loss of life and property Black Tulsans suffered, but it could well apply to everyone who was touched by or who contributed to the horrifying events that took place in Tulsa. While many Oklahomans had welcomed the dawn of the new decade with hope and enthusiasm, the 1920s proved to be a decade of contradictions and extremes. The First World War ended in late 1918. The flu epidemic raged on, but it too subsided in another year’s time. Oklahomans, along with other Americans, felt a renewed sense of hope and prosperity. The higher wartime prices for crops like cotton and wheat began to decrease once the war ended. Soldiers returned home and competition arose for jobs and other opportunities. While manufacturing and farming industries began to struggle, the oil boom proved beneficial especially in the first half of the decade as a record number of Americans bought automobiles and demand for oil remained high.

So, on the face of it, the 1920s were ripe with possibility. But as it happened, the decade was full of challenges and no small amount of horror. Racial tensions were flaring. The far-away Bolshevik Revolution in Russia created fears at home. As Communists gained control of Russia and promised to spread communism to the rest of the world, Oklahomans distanced themselves from their radical past. The Green Corn Rebellion and the Jones Family conspiracy trial had already led to a significant decrease in Oklahoma's Socialist Party membership. Many Oklahomans developed an increasing fear of anti-American and pro-Communist movements that unfolded nationally after the First World War. Now they wanted to rid themselves of any lingering sympathies for socialism or antigovernment ideas.

Red Scare

Following World War I, strong pro-America values prevailed. Many Americans viewed anarchists (people who oppose government and authority), socialists, and communists in the United States as a threat. They viewed immigrants as a threat. The actions the federal government took to control these groups beginning in 1919 and into the 1920s became known as the Red Scare, a reference to the red flag as a symbol of communism.

During the war, unions gained power. They tried to use this power by going on strikes. Over three thousand strikes took place in 1919 and involved four million workers. The protests rose in the summer and peaked in the fall. The government painted these protests as leftist radicalism. Many people feared that the ideas driving the 1917 Russian Revolution would spread to the United States. Others saw the number of new immigrants as a threat to current power structures.

In late April 1919, several public officials received bombs through the mail, one of which exploded. Postal workers found many more addressed to other government employees. Investigators suspected that leftist radicals were sending them. On the evening of June 2, 1919, nine much larger bombs exploded in eight US cities. The weapons held up to twenty-five pounds of dynamite. The bombers left them at public buildings and the homes of public officials. Some people found flyers along with the bombing remains. The flyers said that a group called "The Anarchist Fighters" had distributed the bombs.

On November 7, 1919, the United States began a series of arrests and deportations related to the perceived threat of radical activity. Most of those deported were immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. These government actions were known as the Palmer Raids, named after US attorney general A. Mitchell Palmer. The November raids occurred in 18 cities and resulted in 250 deportations. In January 1920, raids occurred across 70 cities. The government arrested around 10,000 people. The arrests included orders to deport over 2,000 people. The Secretary of Labor canceled most of the orders, however. He also tried to get Palmer fired because the raids and deportations seemed rather extreme, but his effort failed.

As the economy improved and employment increased in the 1920s, the factors fueling the Red Scare went away. Union activity declined. While nativism (promoting and protecting the interests of citizens over the interests of immigrants) continued, people held such beliefs with less strength. Thus, support for anti-immigrant policies declined. In May 1920, the government falsely predicted that there would be a leftist uprising. When the uprising failed to take place, Red Scare policies lost all public support.

He authorized numerous raids and was responsible for the arrests of hundreds of people, but he did not uncover any serious threats. Nevertheless, he insisted that **Communists** were infiltrating the country with plans to overthrow the government. Oklahomans were especially sensitive to such threats, and as it turned out, their worries had a direct impact on Oklahoma. The fear of suspected radicals or other subversives led to an attack on the **Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)** offices in Tulsa. At the same time membership in the Socialist Party continued to decline.

In an effort to exact revenge on the Democratic Party for becoming the party in power, many former Socialists voted Republican in 1920 and 1922. In 1920, their votes helped the Oklahoma Republican Party take control of the State House of Representatives, but Democrats maintained control of the Senate. The increase in the number of Republicans in the state legislature and local offices did not last long, though. By the end of the decade former Socialists realized their revenge voting had given them no victory and so they went in search of new strategies.

The brief inroads made by the Republican Party in Oklahoma in the early 1920s also allowed for the first Oklahoman woman (and only the second in the whole country), **Alice Mary Robertson**, to be elected to the US House of Representatives. Robertson was a Republican, but she had also been strongly opposed to women getting the right to vote or running for office. When asked about this, she responded, "The men have thrust the vote on us and now I am going to see whether they mean it." Robertson was a force of nature. She was fiercely loyal to her party and did not want to be seen as a female politician who was mostly concerned with women's issues. And she was very vocal about this. While her time in office was short, her election as well as her opposition to voting rights for women together show the unusual and sometimes contradictory nature of Oklahoma politics.



Fig. 8.1: Alice Mary Robertson, 1923. Robertson won her US congressional seat in 1920 as a Republican, despite being an outspoken opponent of women getting the right to vote. She served from 1921 to 1922. Oklahoma did not send another woman to Congress until Mary Fallin was elected to the House of Representatives more than eighty years later.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Oklahoma Politics

On the national level, Republicans dominated politics in the 1920s. All three presidents elected in the decade were Republicans and all shared similar ideas about the importance of keeping government small and the need to decrease regulation. For Oklahoma, these ideas marked a rejection of Progressivism and the Progressive ideals upon which the state constitution was built. Oklahoma was a largely Democratic state during this time, which also put the state out of step with national leadership. Even the brief increase in Republican election victories in the state was not enough to shift the balance of power. Oklahomans were often politically at war with themselves during this decade. Impeachment (when elected officials are charged with doing something wrong) and the use of martial law (which is when the military is put in charge) dominated the administrations of Oklahoma governors in the 1920s and overshadowed the accomplishments that took place. Oklahomans may have overwhelmingly voted for the Democratic Party, but that did not mean they were happy with their leaders.

