

Chapter 1 – 1:08

Introduction

John Erling: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 is considered to be the worst race riot in U.S. history. The actual number of black citizens killed by local white militia men and others as a result of the riot was estimated by the Red Cross at around 300. Circumstances leading up to the riot are in question. Late in the afternoon of May 30, 1921, black teenager Dick Rowland used the elevator in the Drexel Building in downtown Tulsa. As Dick rode and exited the elevator, an employee of Renberg's clothing store heard what was thought to be a scream. The clerk reached the conclusion that Sarah Page, the white elevator operator, had been assaulted. Newspaper headlines supported the account, and a race riot broke out May 31, 1921. What you are about to hear is the recollection of race riot survivor Otis Clark, who was 19 at the time of the riot. Otis was 106 years old when interviewed by phone from his home in Seattle, Washington, Nov. 23, 2009, and is made available to you on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 6:00

Before the Race Riot

John Erling: Would you state your name and your date of birth?

Otis Clark: Otis Granville Clark, February 13th, 1903.

JE: So how old are you right now?

OC: About 106 years old.

JE: Where were you born?

OC: Meridian, Oklahoma.

JE: What was your father's name?

OC: Henry Clark.

JE: And where was he raised?

OC: He was from Tulsa, Oklahoma, to my knowledge.

JE: Do you know how old he was when he died?

OC: He was supposed to have been about 97 years old when he died. He died in California.

JE: Your mother's name?

OC: Effie Clark.

JE: Was she from Tulsa as well?

OC: To the best of my knowledge, she was from Meridian, Oklahoma.

JE: And how old was she when she died?

OC: I think she was around 94 years old, somewhere in there. She died in Guthrie, Oklahoma, where she was buried.

JE: Did you have brothers and sisters?

OC: Yes, I had a brother, Bernard Clark. And I had two sisters. Gladys was one, and Almida was one. Both of them died in Tulsa.

JE: Where did you grow up?

OC: I grew up in the north end of Los Angeles, California.

JE: How did you make your way to Tulsa?

OC: We were born in the Meridian, Oklahoma, and my folks took me to Tulsa when I was a baby. And I grew up in Tulsa until we had, what you might say are the race riots, they called it.

JE: Yes.

OC: That was in 1921.

JE: Right, we'll get to that in a moment. Where did you go to school in Tulsa for elementary school?

OC: It was a little country school they called Hartford School.

JE: And then you went on to junior high school, is that so?

OC: I went to Booker T. Washington.

JE: Oh, you went to Booker T.?

OC: Yes, they transferred us from Hartford over to the Booker T. school and at the same time, just before we got settled in at the Booker T. school, they had the race riots.

JE: Yes.

OC: And the school was torn up in the riots, and burned, or something. And anyway, I went to California with some of my friends.

JE: Yes. In 1914, World War I broke out and you were 13 years old. Do you remember hearing anything about World War I?

OC: No, I didn't hear too much about World War I.

JE: Okay. As you grew into your teen years, tell us what it was like to be growing up in Tulsa.

OC: Oh, to tell the truth about it, just before the riots we boys just played ball and skated after school-time, at a little school that was called Hartford School, just a block or so off

of Archer. Greenwood was our main little business street, and it ran up to Archer. We lived on Archer Street.

JE: Do you remember your address?

OC: To the best of my knowledge, it was around 802 somewhere in there.

JE: Can you name any of your friends?

OC: To tell the truth about it, the riots broke up everything and I had to run off to California. One of them was named Clifton, and he stayed right there pretty close to Archer Street.

JE: Did you go to movies? Did you go to the theater?

OC: Yes. At that time, they didn't have anything but writing. They didn't have (inaudible), they were silent pictures as they called them. But I think it was Charlie Chaplin and (inaudible). They were the ones that were in the movies back then.

JE: And you remember going to the movies?

OC: Yes. That's all I did back then. That was our pastime, going to the movies. That was on Greenwood Avenue.

JE: On Memorial Day 1921, do you remember the days leading up to that day? Did you go downtown in Tulsa?

OC: I went downtown. I was about 12 or 13. I rode a bicycle and delivered medicine for the drugstore and 12th in Main Street.

JE: Sure.

