

Excerpt from Amy Comstock's report on the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.

The causes that culminated in the recent race riot in Tulsa are not different from those that prompted similar eruptions in Chicago, Washington, East St. Louis and Springfield, Ill., except that it is possible that Tulsa may have been more indifferent about law enforcement than these older cities. Certainly lack of law enforcement was in no small part a contributing factor.

Tulsa is new. Its newness excuses it to some modified extent for its failures. You cannot build a city of a hundred thousand people in a span of fifteen years without a heavy load of construction cost. Most cities grow slowly. Tulsa grew fast. When pavements and sewers, water and gas mains are all laid in a few years, to say nothing of school and public buildings, the tax rates climb high. In the hurried construction of Tulsa that section which was known as "Niggertown" was pretty much neglected. Before this Negro district was burned you would have seen an offensive sight had you come into Tulsa on the Santa Fe. Improvised shanties abounded with out-houses standing on stilts, and yards in conspicuous disorder. There were water mains through the section for fire prevention purposes, but all inadequate, and of sewers there were none.

Here the colored child had at best a poor start. His outlook on life was anything but bright or aesthetic. He lived a long way from his white neighbors where things were better. He knew another world. The conditions under which he lived were a constant menace to the health of the city. But that was the condition that prevailed in Washington right under the shadow of the capitol of the nation.

It is doubtful if you can make a good citizen in a thoroughly bad and sordid environment. If resentment is not fostered a disregard for law and order is sure to be. It is not so much a matter of "social equality" which the childlike Negro mind at times indulges in with foolish day-dreams. It is a matter of physical fitness to live.

But the city does not meet its problem by merely providing better sanitary conditions, as Tulsa failed to do. It must school the Negro how to use and appreciate and better his living conditions when better agencies and instruments are brought to him for that end. This also, in common with most of our other cities, Tulsa failed to do.

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It is a sad truth to admit, but Tulsa has been pretty much the crook's paradise. He was least molested here. Bootlegging and gambling have been traditional. For years they have been recognized as close to legitimate trades. Hi-Jacking, as the Westerner call bandit practices, was common, and auto stealing so common that many insurance companies would not write auto policies. Real, honest effort to apprehend and arrest the crook was not the practice in Tulsa. The state recently created two new courts to take care of the criminal calendar which was loaded up with over six thousand untried cases.

It was in the sordid and neglected "Niggertown" that the crooks found their best hiding place. It was a cesspool of crime. There were the low brothels where the low whites mixed with the low blacks. There crimes were plotted and loot hidden. One city administration after another looked after the "uptown" traffic regulations, saw to it that you did not park your auto where you should not, but let "Niggertown" pretty much alone. There, for months past, the bad "niggers," the silk-shirted parasites of society, had been collecting guns and munitions. Tulsa was living on a Vesuvius that was ready to vomit fire at any time. Officials admit they knew of it but hoped it would not come off. And the argonauts were all too busy panning gold to care.

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The cause of the Tulsa race riot was the cause that is common to all race riots plus a city too busy building to give thought or care to the spawning pools of crime that indifferent citizens thought did not really matter because it was "over there." Now they know better. Most such disasters bring their resultant good. Tulsa teaches a lesson to other cities. Don't neglect the "over here." It is that kind of living that cultivates understanding and levels the rough prejudices into a smoother friendliness.

SOURCE: Amy Comstock, "Another View of the Tulsa Riots," Survey, 2 July 1921, 460. Reprinted at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5118>. Last accessed December 5, 2008.