Section 1

1920s Oklahoma

UNIT 2

Governor James Brooks Ayers Robertson was in office at the start of the 1920s, having taken office the year before. He faced numerous challenges and repeatedly declared martial law. He used the National Guard to end strikes, including a coal strike in 1919 and a railway shopmen strike in 1922. He even threatened to use state prisoners to replace striking workers. Governor Robertson was also in office during the Tulsa Race Massacre, and as a result of local pressure from white leaders in Tulsa, he was slow to declare martial law and send the National Guard to the city. He later faced criticism for not acting sooner. He was also accused of accepting bribes and was almost impeached. Despite some of the turmoil in his administration, things went more smoothly for him than they did for the next governor.

Fig. 8.2: Governor James Brooks Ayers Robertson. Robertson, who was a Democrat, served as governor of Oklahoma from 1919 to 1923 during a difficult period that included both the Tulsa Race Massacre and the Osage murders. He used martial law several times and was almost impeached.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



Fig. 8.3: Governor John C. Walton, 1923. Commonly known as "Our Jack," Walton was a Democrat and served in office less than a year before he was impeached and removed from office. He angered a lot of people by making campaign promises that he did not keep, but his most visible conflict was with the KKK.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

In 1922, the state elected a new governor, John C. "Our Jack" Walton. He was a charismatic leader who made big promises.

Walton claimed to support public education and the rules of law and order but failed on both counts. His 1923 inauguration was among the most extravagant of any in state history as he invited the entire state to celebrate. Orchestras and marching bands from high schools and colleges arrived from across the state to participate. Walton provided an enormous feast for those in attendance, including "289 cows, 70 hogs, 30 sheep, 3,540 rabbits, 4,000 chickens, 110 turkeys, 34 ducks, 25 squirrels, 15 deer, 135 possums, and three bears." Even though drinking alcohol was illegal in Oklahoma, the inaugural feast included 42 cases of whiskey, which were then seized by federal agents.

Walton was only in office a short time. He served about eight months before being impeached, convicted, and removed from office due to corruption charges. He declared martial law to stop the legislature from meeting to vote on his removal from office. When that did not work, he even threatened to release all of the state's prisoners. Law and order were clearly not his top priority. For him, it was all about holding onto power.

Fig. 8.4: Barbeque pits at Governor Walton's inauguration, January 9, 1923. They covered a large part of the Oklahoma State Fairgrounds. The inauguration feast was impressive, but Walton's time in office proved short as he angered Oklahomans in both parties, leading to the legislature turning against him.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



During his brief administration, Walton went after the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), though his opposition to them had little to do with their racist and terrorizing tactics. He showed no opposition to them when they helped him win election to office, but he also did not like it when they threatened his authority. And like several governors who came before and after him, Walton relied heavily on declaring martial law and using the National Guard to restore peace. His bitter fight with the KKK ended when he was removed from office, but not before he dealt a final blow to the Klan. As his last stand against the KKK, Walton publicized many of the violent acts committed by the organization. This ultimately led to the legislature passing the Anti-Mask Law of 1923, which banned people from wearing masks and hoods in public. The “unmasking” of the KKK was an important step in ensuring that people could not commit crimes openly while concealing their identity. However, the KKK did a staggering amount of damage to the state, especially to its Jewish, Catholic, and African American citizens, before its downfall.

The rocky nature of politics persisted for the rest of the decade and by the end of the 1920s, Oklahoma had impeached and removed yet another governor from office. Several Oklahoma governors had been guilty of appointing their friends to important positions in the government, even when they were not qualified. Sometimes Oklahomans complained about this pattern and viewed it as corruption, and other times they seemed not to care. However, when Oklahomans learned that Governor Henry Johnston had hired a state astrologist to consult before he made decisions and that the astrologist was being paid with state tax dollars, they were none too happy. Johnston was impeached and removed from office in 1929 for “general incompetence.” For Oklahomans, this short phrase said it all.

The volatile nature of politics in Oklahoma did not just affect the state legislature and the governor’s office in the 1920s. Oklahoma consistently struggled with issues of law and order during this time. Understanding the dysfunctional political climate in the state helps us comprehend more clearly the lawlessness and violence that defined the decade.

Background to the Tulsa Race Massacre

During and immediately after World War I race riots took place across the United States. More than half a dozen cities experienced race riots in the summer of 1919 as a result of racial tensions.

Red Summer

Following victory in the First World War, American servicemen returned home to the United States and witnessed and sometimes encountered racial tensions and violence. In 1919, eruptions of racial tensions and violence, known as “Red Summer,” took place in twenty-five cities across the United States. They took the form of dozens of race riots and lynchings, an extralegal tool of violence to retain control within a community. These events spanned the country, from New York City to Bisbee, Arizona, and from Syracuse, New York, to Port Arthur, Texas. They affected large cities and small towns. In some cities, the riots lasted for several days and many people died.

The Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North and West continued during this time, and the competition for manufacturing jobs in cities intensified.