OC: Shackles Drug Store. Dr. Shackles, I worked for him. And we had, what you might say is a disease hit Tulsa and a lot of the rich folks died. I delivered medicine. We had what you might say was kind of an epidemic or something. A lot of rich folks died around 21st Street in Tulsa. That was on the south side of the city.

JE: Were they dying from a certain kind of flu?

OC: Yes. I didn't ever know what it was, but some kind of disease hit Tulsa and a lot of folks died. A lot of rich, white people died.

JE: That would have been about 1918, I think.

OC: Somewhere, in there.

JE: Do you recall as a black person until said that you could only go to certain lunch counters and restrooms?

OC: Yes.

JE: The theater that you went to was only for blacks, is that true?

OC: You're right. It was only for blacks. Whites couldn't come, or didn't come on that side. And the colored people weren't allowed on the white side. That's the way that was.

JE: Do you remember the names of any of the other stores that were in downtown Tulsa?

OC: We colored folks weren't allowed in the downtown stores. We had to stay over on the Greenwood side of the city, on the north side of downtown.

JE: But they let you come downtown to work, right?

OC: Oh yes.

Chapter 3 – 6:34

Memorial Day – 1921

John Erling: On May 30, 1921, Memorial Day, you are 18 years old. Do you remember that day?

Say in the morning- what the day was like? What the weather was like?

Otis Clark: Oh, that was the earliest part of the summer. It was just getting warm at that time.

Because I didn't have on anything but trousers when the riots started. Then I had to run off, a lot of the colored folks had to run off from their businesses to keep from being killed. The whites were taking over the colored city altogether.

JE: Well let me just recap here what I know about this and then we'll talk about it. Because sometime that afternoon, Dick Rowland who worked on the ground of the Drexel building, at 319 S. Main, Dick Rowland, shining shoes, and he went on to the elevator and Sarah Page was the elevator operator. Dick Rowland was 19 and she was 17. And he had been to the top floor to use the restroom. When he came down, as he stepped out, we believe he put his hand on her arm, and Sarah screamed. He was black and she was white. That's what the history books say about this.

OC: That's about right too.

JE: He was 19, so he was your age. Did you know Dick Rowland at all?

OC: No, I was in grade school, and I think he was probably in high school at that time. He was a little older than me. They arrested him for saying something to this little white girl. They said he said something to the girl and the white men didn't like it and they jumped on him. And they took him and arrested him and put them in jail. And while he was in jail, some of the colored boys, to the best of our knowledge, went down to the courthouse to try to keep the folks from killing him. At that particular time, we made up our mind to try to leave Tulsa to go where my father was. My father was a pullman on the Frisco Train. He had left and gone to the other side of Chicago-to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He'd gone to Milwaukee, Wisconsin working for some of the leading white people on the train. He had sent letters to my grandmother, and I was staying with my grandmother, his mother. We went up there to try to catch him. We learned that he had left Wisconsin, and we came back to Tulsa. We were riding the freight train. We didn't have any money. But we got back to Tulsa, and found out that he had written to my grandmother that he was in California. So, my little-old Grandmother and me made up our minds we would try go to California too. So I went to California.

JE: Otis, on that day of this elevator scene, do you remember the first time you heard something was wrong? Something was going on in town? Do you remember that moment?

OC: To tell the truth about it, we didn't get that news. We'd run off and left Tulsa going up to Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

JE: But how did you know that day that something had happened?

OC: Because, they had gone and started what you might say is a little war so to speak. And the whites were running the colored folks out of town. We lived with a man that ran the little theater at that time on Greenwood. But, they didn't spare him either. They didn't spare any of the rich colored folks. If they were colored, they had to run off and leave their stuff.

JE: The Tulsa Tribune, the afternoon newspaper, carried the headline: Nabbed Negro for Attacking Girl in Elevator. And it said that Dick Rowland tore her clothes and scratched her face. And it said that Dick Rowland had been arrested and they alluded to attempted rape.

OC: I heard that.

JE: Did you ever see that newspaper? Or know about that newspaper?

OC: No. I'd run off and left everything. I'd run off and tried to catch up with my father.

JE: Whom did you live with?

OC: My grandmother. My father had built a home for my grandmother up on Archer Street, that wasn't too far up from Greenwood.

