

Example of racial coexistence: a painful history as exemplified by race riots sur...

[Sociology](#), [Population](#)



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Abstract

History has proven the close proximity of coexisting ethnic races has been and remains at a minimum a potentially incendiary situation. The United States of America's 1906-1921 era surrounding World War I is absolutely no exception to this putative unwritten law of human nature and affords numerous race riot examples to demonstrate these difficulties. The riots that occurred in Atlanta (1906), Omaha and Chicago (1919), and Tulsa (1921) patently evince the brewing racial tensions between Whites and African Americans that exploded-precipitated and fueled by hatred, baseless fear, false accusations, malicious rumors, and innuendo-into riots, leaving in their wakes death, destruction, and perhaps wounds beyond healing.

The Riots

The inevitable defeat of the Confederate States by the more highly populated and much more industrially advanced North, as clearly evidenced by thousands more miles of railroads and telegraph and manufacturing plants, achieved the United States Civil War's top priority of emancipating

the enslaved Southern Negroes. The ensuing painful Reconstruction Era bestowed upon the freed African Americans liberties hitherto only given to other races. The assertiveness being projected by the black community was not only merited but reinforced by numerous examples of small business success stories throughout the country and further buttressed by the myriad scientific and cultural accomplishments of the American icons George Washington Carver and W. E. B. DuBois.

The self-confidence being portrayed and the perceived haughty nature and aura the African Americans now displayed was viewed by many whites as too menacing and thus the establishment of Jim Crow laws making the African American ability to vote much more difficult by enacting imposing poll taxes and the scores of discriminatory laws, the sole purpose to demoralize and degrade the Negro race.

The resultant massive migration of African Americans to the perceived friendlier North was met with White resistance on the crucial fronts of work and where to live. The presence of already existent abject and very dangerous working conditions were nastily exacerbated by this influx of competing workers, not to mention, at that time, The Great War, and its bringing home tens of thousands of job seekers.

The last ingredient needed to be mentioned is the incredible immigration the United States experienced, especially from Europe, the three decades prior to 1920 and the boiling over point for racial tension is set. The sudden proximity of so many varied cultures, ethos, and beliefs held by so many different people, all of whom are fiercely competing for scarce resources has been proven to be the major cause of race riots as exemplified by the

following race riots between blacks and whites in the United States surrounding the World War I era.

Atlanta The burgeoning post Reconstruction city of Atlanta witnessed the African American population increase a meteoric 289% from 9, 000 in 1800 to 35, 000 in 1910 and an overall 70% increase from 89, 000 in 1900 to 150, 000 in 1910. Regardless the racial mix it is a maxim that any concentrated population surge will engender greater, fiercer competition for all limited resources and considering this being Atlanta-the deep South, formerly embedded in man's atrocious practice of slavery-it is not surprising that the African American assertiveness and developing gentility was viewed as a frightening menace by many elite Caucasians.

As many African Americans established their personal sovereignty by forming successful businesses and forging the intricate and supporting social networks necessary to maintain the financial and emotional prosperity, the 1906 gubernatorial race provided the platform for two candidates to propagate their invective rhetoric as the general public had become increasingly alarmed with rising crime-the ostensible cause being most likely the unemployed, intoxicated black man prowling the streets. Both candidates had access to newspapers and effectively wielded their connections by offering to readers their respective solutions to the rising problems brought upon them by African Americans. As these two used their newspapers to wage their political salvos and foster racial propaganda, other area newspapers printed stories of alleged crimes upon women perpetrated by black men culminating with the spurious September 22, 1906 account of four local white women accosted by black men; the alleged atrocities to be

inflated by extra editions saturating and detailing the unwarranted stories with acts so evil the white population must in some way exact its revenge. The throng of white men and boys soon to amass downtown in response to these terrible black men deeds was able to be held at bay by pleading city leaders, but by early evening the crowd swelled and quickly became a mob attacking African American owned businesses, black men, and inevitably general property. Nature's grace finally dispersed the mob which was being somewhat controlled by state militia with a predawn torrential downpour. As minor attacks and plundering continued, the peace claimed by a newspaper on the 23rd was shattered when it was learned that many African Americans had gathered in a nearby town possibly plotting a September 24th revenge. The police's arrival early September 24 provoked gun shots, one of which killed an officer thus hastening the call for additional reinforcing militia to quell the shootout.

