

# The Last Lynching

by Stephan A. Schwartz

To the modern eye a trip down State Route 24 west of Highway 19 headed for the Cedar Keys is just a glimpse into a charming earlier Florida. Something like Key West, when Hemingway was writing there. But that stretch of rural highway is also a trip into America's heart of darkness; a study in the light and shadows of our history. It is an important trip to take.

The Cedar Keys are a complex of more than 100 closely spaced low lying small islands with irregular outlines, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle thrown down by a child. They are surrounded by the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, and covered with pine, cypress, cabbage palms, palmetto, swamp grasses, and wild flowers. In the brackish channels along the road and around the islands grows a rich crop of water hyacinth. The air is filled with birds, great and small.

The largest island is Way Key -- about 640 acres, one square mile. -- the only Cedar Key with a permanent settlement on which, confusingly, the town of Cedar Key is located. For most of this century, the only way into the Cedar Keys was via a railroad spur, or along a roadway made of oyster shells that could only be crossed at low tide. The railroad is gone, but the roads are paved now, and the entire area is stitched together by a series of bridges.

The earliest inhabitants were the mound building Neo-Indians, whose shell mounds and ceremonial plazas still dot the Florida coastline. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries the pirates Jean La Fitte and Captain Kid plied these waters, and hid their riches. Not too long ago a tidy treasure was dug up along the shore of the nearby Suwannee River, itself made famous by Stephen Foster's song of the same name. Later two British agents, Arbuthnot and Ambrister, stirred up the Seminole Indians against the American whites, until they were captured by General, soon to be President, Andrew Jackson, who had the Seminoles shot in 1818.

The first organized inhabitation of the area in modern times began on the island of Atsena Otie Key, less than a mile off Way Key, but it was gradually abandoned for the town of Cedar Key, which was officially laid out in 1859. The legendary ecologist John Muir walked here from Indianapolis in 1867, contracted malaria, was nursed back to health by the residents, and wrote movingly of their hospitality. What really got things going though was the purchase, in 1855, of vast tracts of land by Eberhard Faber, and his construction of a mill to harvest the cedar of the Keys, which was cut into blanks for the ubiquitous yellow Faber pencils all of us know from school. This brought the railroad, workers, and the dubious pleasures of mill life. A brush factory was also developed which turned the fibers of a local species of palm into the whisk brooms and clothes brushes used by our parents and grand parents. The brush factory closed in the early 1950s, as did operations

that made turpentine and rosin.

Gradually, Cedar Key (the town) developed into a truly charming village. With its white sand beaches and “Cracker” architecture (that’s not a slur, it really is what it is called) defined by gingerbread, tin roofs, second storey porches, and covered walkways, it has a Caribbean air. Hemingway wrote here before going to Key West, and there is a picture of an old man of the sea in the bar in the Island Hotel painted by college students to make the point tongue-in-cheek. But for most of this century much of America had either forgotten or never known about Cedar Key until 1923, when a racist gang drawn from the next door town of Sumner, the surrounding countryside, and several nearby states, committed one of the last and worst massacres to occur in what some historians call The Lynching Period of American history. It happened in Rosewood, about nine miles east of Cedar Key.

Today Rosewood is nothing much. A green and white road sign, a few metal Bradley buildings, a cinderblock volunteer fire department, a few scattered tract homes, a satellite dish, and one aging Victorian white house of fading elegance. Until January 1923, however, Rosewood was a prosperous Southern African-American community.

It started on New Year’s Day when Fannie Taylor, a white woman from the next door town of Sumner, came running down the street screaming, her face covered by blood and tears. Accounts differ, but

the essence most agree on is that she said, or intimated, that she had been assaulted by a black man who the mob came to believe was being hidden by the residents of Rosewood. The truth seems to be she was beaten by her white lover, but feared revealing this lest her mill worker husband kill the man.

Enflamed by her appearance, her story, and a long festering envy of the Rosewood families who were more affluent than their Sumner neighbors, a mob of Sumner white men quickly gathered. Over the next several days the mob pillaged, murdered, and burned. At least 10 people, including two whites, died, and Rosewood, a town of 30 homes, stores, and a Masonic lodge, was left in ashes. The bodies of the men, women, and children killed in this paroxysm of hate, as well as their charred belongings, were dumped in an unmarked mass grave, by several accounts less than half a mile away from the Victorian house that still stands along Highway 24. At the time of the massacre, it was owned by John Wright, the only white store keeper in Rosewood. Assisted by a black World War I veteran, who just happened to be passing through, Wright risked his life to hide the women and children survivors in his home, and in the nearby swamp, until they could be smuggled aboard a train which took them to safety.

Appropriately, the house is now the home of a gracious publicity-shy mixed-raced (Japanese/American) couple. Driving past it on its dry highpoint in the midst of saltwater marsh one wonders why it is not a

national memorial.

No African-Americans seem to live in the Cedar Keys now, although many visit. The last black resident, David Mitchell, had his house moved to nearby Chiefland where there were other African-Americans, but asked to be buried in the Cedar Key township cemetery, which request was honored when he died in 1979. More than one person, when asked by a visitor about the Rosewood massacre, denied that it ever took place, citing a Grand Jury in 1923, which found there was no evidence that anything warranting a trial took place. Others acknowledged that something happened, but said "there were white people killed. The Northern press just made things up the way they wanted." When asked why the State of Florida, in 1994, paid the Rosewood survivors and their descendents \$2.1 million dollars in reparations, the usual response was "Politics."

Today, as these basically decent people stand in their friendly town, talking about an event that happened over 75 years ago, long before most of them were born, it is clear there is a massive unwillingness to open the wound and deal with the unhealed emotions that lie beneath. It would be easy to single out those who live here for such reticence and paint them in a negative light. But the truth is that Cedar Key is not so very different from many other towns and cities in America, or the U.S. Senate.

Only in June 2005, after 200 earlier attempts to make lynching a Federal crime, did the Senate finally issue, not a law, but a formal apology for not passing legislation outlawing lynchings. And even this apology was not a unanimous one. More than 20 senators refused to go along, among them Mississippi Senators Trent Lott and Thad Cochran who declined to be present for the vote. Both Cedar Key and the rest of the U.S. have come a long way, as Colin Powell and Condelezza Rice and Oprah Winfrey and Michael Jordan have all made clear. But we aren't there yet, and knowing the road that leads to Rosewood and the last lynching is important to remember.