JE: Did your mother live there too?

OC: No, she lived in different places. But, she worked downtown-down on 1st Street. I didn't get a chance to even see my mother very much. She hardly ever came out there to check on us.

JE: Your grandmother had a garden?

OC: Oh yes. When I was a little boy she made me carry some of the stuff to sell to the sportin' folks, right back behind us on Archer. No, it was on 1st Street. The sportin' folk, what you might say sportin' women and stuff like that lived over on 1st Street. I remember carrying groceries and stuff over to the whites, they were sportin' women.

JE: What do you mean by sportin' women?

OC: Back then what we knew was that they would sell their bodies to men, white men. They had a regular little settlement that they lived in, right across from the Frisco tracks, right behind us. Just the Frisco train tracks separated 1st Street from Archer Street. And I had to carry groceries that my grandmother would send over to these sportin' women.

JE: And so you'd charge them for their vegetables?

OC: Yes.

JE: And they would pay you then?

OC: Yes.

JE: You'd bring that back to your grandmother?

OC: Yes. We were living well until the riot broke out. They tell me whites were jealous of us,

of what you might say is—you some of the Colored people over on that side. Some of the main folk were working for the rich, white folks that were done on the south side of the city. And they were living well. And there was a jealousy they tell me. They were living too well, and they wanted to run them out of town, and take that part of town and give it back to the white folks.

Chapter 4 – 4:12

Bullets Fired at Otis

John Erling: On that day, Memorial Day of 1921, do you recall hearing bullets and shooting?

Otis Clark: Oh yes. I got shot at. Come to think about it, I had a friend there at the Jackson funeral home. He was what you might say was the father of my sisters two little boys. I was down there at the funeral home when the riot broke out.

JE: When you went to the garage of that funeral home, tell me what happened as your friend was opening the garage store?

OC: While he was trying to open it, Jackson had come to the knowledge that we better get the colored folks out of that part of town. You see, we were the closest to the white section of town. Archer was the first street on what you might say is the north side of town.

JE: When you were there at the garage, Otis is it true that somebody shot and a bullet struck your friend's hand?

OC: That's right. Just across the Frisco tracks, on 1st Street, there was a mill. And the white men worked in that mill. It was some kind of grain mill, three or four stories high. And they (white men) could get up at the top of that mill and look across the tracks and see what we colored folks were doing. And sure enough we got shot at from the men over across the tracks. And it hit the boy in the hand, and I'm standing right behind him. He dropped his keys and we left the old car in the garage, and ran off and left it.

JE: You tried to run home?

OC: No, because the whites had then covered our home, which was about, three or four blocks up from the funeral home.

JE: Did you stay with your friend? His hand had a bullet in it?

OC: No, I ran off and left him.

JE: When you tried to go home, the whites were blocking your way home, is that true?

OC: Oh Lord. Yes. And they even burned it up.

JE: They burned your house?

OC: Oh yes, they burned up where we lived.

JE: But do you recall that night, you couldn't go to your house, it was burning. Didn't you go

to your cousin's house? They were planning to go to Claremore?

OC: That was in the riot. The riot was just starting. The whites were taking over that section of the city, which was closest to them, just across the Frisco tracks. My cousin, they lived way out on Greenwood and had a little café way up out on Greenwood there. So we made up our minds to try to get out to where they lived. But when we got out there, they were fixing to go to Claremore to kind of get out of the troubled area. So we went to Claremore. But on our way to Claremore, after week loss cross the little old Verdigris River, and then came out with their guns and stopped the car.

JE: When the white men stopped your car, where they asking for anything? Or did you think that was going to be the end of you there?

OC: We didn't know about all this race trouble that they had started. They knew about it, and so after they found out we didn't have anything, no guns and stuff, they let us go on to Claremore. But then in Claremore, at a little hotel where we stayed, they found out that the soldiers had come in there and stopped some of the riots, so we could come on back home. And the next morning we came back to Tulsa. But when we got back there, they had burned up everything. And so the little Salvation Army had come over and built some little-old building for the colored folks that were left there to live in. My mother and some of them had a little building and that's where I had to stay too, because all of the big buildings were burned up.

