

**Episode 2: The
Legacy of the
Ocoee Riot**

A Podcast Produced by
Julio R. Firpo

RICHES Podcast Documentaries

University of Central Florida RICHES

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*A RICHES Project: Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences,
and Stories of Central Florida*

University of Central Florida

Interview Histories

Interviewers:	Russell Moore
Interviewees:	William Maxwell
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The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the RICHES of Central Florida Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.

Project Detail

RICHES of Central Florida is an umbrella program housing interdisciplinary public history projects that bring together different departments at UCF with profit and non-profit sectors of the community.

Central Florida has often been associated with large-scale, commercial tourism and housing development. While those aspects of Central Florida are important to the economic growth of the region, much of its history has remained unnoticed and under researched. The Public History program at UCF links many projects under one initiative to promote the collection and preservation of Central Florida history. By facilitating research that records and presents the stories of communities, businesses, and institutions in Central Florida, RICHES seeks to provide the region with a deeper sense of its heritage. At the same time, the initiative connects the UCF students and faculty with the community and creates a foundation on which Central Floridians can build a better sense of their history.

RICHES Podcast Documentaries are short form narrative documentaries that explore Central Florida history and are locally produced. These podcasts can involve the participation or cooperation of local area partners.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the podcast is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed in 2011.

Abstract

Episode 2 of RICHES Podcast Documentaries: The Legacy of the Ocoee Riot. RICHES Podcast Documentaries are short form narrative documentaries that explore Central Florida history and are locally produced. These podcasts can involve the participation or cooperation of local area partners.

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Episode 2 examines the legacy of the Ocoee Race Riot and the efforts to commemorate the African American experience in 21st century Ocoee. The Ocoee Race Riot erupted on Election Day, November 2, 1920. Up to fifty-six African Americans were killed and many African-American buildings were razed. Those who survived were threatened or forced to leave. The riot began as a white mob responded to Moses Norman's persistence of voting in the presidential election. The mob also targeted Julius "July" Perry, a wealth African-American farmer and contractor who was believe to be hiding Norman.

Episode 2: The Legacy of the Ocoee Riot

Narrated by Dr. Russell Moore

Interviews with William Maxwell, Dr. Paul Ortiz, Lester Dabbs, Joy Wallace
Dickinson

0:00:00

Introduction

Cassanello I'm Robert Cassanello, assistant professor of history at the University of Central Florida, and you're listening to the RICHES documentary podcast.

Welcome to the RICHES documentary podcast. RICHES, the regional initiative for collecting the histories, experiences, and stories of Central Florida, is an umbrella program housing interdisciplinary public history projects that bring together different departments at the University of Central Florida with profit and nonprofit sectors of the community in order to promote the collection and preservation of the region's history. By facilitating research that records and presents the stories of communities, businesses, and institutions in Central Florida, RICHES seeks to provide the region with a deeper sense of its heritage. This series will feature a podcast every two weeks, in the middle and at the end of each month, that will explore various aspects of Central Florida history.

In today's episode, *The Legacy of the Ocoee Race Riot of 1920*, Julio [R.] Firpo produced this podcast and Russell Moore narrates it, which examines the long term impact of this event on the region.

0:01:30

Martin Luther King Unity Parade and Celebration

Moore On January 18th, 2010 the city of Ocoee heads to their fourth annual Martin Luther King Unity Parade and Celebration. The parade was planned by Ocoee's Human Relations Diversity Board. The board aims to bring together all ethnic groups and make them feel as part of the community. William Maxwell has lived in Ocoee for over 15 years, and is the current chairman for the Human Relations Diversity Board. He elaborates of the purpose of the event.

Maxwell Tomorrow is, of course, designed to really promote our mission statement, which is that of uniting the – the races, the businesses, and the churches in the city of Ocoee around that bridge of, of ethnical, uh, components that make up our community to make sure that we have some dignity, we have some respect of one another as individuals, and to ultimately raise the level of awareness of each group towards the existence of the other group so as to facilitate a more harmonious and

racial profile in the eyes of our, uh, community, in the eyes of our county,
and state, and take it to whatever level.