The rise of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and the atmosphere of the Red Scare compounded white fears of change and loss of status. The rhetoric of the Red Scare targeted Black populations in two ways. It focused on the alleged risk of African Americans becoming leftist radicals under the influence of anti-capitalists. It also stressed the perceived threat of Black militancy under leaders like W. E. B. Dubois. These fear-driven perceptions among whites fed the growth of the KKK in the late 1910s. The culture of vigilantism that dominated the KKK spread to the broader white population.

In October 1919, George E. Haynes, an official in the Department of Labor, produced a report designed to guide congressional debate on the issue of racial violence. Haynes documented almost forty distinct race riots and over forty lynchings in his report, which was titled “Why Congress Should Investigate Race Riots and Lynchings.” Using the report as evidence, the House Judiciary Committee debated an anti-lynching bill in 1920 as a response to the violence of Red Summer. The bill did not become law until 2022, almost one hundred years later.

Several factors led to these racial tensions across the country and in Oklahoma. African American men served with distinction in World War I, but they fought in segregated units under white command and some even served under French command (which no other American soldiers were permitted to do).

Black veterans hoped their sacrifices would be rewarded when they returned home. Instead, their bravery and service often triggered resentment and hate among whites. After all, if Black men could serve their countries with distinction, would that not contradict the racist assumption that whites were superior to African Americans? In fact, many whites were uncomfortable with Black success in general because it challenged this belief in white superiority. Certainly not all whites felt this way, but it is important to keep this widespread prejudice in mind as we examine increasing racial tensions following the war.

Fig. 8.5: World War I soldier, circa 1914–19. More than 350,000 Black soldiers served in the war, but they often faced discrimination when they returned home.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.





Fig. 8.6: Ku Klux Klan drum corps, circa 1921–22, in Oklahoma City. During the 1920s, some citizens viewed the KKK as a social or civics organization. The KKK participated in activities such as the drum corps. Their main purpose, however, was to instill fear and inflict violence.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

In Oklahoma, the number of All-Black towns continued to decrease, and segregation now prevailed in Oklahoma cities. Racial tension simmered just beneath the surface across Oklahoma, especially as KKK membership skyrocketed in the state. The KKK of the 1920s presented themselves as the great protectors of women and children. At first, some saw the KKK as an organization that helped ordinary citizens, and others saw them as well-meaning vigilantes who sometimes acted outside of the law to make sure that justice was served.



Fig. 8.7: A night gathering of the Ku Klux Klan, Okmulgee, July 4, 1924. The KKK grew in popularity in the first half of the decade, even as it came under attack by Governor Jack Walton. While some viewed the organization in a positive light, the KKK was actually a terrorist organization that engaged in violence.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

In truth, they were domestic terrorists, which increasing numbers of Oklahomans came to understand when Governor Walton launched his campaign against them and exposed their horrific crimes. It is true there were instances when the KKK confronted wife-beaters or protected young women from unwanted male advances. It is also true that the KKK frequently terrorized people, destroyed property, and engaged in lynching and other forms of murder.

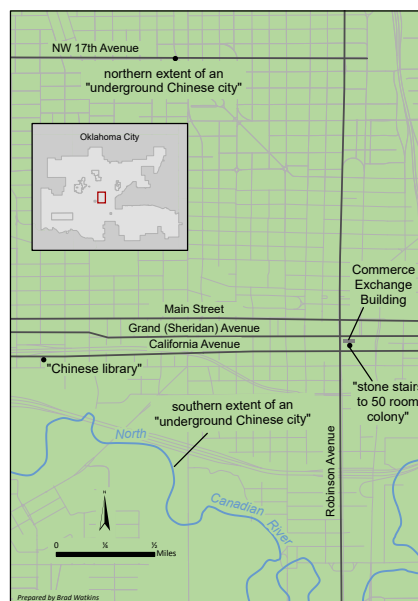


Fig. 8.7: Thousands of Chinese immigrants came to the American West in the 1800s and worked on railroad construction until the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States. By the 1890s, a small number of Chinese people moved to Oklahoma Territory and created an underground community in downtown Oklahoma City, where they lived and worked for the next several decades.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Oklahoma's comfort with the KKK in the early 1920s was hardly unique. Numerous other states, especially in the Midwest, had large KKK membership. The history of settlement in Oklahoma and the complex nature of law enforcement during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made Oklahoma especially vulnerable to vigilante violence, though. One incident of vigilante violence in the state occurred in 1917, when several dozen members of the "Knights of Liberty" ambushed a police caravan containing prisoners. The prisoners were seventeen men convicted of being involved with or sympathetic to the bombing of an oil executive's home. The Knights of Liberty beat the prisoners before tarring and feathering them. Jail time alone was apparently not enough punishment in their eyes.

Lynching was also not uncommon in Oklahoma, and it often happened without even a pretense of the police trying to stop it. One especially horrific incident, which occurred in Tulsa in 1920, stands out. Roy Belton was a white man who confessed to killing a white cab driver. He later withdrew his confession, but a lynch mob formed outside the courthouse where he was being held and demanded he be turned over to them. The mob succeeded in taking charge of Belton and proceeded to drive him to the location where the cab driver had been murdered. The police followed but did not intervene to stop the lynching of Belton that then happened as over a thousand Tulsans stood watching. Some reports said that the only intervention provided by the police was their direction of traffic when the lynching was over. One noteworthy aspect of this story is that it involved the lynching of a white man. While racial tensions were a growing problem in Tulsa, it is important to remember that not all vigilante violence was race-related or carried out against African Americans. These examples show that Tulsans, and many Oklahomans for that matter, had a degree of comfort with mob violence in general as punishment for crimes, both real and imagined. At the same time, lynchings of Black people happened more frequently than lynchings of white people, and they were part of a campaign of terror against all Black people that worked in combination with legal segregation.