JE: When you came back then, you found your home was destroyed. I think even your dog was gone, right?

OC: Oh yes, yes. We didn't see him anymore.

Chapter 5 – 3:55

Treatment of Blacks

John Erling: So that night, May 31, in 1921, you left town?

Otis Clark: Yes.

JE: And that's when you hopped a freight train?

OC: Yes. A little-old freight train all the way to Chicago because we found out that we could get the train out of Chicago over to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. That's where we wanted to go to find my father. But he had already left and gone to California.

JE: Do you have any other memories of what you saw when you came back on the 31st? Did you see smoke or buildings on fire? Did you see dead bodies in the street?

OC: Oh, I don't know how many days that it was before we got back to Tulsa on the freight train. But when we got back to Tulsa the soldiers had come there and stopped

overshooting and stuff and everything was kind of calm then. But they killed a lot of the poor colored folks. That's the worst thing in all of the United States. They got away with killing 300 folks they claim, but it was even more than that. My stepfather, he was dead and gone. There was nobody that knew where he was. They didn't have any funeral for anybody. Ku Klux Klan they came in and had taken over and they didn't let the folks have any law (rights) or anything like that, they just killed the folks, all that they wanted to kill. And they let some of the folks live. But it was the Ku Klux Klan taken over the city of Tulsa. And they had taken over power there for three or four years in the colored folks couldn't do anything. We didn't have anything. And all the rich colored folks that owned the theaters and barbershops and all that stuff, they were what you might say out of jobs. All of them had become poor folks from then on.

JE: Did you see the courthouse and the mob that was beginning to build around the courthouse? Did you know that the mob was there and they wanted to lynch Dick Rowland?

OC: We were living down in the colored section, and didn't know anything about this at all. We just heard that they had arrested a boy. Though we didn't get the chance to see anything about it at all.

JE: Was your grandmother—what happened to her? Where did she go?

OC: My grandmother was—they had protected all the old folks and taken them downtown and put them in a ballpark in different big places to protect them from being destroyed.

JE: Well, they put some in jail, and they put some at the fairgrounds—was your mother taken to the fairgrounds?

OC: She worked downtown. We didn't get the chance to see her much at all. She was a young woman, so we didn't know what she was doing.

JE: Did anybody try to capture you?

OC: No. We stayed over on the colored side. They called it the nigger side back then. All the niggers had to stay back on the north side of the city where they were burning them up. They didn't tell the whole truth about it in the papers. But more colored folks were killed in that riot than anyplace in America. It was the worst thing in all of America—the Tulsa Race Riots.

JE: So then you decided to leave Tulsa?

OC: Oh yes. I decided to catch up with my father, and he had gone to California. My grandmother got a letter from him, which (by the way) they didn't ever leave Tulsa, they stayed right there in Tulsa, my grandmother and my mother and some of them stayed there in Tulsa. The Salvation Army built some little-old, shack and so they stayed in a little shack. But I went to California.

Chapter 6 – 4:09**Butler for Joan Crawford**

John Erling: Okay, you took a freight train to California, is that true?

Otis Clark: Yes. We were on a freight train, riding in a boxcar. That's where I saw some of the best grape orchards where they grow grapes. And for miles and miles those folks had nothing but grape farms where they grew different kinds of grapes. We were happy to see all of that. We hadn't seen anything like that before we went to California. But anyway, we had a nice time. And we got out there in California, and then I went to work for my father. My father was working for the rich sportin' folks, so I got a job working for the movie star folks. And I worked for Clark Gable and Charlie Chaplin and (inaudible). I worked as a butler for Joan Crawford, the movie star. I got what you might say on big-time. To tell the truth, I forgot all about our troubles that we had in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: Didn't you marry—you married a woman out there in California?

OC: Yes, I married a woman out there, but she died. I married more than one. My last wife was named Bessie.

JE: But this woman you married in California, she was a cook?

OC: I married her in Tulsa, Oklahoma. And then we moved to California. She was a good cook in Tulsa. So when we got to California, she got a good job cooking for—what was that movie star?

JE: Joan Crawford?

OC: Yes! She got a job cooking for Joan Crawford. That's right. And so I got along nicely then.

JE: And then you had a job, what did you do? You were a butler?