0:02:50

Ocoee Race Riot

Moore Ocoee was the center of a race riot in 1920. Paul Ortiz is a professor at the University of Florida, and the director of the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program. He has written on race relations in Florida, and was the keynote speaker for the 2009 Martin Luther King, Jr. parade. He explains the origin of the Ocoee Race Riot of 1920.

Ortiz Well, what happened in Ocoee was something that was happening all throughout the state of Florida, and, in fact, all throughout the South. And 1920 was a presidential election year, and it was also a – a census year. It was a year where apportionment was going to happen. It was a year when African Americans throughout the entire country were registering to vote in a record numbers[sic]. And they were often using their wartime service as a[sic], uh, example of, you know, saying, “Hey, we went to France in very large numbers. we – we volunteered, we signed up, we fought in World War I, we served this country, we fought this war for freedom. Now we’re coming back to a country which considers us to be second class citizens.”

And so there were these huge voter registration campaigns in black communities throughout the state of Florida, and Ocoee was no different than – than any other of these communities. And when people tried to vote in Ocoee, they were turned away from the polls, but they came back. There was a gun battle that occurred, and that led to a huge – a larger gun battle, which became a massacre. uh, most African Americans were driven out of Ocoee within a very short period of time. But that Election Day massacre here, again was part of a larger story. I mean, here were Election Day massacres that occurred in other parts of Florida, as well. The violence was aimed at stopping black people from voting. and – and in a larger symbolic sense, stopping them from feeling that they had a stake in society, that they could become involved politically. Because if they became involved politically in 1920, that’s the end of segregation. That’s the end of Jim Crow. And the entire system would’ve come tottering down.

0:05:06

Cover-up by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

Moore Lester Dabbs is a former Ocoee mayor and commissioner, and served on the Human Relations Diversity Board. He wrote his master’s degree thesis on the Ocoee Riot. He stumbled upon an interesting discovery while conducting his research.

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Dabbs What I was able to ascertain is that it was a cover-up from the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] all the way down the community, the—the city, the society was in denial about the ramifications of the—of the riot. It came about because of the rising influence of a couple of, uh, African-American, uh, labor organizers—or labor people—who, if you wanted any lettuce picked or oranges picked or what not, you had to go through either July Perry¹ or Moses Norman.

That was the center cause, and the other situation, uh, Judge [John Moses] Chaney[sp] was, uh, arresting blacks in west Orange County who voted in the 1920 election, so it was a combination of factors. The, uh, FBI sent agents from, um, North Carolina, South Carolina, and I believe it was Georgia—anyway, three southern states to determine what was [laughs]—what was wrong, and there was no blame affixed. And uh, as I understand it, the grand jury report is still sealed. I know two people who've tried to gain access to it through the state attorney's office, and it's still sealed. So there was a veil of secrecy, so to speak, over the situation.

0:06:47

Post-riot racial tensions

Moore Decades after the riot, Ocoee still had a racial stigma surrounding the town. Joy Wallace Dickinson writes a weekly column in *The Orlando Sentinel* called "Florida Flashback," which covers topics regarding Central Florida history. As a long term Central Floridian, she reflects on Ocoee's past.

Dickinson Uh, there are plenty of anecdotes. Again just from my own experience, I had a high school friend that told me, um—this would be back in the [29]50s or '60s—that there were [clears throat] black drivers that worked for her father's business that wouldn't go near Ocoee. I mean, if a delivery had to be made out there, somebody else had to do it. So, I think there was certainly, clearly a feeling that, uh, that was the place that black people not only were not welcome, but—but were—that they were afraid to go there.