Map 8.1: The Chinese Underground in Oklahoma City was discovered in 1969 during extensive renovations in the downtown area. It likely housed over one hundred Chinese people in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Chinese immigrants living in this part of the city tried to stay under the radar. They continued their traditional cultural and religious practices as best as they could. Many men worked in restaurants and other places during the day. At night, they ran businesses for the Chinese community. These businesses were housed in basements connected by underground passages where some also lived.

Courtesy of Brad Watkins, PhD.

The Tulsa Race Massacre



Fig. 8.9: Greenwood in 1921 before the Tulsa Race Massacre. During this time the Greenwood District or “Black Wall Street” was a prosperous community that attracted visitors and praise from across the country. The intersection at Greenwood Avenue and Archer Street, one block north of the Frisco railroad tracks, was the border between Black Tulsa and white Tulsa.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

On May 30, 1921, Dick Rowland, a nineteen-year-old African American bootblack (shoe shiner) did what for him was a very ordinary thing. He took the elevator to the fourth floor of the Drexel Building in Tulsa so that he could use the bathroom. It was one of the few bathrooms in the white part of Tulsa that African Americans were allowed to use. Seventeen-year-old Sarah Page was the white elevator operator working that day. We do not know what happened on the elevator (one story said he stepped on her foot) or even how well the two knew each other, but what we do know is that Page screamed when they stepped off the elevator, and Rowland ran. A clothing store clerk who worked in the building heard Page scream, saw Rowland run away, and assumed he had attacked her. The store clerk called the police to say that a Black man had assaulted a white girl on the elevator, and then repeated that story over and over again to anyone who would listen. Sarah Page had no plans to press charges. She made no complaint. But the next day, Dick Rowland was arrested by the police and taken to the county courthouse and placed in a jail cell.

Meanwhile, stories and rumors spread rapidly, one more sensational than the next. As talk grew about a white woman being raped by a Black man, so too did calls for an extralegal form of justice (that is, a form not regulated by the law), not unheard of in Tulsa. Local whites began discussing a lynching. That evening, a large number of white men surrounded the courthouse and demanded that Dick Rowland be turned over to them. Sheriff Willard McCullough refused and told them to go home. The white crowd grew larger. Then several carloads of armed African American men, many of whom were veterans, showed up and offered to help the sheriff protect Rowland. McCullough declined their offer and told them to go home. They left, but the white crowd grew to over two thousand.

News reached the Black community of **Greenwood** in Tulsa that the courthouse had been overrun by the lynch mob. Upon hearing this news, around seventy-five armed Black men headed back to the courthouse. News of the courthouse being overrun turned out to be false, but it was too late. The sight of a large number of armed Black men, some wearing their military uniforms, inflamed the white men who surrounded the courthouse. The whites greatly outnumbered the Blacks. A struggle broke out when a white man demanded that a Black man give him his gun. Shots rang out. More followed. The massacre was now underway. Through the night on May 31, violent clashes took place. African Americans were gunned down in the streets. An older African American couple were praying in their home when rioters broke in and executed them as they were kneeling in prayer in their bedroom. Inhumane behavior fueled by rage was on full display. It is impossible to know how many people died that night, but one thing is certain. More would die the next day.

Many of the white rioters were deputized and armed so they could “assist” local police. Others broke into the nearby armory and helped themselves to more guns and ammunition, including machine guns. Many of the African American men who were present when the initial shooting started tried to make their way back to Greenwood in north Tulsa to protect their families, homes, and businesses.

A number of Black families fled in the dead of the night, afraid of what might come next. Then things seemed to settle down by around 2:00 a.m. on June 1. For a few brief hours it appeared that the violent attack had subsided. Dick Rowland was safe. The defense of the jail had been successful. The sounds of gunfire diminished. Black Tulsans remained watchful and uneasy, but the quiet before daybreak may have raised their hopes that the worst was over. The worst was not over, though. Sometime between 4:00 and 5:00 a.m., survivors said they heard some sort of whistle. And then all hell broke loose.

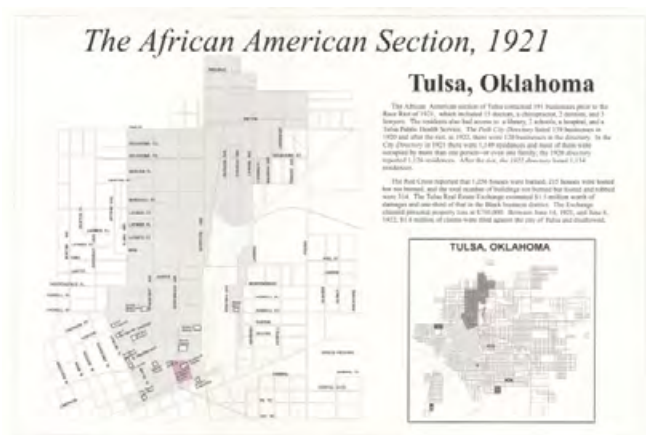


Fig. 8.10: Greenwood in 1921 after the Tulsa Race Massacre. A white mob destroyed over thirty blocks of this bustling community. Surviving Black Tulsans remained resilient, however, and over the next years, they rebuilt the community and many of their homes and businesses.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The Coordinated Attack on Black Tulsa

