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CRD 152: Winter 2022

Connect and Reflect: Revised

**Content Warning** for racialized violence

### A Complex Past: Tulsa Oklahoma

Looking into the history of a city reveals a lot about the past by what names tend to be repeated. For Tulsa, that name is Brady: Brady Street, Brady Hotel, Brady Theater, even Brady Historic Heights, which in 1980 was listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places which officially protected it as a landmark (Brasher, 2020). By the time the city charter of Tulsa, Oklahoma was signed by several local businessmen in 1898, it already had developed a typical history of colonization. The land has previously been designated as a place for American Native tribes to settle after being pushed west from their homelands. But as the population of the United States had outgrown the land they had previously taken and the railroad needed to be expanded, soon this land was reoccupied and a small section made available for Natives and Black residents. This was eventually labeled the Greenwood District of Tulsa but it would be many years before the residents would see any wealth.

If there's anything to know about Tulsa's history, you would know about the Greenwood District, otherwise referred to as Black Wall Street. It was called this because it was one of the very rare places in the United States where a Black middle-to-upper class community was thriving and growing. This prosperity was devoured by rage, jealousy, and fear that consumed the neighboring community of whites. What was once a thriving district laid bare to ashes and shattered dreams overnight. One might think the city of Tulsa would memorialize what many

consider the worst instance of racial violence in United States history. So, who was this man who ended up with a significant portion of the city named after him?

In this paper, first we will explore Brady's ties to Tulsa and the personal ideals he branded into the turbulent political environment that led to the Race Massacre. Next, we will delve into the history of Greenwood District and how it became a self-sustained Black Wall Street only to be brought to its knees in one night. Finally, we will trace the history of several instances of Brady's name on public assets that have or have not endured into the modern community of Tulsa. How holding this name in a place of respect and power allowed for the violence to be kept on a don't ask, don't tell basis. When it did finally come to renaming one of these landmarks, who's voice is the loudest and holds the most sway? Whose voice should be elevated above others? In terms of Brady Street in Tulsa, the decision often had more of an affinity for upholding neoliberal ideals than the true goal of reconciliation or reparations for the decedents of Greenwood's residents and the indigenous people who lived there before. In the end, renaming a street is merely a drop in the bucket of racial reconciliation.

### **Background on Brady**

Wyatt Tate Brady was a young business man drawn to the area by the cattle business and incorporation of the railroad in hopes to prosper off of the economic growth. Instead of joining in alongside the workers of the fields, he derived a different strategy as a merchant building up his business with a store front. By providing goods and trading, he built up a lot of capital. In 1898, he was one of many businessmen to sign the charter for Tulsa, Oklahoma to be federally recognized as a city which heightened Tulsa's notoriety (Chapman, 2011). With the discovery and boom of the oil industry, people began flocking to the area from all over to profit but had no place to stay. Brady commissioned the build for the Brady Hotel so travelers would have a place

to stay: designing aspects that made it more luxurious to cater to those coming with wealth.

Between his hotel and store front, the constant flow of newcomers to the area brought lots of business and enough wealth to build within the community, including investing in a local paper called the Tulsa Democrat (Chapman, 2011). The more he invested and built, the more influential he became as a member of the community and more sway he held. With the ability to fund so many developments and local projects, his name became synonymous with education, news, hospitality, goods, and just about every facet of daily life for the white people of Tulsa.

His wealth and power continued to grow rapidly and Brady made it increasingly obvious where his support laid in terms of politics. His father was a Civil War confederate veteran and he held General Robert E. Lee in the highest regard as a personal hero, designing a whole mansion after the general's personal home (Chapman, 2011). He invited the group, Sons of Confederate Veterans to come to Tulsa to celebrate their 28<sup>th</sup> annual reunion there which had the largest turnout since the Civil War. The group was more than just offspring of old veterans but held the principles of "the emulation of [the Confederate veteran's] virtues, and the perpetuation of those principles he loved" (Chapman, 2011). They existed to further support and implement white supremacy and the beliefs that Black people were meant to be enslaved. It is not hard to then see how the venn diagram between the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the Klu Klux Klan nearly resembled a circle. Brady himself was a proud member and leader of his local chapter up until 1922 during a statewide crackdown on Klan activity and violence, especially aimed at Tulsa for the massacre a year earlier. He claimed he was no longer a member, but his statements could be interpreted as what was needed to be said in order to protect his assets.

### **Background on Greenwood and the Massacre**

The area of Tulsa that eventually became known as the Greenwood District had attracted many Black Americans in 1890 due to the fact that Oklahoma was not officially a state and therefore could have no laws set in place related to “racial dynamics” (Day, 2016). The Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889 attracted many people who previously had not been allowed to own land. The way land rushes worked is that whoever arrived at the land first was allowed to homestead or build business; sometimes they could be bid upon or won in lottery (Day, 2016). It was commonly how land formerly designated for Native tribes was colonized and redistributed and was one of few avenues for Black people to become land owners in that era. The same oil boom that brought prosperity to Brady’s businesses also allowed the Black owned businesses of Greenwood to thrive and generate capital which poured back into the community. It soon became one of the most affluent Black communities of the United States, including a full financial district (Oklahoma, 2001).

