

Chapter 11

THE MEMORY OF 1898

For decades afterward, participation in the 1898 campaign became the irreplaceable political credential; at least five of the state's next six governors were drawn from its ranks. As late as 1920, Cameron Morrison campaigned on his laurels as a Red Shirt Democrat in the "party of white supremacy."

And yet, even as white supremacy tightened its grip on North Carolina, the memory of what that victory had entailed — murders, banishments, stuffed ballot boxes — soon became murky. The central episode was gradually cleansed from our state's history, from our textbooks and our memories. Eventually, Charles B. Aycock became known as the education governor.

However, the raw violence of Wilmington was not completely forgotten. It could, of course, be seen every day, everywhere, in the Jim Crow world it had made. More than 60 blacks were lynched in North Carolina between 1900 and 1943. Whites would often raise the specter of 1898 when mounting demands from African-Americans for justice made it necessary to remind them of what could happen. "Sometimes," historian Glenda Gilmore writes, "murder does its best work in memory, after the fact."

During World War II, black protests against racial discrimination blossomed, especially among black men in uniform. Black soldiers stationed at Camp Davis, 30 miles north of Wilmington, overturned buses at Grace and Second streets in Wilmington to protest segregation policies that limited black seating. Mayor Bruce Cameron pleaded with Gov. J. Melville Broughton to "tell them as long as you are governor the colored people will have to behave themselves."

On July 11, 1943, Broughton mounted a podium beside the Cape Fear River that Alfred Waddell had promised to clot with black bodies. In language evoking the inflammatory tirades of 1898 against blacks preying on white women, Broughton condemned "radical agitators" who he claimed were seeking "to advance theories and philosophies which if carried to their logical conclusion would result only in a mongrel race." Then he cut to the chase: "Forty-five years ago, blood flowed freely in the streets of this city." It was hard to escape the conclusion that if the

"radical agitators" persisted, it could happen again.

Broughton was not simply a pandering politician intent on maintaining law and order. He reflected the view of much of North Carolina's elite, who still understood the violence upon which their world rested.

During the war, Josephus Daniels' sons, Jonathan and Frank Daniels Sr., often conferred about race relations in North Carolina. Jonathan worked as an assistant to President Franklin Roosevelt on race relations. Alarmed at "the rising insistence of Negroes on their rights," Jonathan favored small concessions in order to maintain white domination. "We thought we had to get a little justice [for blacks] just to keep them in line," he said later.

Frank Daniels, who stayed in Raleigh to publish *The News and Observer*, took a harder stance. If African-Americans continue to "keep on insisting for more privileges," he wrote, "a worse condition is going to exist in North Carolina before very long than the period from 1895 to 1902, because white people just



After a violent demonstration by black soldiers in Wilmington during World War II, Gov. J. Melville Broughton made a speech invoking the 1898 riots.

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A Rights of White People meeting at Hugh MacRae Park in Wilmington, 1971. "What we need in this town are some dead agitators. They should be shot and left in the streets ...," a white man said.

PHOTO BY ANDY HOWELL/WILMINGTON STAR-NEWS

aren't going to stand for it." If blacks continued to press for "equality," Daniels insisted, "white people are going to rise in arms and eliminate them from the national picture." In the end, Daniels warned, continued civil rights activism would "mean that all of [the blacks] that can read and write are going to be eliminated in the Hitler style."

Despite several riots and persistent black protests across the state, the bloodbath some predicted did not occur. Newly committed to America's image as a beacon of democracy, the federal government, the national Democratic Party and many newspapers, including *The News and Observer*, began to actively oppose white terror after the war.

Lynching was no longer a viable political option, though it continued to happen occasionally. When a black man in Jackson, N.C., miraculously escaped the clutches of a lynch mob in 1947, Gov. R. Gregg Cherry attempted to prosecute members of the mob, though he failed. When the Klan committed dozens of kidnappings, whippings and shootings in Eastern North Carolina in the early 1950s, 60 Klansmen were indicted. During the 1960s, white terrorism persisted but rarely won public applause.

And yet from the very first hints of the modern black freedom struggle, the memory of violence haunted Wilmington. Hubert Eaton, an African-American physician who pressed for integration in Wilmington for many years, recalls a 1951 school board meeting in which he was rebuffed by the board's attorney, who alluded to the violence of 1898 "as an effort to intimidate — to warn that it could happen again."

In 1971, when the upheavals over school integration tore through Wilmington, a white man at a Rights of White People rally in Hugh MacRae Park told the *Wilmington Morning Star*: "What we need in this town are some dead agitators. They should be shot and left in the streets as a reminder for three days and then bury them. I've got my gun."

When Wilmington's streets raged with violence in early 1971, one black woman recalled, her schoolteachers warned her about what had happened at the turn of the century. "Those old experienced teachers," she told an interviewer, "... talked in hush-hush tones about 1898." But the ghosts along the river persisted in their whispering, and that is what

echoed in our church in 1971 when an African-American woman told my father, the Rev. Vernon C. Tyson, "They say that river was full of black bodies."

It is no wonder that the furious conflict that marked the black freedom movement in Wilmington in 1971 brought back memories of bodies drifting in the current of the Cape Fear. Wilmington's African-Americans realized that the legacy of the racial massacre still haunted the city. And this is only a little less true today. Far beyond North Carolina and 1898, the tragic events that transpired in Wilmington force us to contemplate the meaning of America's racial past and its hold on the living.

From our vantage point more than a century later, we can see that the white supremacy campaigns of the 1890s and early 1900s injected a vicious racial ideology into the heart of American political culture. Our separate and unequal lives attest to its persistence.

If 1898 has saddled us with its legacy, it also suggests how we might overcome it. Its central lesson is this: Human beings make history. The mistakes that North Carolinians made in 1898 can be mended if we choose.