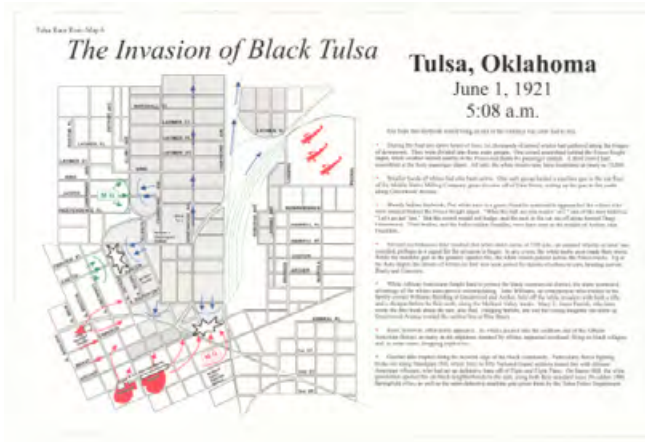
What may have started as a race riot became a full-blown massacre. White rioters actually used the quiet hours before dawn to organize and recruit more whites to launch an all-out assault on Greenwood. The thriving community known as Black Wall Street would be destroyed within a few hours.



Map 8.2: Black Tulsa as it was at the time of the massacre. The area included 1,149 homes and 191 businesses.

White men went door to door recruiting for the assault, saying that Blacks would attack them if they were not stopped first. Repeatedly, they referenced the alleged rape of Sarah Page, saying “What would you do if it were your daughter or sister?” They emphasized the danger that Blacks posed to the white community, and they used fear and intimidation to grow their numbers into the thousands. They did not just recruit men to engage in violence and destruction, though. They recruited women too. Several eyewitness accounts describe scenarios where once a house or business was believed to have been cleared of its Black occupants, white women with shopping bags moved through the building helping themselves to whatever they could carry. Once their shopping bags were full and they were safely out of harm’s way, the homes and businesses were torched.

On that second day of the massacre, machine guns fired from multiple locations, according to reports. And then the airplanes came, dropping some sort of incendiary devices onto a city already on fire. Many eyewitnesses also recalled gunfire coming from low-flying planes. Black people were gunned down in the streets as they tried to run to safety.



Map 8.2: The attack on Black Tulsa. The red arrows and images represent the white mob who invaded Black Tulsa. The blue arrows represent the routes Black citizens took to escape the violence. The green arrows represent a gunfire altercation between Black Tulsans and the National Guard.

In order to be released from the camps, African Americans needed a white person to vouch for them.

Some whites in Tulsa risked their lives to hide African Americans during the massacre, or they headed to the camps to secure the release of Black employees and acquaintances. Some whites vouched for African Americans they had never met before. The Red Cross provided food and medical care to the survivors and continued to treat those with the most serious injuries for nearly a year after the massacre ended.

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By the time state troops from the National Guard arrived mid-morning on June 1, Greenwood was gone. Thirty-five blocks had been reduced to ashes. Total estimates vary, but approximately 1,256 homes were burned to the ground while another 215 homes were looted. There were 191 businesses, a junior high school, a hospital, and at least 13 churches destroyed. Nearly 10,000 African Americans were left homeless. Governor Robertson finally declared martial law at 11:29 a.m. on June 1. More than 6,000 African Americans were placed in internment camps while white men were disarmed and sent home.



Fig. 8.11: White civilians with guns, perhaps those deputized by the Tulsa police, escorting a group of Black Tulsans into a building during the Tulsa Race Massacre. Afterward, authorities set up internment camps for the citizens of Black Tulsa, which they could not easily leave in the days following the massacre.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Tenant Farmers



Fig. 7.12: The bustling cotton market in Idabel, Oklahoma, 1925. During the 1910s and 1920s, cotton cultivation expanded in Idabel, beginning with one cotton gin in 1904 and increasing to six by the 1930s

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Race and racism left a heavy imprint on the young state of Oklahoma, but it is important to remember also that poverty affected the lives of many Oklahomans, regardless of race, ethnicity, or religious beliefs. Many who moved to Oklahoma in the early years of the twentieth century wanted to own their own farms, but Oklahoma proved to be a difficult place for poor farmers to get ahead. They suffered from high rent prices and extreme poverty. Most were uneducated and saw working the land as their best chance to create stable lives for themselves and their families. In the same way that many African Americans faced disappointment when confronted with the limitations of Oklahoma as a promised land of opportunity and equality, poor whites who moved to Oklahoma looking to find a better life for themselves and their families also faced disappointment. A number of people migrated to

Oklahoma to participate in land runs and land lotteries as a means of owning their own property. But what happened to most of that property? Some found success with the land they acquired. They turned their plots into farmland, or they used their land to help develop cities and open businesses. Others, however, quickly faced financial ruin, especially those who were poor to begin with and had no additional money to invest in the property they acquired. Some lost property they could not maintain and instead became **tenant farmers**, who rented rather than owned the land on which they farmed.

One particular challenge that tenant farmers faced was the corrupt guardianship of Indigenous land. Prior to the 1890s, a number of poor people made their way into Oklahoma from the South and rented land from Native American tribes, especially from the Five Tribes in the eastern half of what became Oklahoma. As Indigenous land came under the control of white guardians, both before and after allotment, rent rates increased as competition for land also increased. This rise in the cost of rent caused economic hardship for tenant farmers. It also did nothing to help Indigenous landowners when guardians pocketed the money. In the decade after statehood, rent rates for farmland throughout Oklahoma skyrocketed. Tenant farmers faced extraordinary hardships as they struggled to survive.

Many tenant farmers grew angrier and angrier as time went on because the rent they paid kept increasing. They encountered a range of other problems as well. Fluctuations in sale prices for their crops made planning difficult from one year to the next. A surprising number of tenant farmers changed land every year or two when their leases were up. This constant moving around made it hard to get ahead. Sometimes owners refused to renew the lease, or renters sought better quality land and/or more reasonable rates. On the whole, efforts to secure better land and more favorable leases proved unsuccessful.