OC: Yes. I worked as a butler and I worked as a driver for some rich doctors.

JE: You mentioned Clark Gable, can you tell us what he was like?

OC: I only took care of him when he came to the house. I worked as a butler for Joan Crawford, and they would come to her house and have dinner. My job was to help serve them.

JE: Charlie Chaplin came to the house too?

OC: Oh yeah. Oh yes. But they had moved over to England. I didn't know just whereabouts in England, but they were over there in England. London or somewhere over there. They went over there because they didn't want to pay taxes, but they didn't talk about it, so I didn't know too much about it. But all of these new movie stars went over to England.

JE: California was taxing them too much.

OC: That's right.

JE: All of this time that you were living in California, were you hearing anything about Tulsa and the aftermath of the race riots? Did you stay in touch with anybody?

OC: No. My mother and my grandmother, they got along so nice after they calmed down

everything. They didn't want to leave Tulsa. So they stayed around in Tulsa and those little shacks that they built them, because their real homes had been burned down.

JE: You lived in California until about 1998, and you came back to Tulsa?

OC: I had come back to Tulsa every now and then to see about my mother and my grandmother and others and visit with them a while. But I made my own home, really, in California.

JE: When you would come back to visit, what did you think about Tulsa? And what did your grandmother and mother say about that? Because here this riot had gone on, what were they talking about?

OC: The Ku Klux Klan had taken over the power of the city, and they didn't allow the colored folks to have anything to do with what was going on downtown, and what those folks were up to. They had to be, what you might say, kind of like prisoners. They had to be quiet, and they couldn't say anything. They tell me that lasted around three or four years that the Ku Klux Klan wouldn't let them have anything to say. And, they wouldn't let any other towns come in and help us. The Ku Klux Klan kept us bound down for three or four years.

Chapter 7 – 4:07

Otis & Jailhouse Conversion

John Erling: When you were in California, I think for some reason, you landed in jail for about 20 days?

Otis Clark: You got that right. I had forgotten about that. I got acquainted with some of my old boyfriends that used to live in Oklahoma, in Tulsa, and they were selling whiskey, bootlegging we called it. And I got to selling whiskey. And somehow or another, I sold whiskey to the wrong guys. The little guy was a stool pigeon they called him. And he would tell the law about you. And I guess he made his living telling on folks selling whiskey. He told on me about having whiskey in my room. And sure enough, they put me in jail. My father was moving pretty well. He was in the Baptist Church. It was quite a nice big church, one of the leading churches of the city. It was the second Baptist Church they called it.

JE: Did the Salvation Army send preachers to the jail?

OC: Yes! They did that. The Salvation Army on Saturday and Sunday, they would let little young preachers and workers come to the jail and preach to us in jail. And I happened to be one of those that got converted in jail. They told me I had to get to the Lord and repent. So I repented and had one of the most beautiful dreams that I ever had in my life in the Los Angeles jail. I got to be a member then of the Baptist Church.

JE: What was the dream you had?

OC: I dreamed that I was over in heaven, over in the heavenly pastures. I don't know whether I

had wings or what. But I could see all of the beautiful trees. Trees all beautiful with flowers all over them. More beautiful than anything I'd ever seen in my life. And so I made up my mind that I was going to be a good Christian. And so I got to be, what you might say after that, is something of a preacher myself. And I would tell the folks to repent and get on God's side. And if you're on God's side, you were on the winning side. And if you weren't on God's side, you were a loser, and the devil had the power over you. So I had a good time then. I got to be a little evangelist traveling all around all over the country. I even went to Chicago and New York and traveled around the main big cities as an evangelist of the Church of God in Christ. And Bishop Mason was the head of the Church of God in Christ at that time. I served Bishop Mason and a lot of the big elders of the Church of God in Christ.

JE: You were a minister and in the church for many years then weren't you?

OC: That's right.

JE: Today you are a Bishop, Bishop Clark?

OC: They gave me that title. My little youth group gave me that title. I just call myself an evangelist. And an evangelist is one that travels to different places and goes to different church buildings and stuff like that.

JE: Did you ever come back to Oklahoma to preach?

OC: Oh Lord. Yes. I tried to tell the folks in Oklahoma how to get on God's side.

JE: Did you preach in Tulsa?