One of the, uh, leaders of the reconciliation movement, um, Jarred Gurley[sp], who is a lawyer now, but he was one of the leaders of the West Orange reconciliation task force. And I can remember him saying, he, he—he's African American, and he said to his wife, "Well, why," you know, "We can buy the same house that we're looking at in MetroWest than Ocoee for so much less. why don't we moved there?" And she had grown up in Orange County and said, "No way. Black people don't just live in Ocoee. We wouldn't do that."

¹ Julius Perry.

But you know the economics were so great more people did, more you know more African Americans said, "Well, let's do. Let's buy that house there."

0:08:32 **How Ocoee has changed**

Ortiz I think it takes time. When I was a graduate student I actually came to Ocoee, and I was invited by a small group of people, who at the time were trying to tell the story about what happened in November 1920. And they felt completely marginalized by the larger community, and they felt really – they did a public event – I think it was at a local bookstore – it was very controversial. And now – you know, I don't want to exaggerate the changes that have taken place, but now it seems that Ocoee is moving, uh, a little further along the road.

0:09:17 **Martin Luther King, Jr. Day parade**

Dabbs I received a call from Dr. Paul Ortiz – he spoke at the last[?] one, back in January – wanting to know my reaction to what impact of Martin Luther King Day parade had on the city, etc., etc. Now I've, uh, had the black prince from Apopka tell me that how envious they are of Ocoee [*laughs*] for – for being gutsy enough to – to do this, uh, sort of thing. I, I think it was uh, uh, an excellent, uh, idea. I was able to get I think six sponsors, and uh, it's uh – it's going to be an annual thing. We've had three I think, and uh, but it was the brain child of the Human Relations Diversity Board, and, and Danny Barene[sp], uh, the police of chief of Eatonville of the time – it was his suggestion, which we, uh, took hold of and made happen.

0:10:26 **Reconciliation**

Dickinson In – in 2000, there had been an event a couple of years before that, uh, in which a couple of groups had put on a program in Ocoee, and it was – it was just tremendously volatile. It was considered a taboo to even talk about it. Um, particularly in, uh – in Ocoee. It was very upsetting to people. It – it was absolutely, sort of socially verboten to even acknowledge that it had happened.

And uh, over those 10 years, there have been numerous things that have happened that have sort of built a spirit of reconciliation in many people involved. One of them being, placing a stone at the – the grave of July Perry in Greenwood Cemetery in Orlando, and, uh, many other things.

But when – when Ocoee that first Martin Luther King Parade several years ago – I think this is the four one – that was considered a – a quite an, uh – an amazing turn of events, and, uh, now it's gotten even, you

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know, more established as a—as an event that they would have a Martin Luther King parade. And I think that’s come to symbolize the changes in Ocoee and west Orange County.

0:11:48 **Ocoee Human Relations Diversity Board**

Moore Lester Dabbs explains the creation of the Ocoee Human Relations Diversity Board.

Dabbs It was created, because city, uh, recognized that we have to get past the unsavory events of 1920 to—to come kicking and thrashing into the 21st century. There was an unofficial body that the former city manager—now deceased—lent support to and that was the West Orange Reconciliation Task Force.

There was a riot in, um, Wilmington, North Carolina. They had had uh, a reconciliation at up there, a force that, uh, tell the story, you know, acknowledge the event, etc. and so we brought him the curator—the director—of that reconciliation in Wilmington here and, uh, we have, uh, —did have until last year—an annual affair where we gathered in the abandoned cemetery and what not. We bought headstones for July Perry, the man who was taken out of the jail and hanged on Lake Adair.

And we’ve done any number of things, but this was an unofficial body. It was sanctioned by the city manager but it was not an arm of the City [of Ocoee] officially. So, as we progressed in making progress in that area, the City saw the opportunity and took advantage of it to build upon the good will that we were creating to form an official body appointed by the [Ocoee] City Commission. It had great diversity initially, and I guess still does. But that was an effort to again ensure that everyone got a fair shake in the—the city um, for job opportunity, business opportunity, etc.