Another problem was a tick-borne disease commonly known as “Texas fever.” It proved so devastating to herds of cattle that the government began requiring treatment for cows that involved dipping them into large vats of highly toxic chemicals. Ranchers and farmers with large numbers of cattle were more likely to support dipping than tenant farmers who only had a few cows. If a farmer only had one or two cows, the death of one cow in a vat would be an extreme hardship.

Tenant farmers viewed government-required dipping as a violation of their rights and were vocal in their opposition to it. When forced dipping continued, some tenant farmers turned to violence. Night riders destroyed property, including vats, in the middle of the night. They also threatened landowners with physical harm and property damage if they continued to raise the rent. Some turned to membership in the **Socialist Party** because they believed Socialist candidates were more sympathetic to the problems they faced. Some joined labor unions and other organizations that promised to help them. The largest organization in Oklahoma that voiced support for tenant farmers was the Working Class Union (WCU). They claimed to have as many as 35,000 members in Oklahoma prior to the First World War.

The First World War

When war broke out in Europe in the summer of 1914, many Oklahomans paid little attention. It was far away. It was not their fight. And Oklahomans had their own problems to address. But the war's outbreak created uneasiness across the country, which only increased the longer the war went on. Cotton prices during this time dropped about 20 percent, which hurt Oklahoma farmers. President Woodrow Wilson initially urged Americans to remain neutral in their thoughts and their actions. He reminded them that as a nation of immigrants with citizens from both sides of the conflict, America could not choose sides without risking its own civil war. Americans were not interested in another civil war. Immigrants from numerous countries called Oklahoma home and had sympathies on both sides of the conflict. It seemed a good idea to follow Wilson's advice. However, the longer the war went on, the trading partnerships between the United States and the Allied Powers put the country clearly on the side of the Allied Powers, which included (among others) the British, French, and Russians. Germany, as part of the Central Powers, was fighting against the Allies. Germany's opposition to some of America's greatest allies put German Americans, including those living in Oklahoma, in a complicated position.

President Wilson won re-election in November 1916, in part because for more than two years he had officially kept the United States out of the war. That all changed in early 1917. Germany tried to entice Mexico to attack the United States. Germany also began aggressively attacking American ships used for trading with the Allies. These two factors among others finally led Congress to declare war against Germany on April 6, 1917, after four long days of debate.

Many Oklahomans remained unconvinced that this was a necessary war. After all, to some it seemed that tenant farmers in Oklahoma had more in common with poor German farmers than they did with the political and economic elites of their two countries. They wondered why America and Germany should fight each other. When the **Selective Service Act** was passed in May of 1917, many Oklahomans ignored the new law, which required men between the ages of 21 and 30 (the age range was extended to 18 to 45 the following year) to register for the draft. In June of 1917, fewer than 25 percent of draft-eligible men in Oklahoma had registered and indicated their fitness to serve. The war was especially unpopular with poor male farmers who worried about what would happen to their families and their farms if they had to go fight a war in Europe.

The Socialist Party was vocal in its criticism of the war, and Oklahoma had a significant number of Socialist Party members—more members per capita than any other state in 1910. In 1914 the Socialist candidate for governor won 21 percent of the vote. Socialists characterized the war as a conflict that pitted working-class people from different countries against one another. They said that poor people were being forced to fight a rich man's war. In the United States, the Socialist Party creatively, though unsuccessfully, argued that the Selective Service Act violated the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery and made involuntary servitude illegal. In their view, the war draft was a form of involuntary, or forced, servitude. Antiwar and antidraft sentiment was strong in rural Oklahoma, until two important events caused Oklahomans to reconsider—and then abandon—their opposition.

Green Corn Rebellion

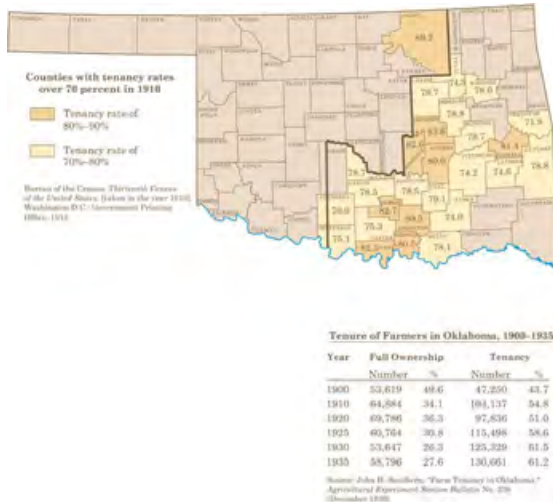


Fig. 6.7: The socialist movement and Green Corn Rebellion. With a high percentage of landless farmers, socialism grew in popularity in Oklahoma in the early twentieth century.

men took part in plotting a rebellion. The plan was simple. They would march to Washington, DC, and demand to speak to President Wilson. They would tell him to end the war. Then they would return home to their families and their farms. They planned to take corn with them to eat on their journey to the nation's capital, but the green corn was not yet ripe, which is how their protest earned the name the **Green Corn Rebellion**.

The Green Corn Rebellion ended almost before it started. Local authorities were alerted to the rebels' plans. Another antidraft group had been arrested a few days before the Green Corn Rebellion started.