OC: Oh yes.

JE: What effect did the race riots have on your life and the way you view things?

OC: The race riots didn't have too much of a real effect on me after getting to California and getting with these leading sportin' folks. I forgot all about some of the troubles that we had there in Tulsa, Oklahoma. That's the way that turned out. Then, when I got to preaching-it was then that I was able to tell the folks about what a difference it would make, to be safe from the powers of the devil to the glory of God.

Chapter 8 – 4:33

Life and Advice at 106 Years Old

John Erling: You came back to Tulsa in 1998, and you lived here then for some time?

Otis Clark: Yes, I spent a little time because my sister had bought a home place for us in Tulsa.

I didn't stay there. I just stayed in California. But I would come back and check with them and spend time with them and then go on back to California. But, I fooled around then and made up my mind to live there in Tulsa and then I married there. Then after we were married, I made up my mind to take my wife and go back to California.

JE: We should point out that we are talking to you now from your home in Seattle, Washington.

OC: That's right. Auburn.

JE: Auburn, Washington. Otis, but we think back on the race riot, and the fact that the city was really silent about the riot for about 75 years, and that many Tulsans grew up, attended school, studied Oklahoma history and said that many years ago they did not know about the riot, that the city was quiet about it. What are your feelings about that?

OC: That's about right. The Ku Klux Klan was in power, and they stayed in power for years.

The Negroes had to stay on one side of town and the whites on the other.

JE: Actually, the race riot sent you to California and you started living a better life out there than if you had stayed right here in Oklahoma. Now you are 106 years old today. To what do you owe this long life of 106? Why do you think you've lived to be 106?

OC: I don't know myself other than trying to warn the folks that if you were on God's side, you were on the right side.

JE: How strong are you here at 106 years old? Do you walk with a cane or walker?

OC: No, I don't use either one.

JE: You are absolutely amazing. What do you are doctors say about your condition?

OC: I'm not on medication or anything.

JE: You're not on any medication?

OC: No.

JE: You're absolutely amazing.

OC: I just have to thank God. I try to tell the younger folks to get on his side, and that is best side to be on.

JE: Otis, how would you like to be remembered?

OC: As being blessed to be saved from the powers of Satan unto God. I wasn't on God's side all the time. I was on Satan's side. I was doing everything I thought the world was doing—doing bad things. But through the goodness of God, he let me get saved, and get on his side. And I'm telling the young folks that if you're on God's side, you're on the winning side. And if you're not on God's side, you're a loser. The devil can't save you. The devil is going to lose. The devil is going to get put in hell. (Laughter.) So if you follow him, you'll have to go to hell, so you don't want to go to hell. You want to get on God's side and go to heaven and live with God. You can't beat that can you?

JE: No, you can't beat that. When they were talking about reparations or paying money to those who were survivors, which you were, did you believe that you should be paid money by the state or the federal government?

OC: I heard that but it never did materialize into anything, or in other words, to reality in my life.

JE: You know, you could possibly have, as other blacks may have, resentment toward whites in what they did to Tulsa. Do you feel any of that resentment?

OC: Well, you're taught that, but if you get converted, God forgives you, and you don't bother about it at all. Real Christians don't bother about the riots and stuff anymore. Somehow or another, God has just taken it out of their minds. We don't have the mind of what we used to suffer. We have the mind of Christ. And the Book tells us, to let your mind be used for Christ—a mind to love and to do right.

JE: Well, you have done a great job here, and it's just hard to believe that I'm talking to a 106-year-old man. You're the oldest man I've ever talked to. And, by your pictures, you sure do not look 106.

OC: That's God's doing.

JE: Well God bless you. Thank you for telling us this story and for taking the time with us today. We really appreciate it very, very much.

OC: Thank you John. May God bless you, too.

Chapter 9 – 0:33

Conclusion

John Erling: You have just heard 106-year-old Otis Clark and his recollection of the 1921 race riot. Please consult our “For Further Reading” section and Bookstore for background information on this major event in the life of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Our thanks to the underwriters of this Web site, who have given generously for the preservation of oral history in Oklahoma and our thanks to Otis for his time. Thus far, he is the oldest person interviewed here on **VoicesofOklahoma.com**.