0:13:47 **African-American cemetery**

Dabbs Cemeteries—white or black—are places of, uh, worthy of upkeep, and restoration, and what not. And the City abandoned this Negro cemetery in the mid-50s. There was a cemetery committee here that was charged with overseeing both the white and the black cemetery, but they dropped the black cemetery in, uh—I don’t know, ‘53, ‘55, something like that. And it just went further and further into the variation.

0:14:28 **Tulsa Race Riot**

Ortiz We are able to use now, certain days—like Martin Luther King Day for example—as an opening to create a space to talk about these types of events. And the thing we have to understand of course, as you all know, is that they occurred all across the country, and you know Tulsa[, Oklahoma]—I was just reading about the Tulsa race riot, for example—and—and Tulsa—the race there in 1921, um, was even larger and involved a huge amount of destruction of property and—and human life. And I think what it takes is kind of, uh, a coalition, if you will, both of people who have locally—you obviously need people who think historically—but you need, you need people who are not afraid to—to talk. To sit down out a table and just kinda put it out there, and say, “Well, let’s talk about the meaning of this.” Um, and I think now in what I’m hearing from—from this community is that people really want to—to actually, uh, talk.

0:15:26 **Changing white perspective on the Ocoee Race Riot**

Dickinson And also, I think more people moved in that had no—I mean, more white people moved in—that had no idea this heritage were from other places, and it—it—there’s change on all kinds of levels, including on [inaudible] people that have lived there a long time. it’s not just all new folks. I think there’s been a change of heart, and I think also in—in along those lines, I mean, I’ve always been impressed that—I think this was a tremendous burden psychologically on white Ocoee as—as well as black. I—it’s, it’s—it’s really a deep scar. and I mean, there are anecdotes about—I’ve read in one of the—one of the accounts of the event that a—a long term doctor in West Orange would have people come to him and break down in tears for remembering that night and the fear that happened. So both races certainly suffered a lot I think from it. Psychologically and in other ways.

0:16:30 **Public knowledge and awareness**

Maxwell[?] I believe that the behavior that we see in our community, uh—especially human behavior—uh, is a direct result of knowledge. And I believe that it’s, it’s through events that we’re doing right now, that we can enhance the knowledge of the general public and raise their awareness, uh, to a level that they haven’t, uh, experienced before.

0:17:04 **Addressing dark history**

Dickinson I’ve—I’ve had reactions every time I’ve written about it. I think that usually comes from—from folks that—and I—I don’t know, because that’s one of those things about anonymous postings. You really don’t know. But it usually comes from folks who—who live in Ocoee and are really tired of being—being, um, described in a negative way and—and that sort of thing. And—and by the way, I—I think there probably are

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African Americans who say this same sort of thing, “This is very painful, we don’t want to hear about it.”

I, um—I think it is important to bring it up, uh, and it’s something I—I struggle with each time, but I think—I, I think, you know, if you care about history, you have to believe there are just lessons to be learned from the past. And it’s a tremendously compelling story, and—and I think one of the themes of it is how good people can get themselves into situations, in which they cause several things to happen, and they don’t realize it. They don’t realize they’re getting themselves into it. And I think that’s one of the lessons of the story, and by that, I mean, I think now—from today’s perspective, I think middle class white people sort of think that—many times think of the—the KKK [Ku Klux Klan] as I—as something that thugs engage in. But at the time they, the Ku Klux Klan was as presented as a popular fraternal organization for—for southern professional men. And, uh, I think many men joined it thinking that they were upholding some kind of values of the Old South or whatever—anyway without really expecting that they might get into situations in which there would be death and destruction.

0:18:57

Conclusion

Moore

Slowly over time this small Central Florida community has come to grips with its contentious past.

Cassanello

Thank you for listening to the RICHES Documentary Podcasts. Feel free to contact us with any questions or comments on the program that you just heard. Please join us for the next episode *Serving the Community-The New Deal Post Office of Cocoa Florida*, In which Heather Bollinger] examines the history of the iconic building, now home to the Florida Historical Society.

End of Podcast