Fig. 7.13: Green Corn Rebellion, 1917. In early August 1917, hundreds of tenant farmers, such as those in this photo, gathered at the farm of John Spears near Sasakwa, Oklahoma. These men opposed the First World War and the draft, so they organized a rebellion against the US government. Their plan was to march to Washington, DC, surviving on roasted green corn during their journey. Their protest became known as the Green Corn Rebellion, and it was the beginning of the end for the Socialist Party's influence in Oklahoma.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Oklahoma was not alone in its draft opposition. Antidraft protests and rebellions occurred in other western and southern states, including Texas and Arkansas. However, one particular rebellion in Oklahoma shocked those in state leadership positions as well as citizens who feared lawlessness and property destruction. Unrest among poor farmers in rural Oklahoma grew in the spring and early summer of 1917. As we have seen, there were plenty of reasons for their frustration. There were also organizers from outside Oklahoma who traveled around the young state speaking at events that looked a lot like religious tent revivals. Fiery speeches mixed evangelical Christianity with Socialism and antigovernment sentiment. The core message: farmers were being exploited. The entrance of the United States into World War I and the passage of the Selective Service Act further inflamed the farmers.

As a result of their fears over how the draft would affect their ability to support their families and maintain their farms, hundreds of

Within a short amount of time, on August 2 and 3, over 450 men were arrested. Some never made it beyond their home counties, while others made it only a short distance outside their counties. Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans all participated in the rebellion. They shared a common fear about what would happen to their families if they were forced to fight overseas. And they were determined to fight against government officials who would force them to leave their families to go to a distant war. Many, however, were not prepared to take up arms against neighbors and friends. Local sheriffs deputized community members to help put down the rebellion, and this as much as anything caused the participants of the Green Corn Rebellion to surrender within a few days.

Jones Family Conspiracy Trial

While those who participated in the Green Corn Rebellion planned to travel away from their home state to convince the president to end the war, members of the Jones Family plotted a very different strategy to oppose the draft. Eleven members of an antidraft group, known as the Jones family and loosely associated with the WCU, were arrested a few days before the Green Corn Rebellion. Their trial came on the heels of intense media attention to that other rebellion, and eight members of the Jones Family were found guilty of conspiracy to oppose the draft. In their trial, testimony revealed that they planned to hide draft-age men and set traps for any government agents who came looking for them. They intended to use dynamite to blow up bridges and destroy communication lines to keep the draft-age men safe from those who would force them to fight. Another plan included instructions for women helpers. To give their men time to escape, the women would offer food laced with deadly strychnine to government agents.

The testimony in the **Jones Family conspiracy trial** revealed two important facts. First, the Jones Family had planned to use illegal and destructive tactics, including murder. Second, the Jones Family had used a troubling amount of misinformation to convince these farmers that such drastic actions were not only just, but necessary. Farmers feared that “all able-bodied men would be taken by the army and sent to Germany,” while “the old men, the women, and children would be forced to work large tracts of land.” They were also led to believe this scenario would leave “their women despoiled and broken, their babies starving and dying from neglect.” In the same trial one witness testified that a state organizer told a group of tenant farmers that President Wilson had ordered the drafting of farmers to spare the college boys. This argument, though false, must only have increased whatever antidraft sentiment these farmers already possessed.

Although it is true there were outsiders who came to Oklahoma to spread lies among tenant farmers about the war and the intent of the government, it is also true that tenant farmers had legitimate grievances. Their fear of leaving their families both physically and economically unprotected was not unreasonable. The fearmongering used by organizers to incite rebellions against the draft is important to bear in mind, but it is also important to understand the very real concerns that participants had over the survival of their families. Still, the Jones Family conspiracy trial and the Green Corn Rebellion led to a strong backlash among Oklahomans who quickly went from questioning the war to supporting it whole-heartedly.

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Council of Defense and Extreme Patriotism

Across the country, cities and states created Council of Defense organizations to promote patriotism during World War I, especially in the South and West, where opposition to the war was strongest. Oklahoma had a state Council of Defense even before the summer unrest of 1917, but it was now growing in power and popularity.

Espionage and Sedition Acts

After the United States entered the First World War in June 1917, Congress passed the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918. Both were wartime measures designed to protect the nation's security.

The Espionage Act ("espionage" refers to spying) banned activities like aiding foreign nations or disrupting the armed forces. Those who broke the rules could face up to \$10,000 in fines, twenty years in prison, or both. The act was vague, and many believed it violated citizens' rights of free speech. Congress passed the Sedition Act to prevent conduct or speech that would encourage insurrection, meaning uprisings against the US government. Under the act, one could not display the flags of enemy nations or support actions, such as labor strikes, that would lead to less production. This law led to a series of arrests. The Oklahoma Council of Defense worked to enforce the Espionage and Sedition Acts in the state. Before Congress passed the Sedition Act, a bureau of the state council pushed Oklahoma counties to pass their own sedition laws.

At the direction of Governor Robert Williams, the **Oklahoma Council of Defense** took on several wartime jobs. It started by educating Oklahomans about the necessity of the war, but after a few months its focus shifted more to silencing any criticism of the war, rounding up draft dodgers, and promoting the sale of war bonds. In some communities, people who did not buy war bonds (even if they had no money) were harassed and accused of disloyalty. The fact that Oklahomans outpaced many states in their purchase of war bonds had as much to do with fear as it did patriotism. Teaching and speaking the German language were banned. Lutheran churches in Oklahoma stopped offering German language sermons and crowded their sanctuaries with American flags. Those who opposed the war or did not convey enough support of it were called "slackers," and were subject to ridicule, beatings, and imprisonment. In some instances, they were even tarred and feathered—a brutal form of public torture.