The extremely, yet well deserved, tarnished image quickly befalling the hitherto well perceived city convinced newspaper owners, leaders, clergy, and businessman to call an end to the racial violence and future fears of erupting racial tensions further compelled whites to, at a minimum, remain open to robust communication with the black community alleviating these immutable human traits; human traits leaving the scar of racial incompatibility illustrated the ensuing years as a more formalized segregation occurred as black and whites as groups each found their respective, safer areas to live.

Omaha The unspeakable brutality unleashed upon Mr. Will Brown, 40 and African American, on September 28, 1919, accused of raping a white 19 year

old, Agnes Loebeck, completely and definitively proved the cruel and savage nature our species is capable of disintegrating into for the purpose of venting prejudicial hatred.

Similar to the Atlanta riot, white Omaha as well was being influenced by newspaper reports of increasing black crimes. These stories may very well have been the machinations of a defeated officeholder to besmirch the newly elected reformist candidate and his ambitions. Propaganda being extremely effective to roil racial tensions, it is believed that several stories of apocryphal nature were published concerning black crimes to heighten the public's awareness of the encroaching reforms by exaggerating the looming black evils.

Chicago The Jim Crow South had signs clearly delineating where African Americans could and could not be. This not being so in Chicago it was tacitly well known that the 29th street beach was for the white population and the 25th street beach for the black population, and don't ever forget that this line of demarcation does indeed extend into Lake Michigan's waters.

Unfortunately for Eugene Williams, a black teenager, somehow the current propelled him into white man's waters. Clashing accounts of white people claiming a young kid too exhausted to swim to shore causing him to drown, and the truth describing Mr. Williams being hit in the head with a thrown rock by a young white man being the cause of the drowning. Catapulting the escalating situation into one week of riotous mayhem was a white police officer not arresting the alleged rock thrower but instead taking into custody a black man involved in one of the scuffles breaking out shortly following the drowning.

Leading up to the riots many causes paralleled the Atlanta riots thirteen years earlier. A booming World War I economy lured hordes of Southern blacks to the heavily manufacturing Northern states and Chicago's black population soared, more than doubling from 1916 to 1918. Reluctant to join the white controlled unions lest they lose what dignity and respect they earned, blacks increasingly heard the preaching from clergy to practice assertiveness and protection of one self and not being subjugated by the white man. The fact that many black workers were at times hired for the purpose of strikebreaking not only accentuated all white workers' notions of black workers' threatening their superiority and impinging their livelihood, but also shows more than enough reason for the blacks to be genuinely feared for their personal safety. This huge influx of blacks into the competitive job market was exacerbated by many black families moving into exclusively white neighborhoods resulting with twenty-six African American homes being bombed two years prior to the rioting.

Tulsa By all outward appearances 1921 Tulsa fit the description of the average and normal American city. Its population of well over 100, 000 was already segregated as the vast majority of African Americans lived in the Greenwood District boasting of their personally owned businesses, two newspapers, churches, and an overall very welcoming atmosphere. Belying this apparent citywide normalcy there was a very high crime rate associated with Oklahoma's rapid urbanization before and during WWI. With the excellent economic and business opportunities came the human vices cultivating a fertile territory for the emerging second Ku Klux Klan who recruited thousands of Oklahomans, including Tulsans, into their despicable

league of racial prejudice, hatred, and cowardice.

The high crime rate was dealt with rampant indiscriminating vigilantism brutally proven by a white mob in August, 1920 abducting and lynching a white teenager accused of rape from the jail reportedly being not well protected by officers on duty. This and other incidents were a prelude to perhaps this country's ugliest race riot, once again, ignited by the allegation of a black man innocuously accosting a white female and the ensuing conflagration being quickly fueled with newspaper lies, rumors, exaggeration, and innuendo.

The presence of National Guard units and a period of martial law attests to the riot's ferocity. The once bustling Greenwood District lay in ashes as the African Americans attempting to save their neighborhood were simply outnumbered and their inability to rely on the government troops whose duty to defend and restore order to the entire city was heavily concentrated protecting the white communities, and another city left permanently scarred.

Conclusion

Recent incidents have proven that our species' attempt to racially coexist remains a struggling progress and this paper's cited race riots occurring around the WWI era clearly demonstrate that when the explosive ingredients are present an otherwise harmless spark will ignite the fury. The skyrocketing immigration at the turn of the nineteenth century coupled with a country already undergoing rapid urbanization, industrialization, crime, xenophobia and paranoia throughout the United States demonstrates why this era was especially vulnerable and susceptible to man's inevitable

prejudicial hatreds and bigotry and the disgusting, permanent ramifications they unleash.

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