

CLOSE TO HOME

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Listening for 1898 stories still waiting to be told

The violence began at North Fourth and Harnett streets, at 11:30 a.m., where a place called Moore's Drug-store stood. The repercussions echoed loud and long for over a century, throughout Wilmington and then, through North Carolina and even further away.

They never quite reached the ears of Lottie Clinton, whose family wanted her to grow up in a positive environment, to look forward instead of back and keep eyes fixed on her own personal prize.

And so Clinton, an African-American woman of 68 years, never learned early on about the massacre they now call the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898.

As a child, she didn't know white terrorists with guns roamed freely through the Port City, training their guns on innocent black men and blowing them to a place far better than what Wilmington had become.

She didn't know they ransacked the town's only black newspaper and that it burned. An accident, they said it was.

Clinton didn't hear about black women fleeing in terror to swamps with their children, some giving birth out there to babies who died from the cold.

Not until she became a grandmother did Clinton learn of all this, which was what happened in a lot of cases regarding this massacre. She picked up scraps of tales here and there, but not until she sat on the commission that prepared a big report on it all, released earlier this month, did she get the whole story, or what is left to be told.

"It was hard at first for me to even think about 1898 because I really didn't know anything about it, and I thought 'How could people do that?'" Clinton said, after the report was issued. The report is good, she said, not because it dwells on the past, but because it is an introduction to it. "What can you and I do about what happened five minutes ago?" she said. "But if we want to search and find the truth we can do that."

AS A COMMISSION MEMBER, Clinton heard from people whose relatives left Wilmington out of fear on its own personal Kristalnacht, and who learned through oral family histories that Wilmington was a place they should never return to if they valued their lives.

But she didn't hear enough, and neither did the other members. For all the detail contained in this 500-page report, painstakingly gone over by historians before it was published, a lot is still missing.

Everyone who has an interest can go to www.ncculture.org and look for the report, it is there online. And if they have something to contribute before it goes to the state legislature they can still do that.

"I am hoping and praying that the people will come forward," she said. "It may be a cleansing for them, for something that may have happened in their lifetime or prior to their lifetime. It may be they will decide it is worth the effort to help everyone learn the truth about something that affected their town, their family ... that's the only way we will heal."

At Harnett and Fourth, where the bullets once flew, some kids played in a parking lot last week. No, they said, they had no idea history had occurred right by where they stood.

LESSONS OF MORE RECENT HISTORY are more desirable, said 15-year-old William Jones, than those of race riots.

"We need to learn about presidents," said his 9-year-old sister, Brianna Gillette.

Clinton was told about this, and she smiled. If the children want to look forward it is a step toward a better world, she agreed. And if people with knowledge of the riot want to come forward so that what they know can increase the truthfulness of the story, then that makes for a better world, too.

It all figures into a philosophy Lottie Clinton has held to fast since childhood, and it applies as well to the disclosure of information by some as it does the willingness of others to look forward and away once that occurs.

"It is very important to live like you want to have your history written," she said.

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