Although most citizens did not participate in these more disturbing displays of extreme patriotism, many Oklahomans ultimately came to support the war effort in a variety of ways. Crop prices increased significantly between 1916 and 1918, which helped Oklahoma's economy. Oklahoma wheat and cotton farmers eagerly responded to the global demands for their crops by increasing production, and they enjoyed newfound prosperity thanks to higher profits. By the time World War I came to an end in 1918, 85,000 Oklahomans had served.

Fig. 7.14: During the First World War more than 50,000 soldiers trained at Fort Sill. Here is an Armistice Day parade in Lawton, Oklahoma, just three days after the war ended in 1918.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



This included nearly 20,000 African Americans, 5,000 Native Americans, and 60,000 whites. Some of the first code talkers came from Oklahoma. Code talkers were Comanches, Choctaws, and Cherokees who used their native languages to send coded messages that German forces were unable to break. Joseph Oklahombi (Choctaw) captured 150 German soldiers and used his native language to pass coded messages.

Fig. 7.15: Joseph Oklahombi (Choctaw), shown here in two photographs, served with distinction as a code talker in World War I. Oklahombi was a member of Company D, 141st Infantry Regiment, 36th Division, American Expeditionary Forces, in France in 1918. In honor of his service, he received the Silver Star with Victory Ribbon and the French Croix de Guerre.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



Flu Epidemic and Public Health Crisis

The **flu epidemic** of 1918 and 1919 infected nearly one-third of the world's population. Approximately 500 million people contracted the highly contagious virus, and 50 million of that number died from it. The first recorded case was in Kansas in March 1918. The flu then spread rapidly and globally during the last year of the war.



Fig. 7.16: During the First World War, almost 500,000 women in Oklahoma joined American Red Cross organizations in their communities. They promoted the sale of war bonds and worked in factories. Some served as nurses in the army or navy. Others volunteered for the YWCA and other nonmilitary groups supporting the troops. Volunteers also often treated flu patients. In the city of Muskogee, Alice Robertson (left foreground) organized the American Red Cross canteen and workroom.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The close proximity of soldiers and their lack of access to daily hygiene allowed the virus to spread rapidly, especially in the trenches. Soldiers infected one another and spread the virus to civilian populations as well.

In Oklahoma, approximately 7,350 people died from the flu, nearly ten times as many Oklahomans as died fighting in the war. The victims were diverse in race, ethnicity, religion, age, and class. It was impossible to explain why some people lived and some people died. Theaters closed. Curfews were set. People were frightened. A century later, in the 2020s, Oklahomans would live through another public health crisis in the battle against COVID-19. Although the COVID pandemic may seem to us like no other event, it is important to remember that earlier generations of Oklahomans found themselves in a not-so-different situation. They too grappled with debates over individual rights and responsibilities, the role of government and public health experts, mask requirements, and mandates to close public facilities and businesses to slow the spread of disease.

Conclusion



Fig. 7.17: Wanada Parker, daughter of Comanche chief Quanah Parker, attended Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma and Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. She worked at the Fort Sill Indian School and the Fort Sill Indian Hospital in Lawton. In addition, Wanada Parker starred in the 1920 silent film *The Daughter of Dawn* set in the Wichita Mountains of southwest Oklahoma. The all-Indigenous cast featured three hundred Kiowas and Comanches.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The decade following statehood was not an easy one for many Oklahomans. Women saw their social status and opportunities decrease. African Americans lost what rights they had enjoyed for a time after the Civil War, as Jim Crow laws spread across the young state. Indigenous people lost more land even as white people forced them to assimilate. At the same time the US government dismantled tribal governments and sovereignty rights. Farmers faced uncertain weather patterns, fluctuations in crop prices, and sharp increases in rent and taxes. Labor unions organized to protect the rights of workers but sometimes exploited them too. Socialists appealed to rural Oklahoma farmers and laborers both through genuine efforts to help them and through corrupt plots to mislead and incite them. A public health crisis threatened to overrun the state hospitals as the flu epidemic of 1918 and 1919 raged throughout the country and eventually much of the world.

Oklahoma symbolized promise and opportunity, yet many Oklahomans suffered greatly in the years leading up to and during the First World War. This was true across racial and ethnic lines. This was true for women and men. For rich and poor. For those in rural areas and those living in cities. The loss of life in war and from the flu epidemic devastated many families. That is not to say that people's determination and optimism went away. It did not. As Oklahomans looked ahead to the dawn of a new decade, many celebrated the Republican presidential candidate Warren G. Harding's call for a "return to normalcy" in the election of 1920 (though only a minority of Oklahomans voted for him). But "normal" proved elusive. Women finally secured the right to vote with the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 (it came two years earlier in Oklahoma), though buying property in their own names and holding elected positions became more difficult, not less. Many of the issues Oklahomans confronted in the previous decade spilled over into the 1920s. New immigration restrictions were put in place. The KKK grew in power and popularity. And the brewing racial tensions erupted in Tulsa in what we now understand was the worst race massacre in American history. The return to normalcy would have to wait.

Short Answer Questions

- 1 What challenges did Black Oklahomans face during this time and how did they fight to ensure their rights?
- 2 What was the impact of the Dawes Rolls on tribal sovereignty?
- 3 Explain how tenant farming works and identify one specific problem tenant farmers faced.
- 4 What did farmers hope to achieve during the Green Corn Rebellion? Were they successful?

Short Response Questions

- 1 How did the Green Corn Rebellion and the Jones Family Conspiracy change support for World War I in Oklahoma? In your response, be sure to include details about each event.
- 2 Compare and contrast the challenges that African Americans, tribal citizens, and farmers faced in the early years of statehood. In your response, be sure to include specific examples for each group.