The more self-sustained and affluent that Greenwood became, the more residents it drew in and the more it grew in size and services offered. This is what brought along the dubbing of the area as Black Wall Street as more residents climbed the economic ladder. Its segregation from the rest of the white population of Tulsa allowed a unique experience for Black people to shape Greenwood to fit the exact needs their community. It became a safe haven for those looking to start a life free of persecution that was still commonly faced across the states. Oklahoma was becoming a unique place amongst the Bible belt states. This made the white population of Tulsa incredibly uncomfortable as many residents of Greenwood began to grow wealthier and more prosperous than their white neighbors. Considering how many residents of Tulsa subscribed to the same sort of racist thinking that the Sons of the Confederates followed and the Klu Klux Klan, this was absolutely unacceptable to them.

Not only were local racial tensions reaching a breaking point, but the country as a whole was experiencing high levels of racial violence leading up to 1921. From 1919 to 1921, Black Americans were being targeted and lynched across the nation and anti-Black violence was at a record high (Brasher, 2020). As Black people of the United States began gaining more money and social mobility, they were perceived as a threat by whites, especially those who were poor. These growing tensions garnered violent white nationalist groups like the Klan popular support. As the group gained members, they became more and more brazen with their anti-Black sentiments.

The day is May 31st, 1921 in the city of Tulsa and you hear rumors about a nineteen-year-old, Black shoe-shiner accused of assaulting a seventeen-year-old white girl. No one really seems to know what actually happened, but throughout the day, the gossip becomes more and more hyperbolic and violent in what allegedly happened between them. These give light to threats of repercussions against the teen, Dick Rowland. White mobs gather calling for violence while Black mobs gather to protect Rowland. Shouting is exchanged between the groups and the energy rises and bubbles, threatening to boil over. An older white man attempts to disarm a Black man and a shot rings out. It is unclear which of the two fired and the reason why, but this is the spark that starts the fire. The fighting and gunshots between the mobs travel from the courthouse where Rowland was being held to downtown Greenwood. More and more whites join in as the fighting moves to Black Wall Street. Upon arrival, it turns from fighting to pure destruction as white rioters start to target any Black person they see and begin torching buildings. The residents of Greenwood are met with extreme violence and those who try to flee are hunted down. Eventually, airplanes join in the fight as the white terrorists loot and destroy everything they can get their hands on. Brady is among those protecting white owned businesses from

retaliation and organizing the attacks. As thick smoke clouds darken the sky, no help comes for the citizens of Greenwood District. The Tulsa police are staffed and controlled by the same people perpetuating the violence, and those given emergency civil powers as well as weapons are all white (Oklahoma, 2001). Oklahoma National Guard is not called in until the next day, June 1<sup>st</sup> to finally step in and end the destruction and killing. Upon arrival, they bring a majority Black residents into custody rather than the white mobs. The damage is further compounded.

There are many unanswered questions left about what exactly happened those two days and how it came to be; what is not completely unknown is the damage that was caused and that the people of Greenwood District were left to rebuild on their own efforts. Depending on the source, many claim the Race Riot was unprompted and just an unfortunate product of the growing tensions of the time period. However, there are other accounts that assert that it was not a spur of the moment act of violence but a coordinated effort of those in power of Tulsa, which includes Brady (Oklahoma, 2001). Both sides provide evidence to support their case but unfortunately oral history can become tainted by conjecture. A commission to investigate the massacre in 2001 found the following numbers to be the closest estimate of the damages. Casualties range from 75 to 300 people—the number will never be totally verified due to the white mob dumping bodies into an unmarked mass grave and burning bodies. Around forty square blocks of residential, business, and educational buildings were destroyed or burned to the ground. Of those who survived, 10,000 were left homeless and there was an estimated loss of \$1.5 million related to property and \$750,000 in personal assets. Those who were brought into custody by the Oklahoma National Guard were held for several days and many of the residents left with nothing to return to amidst the leveled district. While emergency relief groups like the American Red Cross stepped in to provide tents and medical aid, the survivors were provided no

monetary support to rebuild and were living in tents for the duration of the winter. The official stance of Tulsa was to pretend it never happened, and anyone who disagreed with what happened were scared into silence. Even decades later, in 1950, people found the topic taboo, “Because of shame, I thought. But the explanation was ‘you don’t want to start another,’” (Oklahoma, 2001). Fear kept the people of Tulsa from recognizing and reconciling what happened.

### **Renaming Brady Street**

The year is 2013 and the dark history of Brady Street’s namesake becomes the topic of legislation in the city of Tulsa. Many residents of the city believe leaving the name as it is glorifies the ideals and morals of Wyatt Tate Brady. The proposition to rename the street faced heavy debate from both sides and became incredibly polarized based on racial group of residents (Brasher, 2020). The mayor at the time, Dewey Bartlett, was quite vocally against the name change, calling it, “Grandstanding, political correctness, sweeping history under the rug, trying to rewrite history - there is no advantage in that ... It's a big waste of time,” (Canfield, 2021). He suggested that time and money spent on this petition was better spent trying to bring about more economic growth. When a stalemate was reached, the city decided that they would rename the street from “Brady Street” to “M.B. Brady Street” after a photographer from the Civil War who had no connections to the city of Tulsa (Kast, 2019). The justification for this slight change was that it would disrupt business as little as possible while still honoring someone different than Tate Brady, thus allegedly pleasing both sides of the argument. One could (and many did) argue that this is no better than the original name because it still held the same connotation of the first and was a rather hollow attempt at healing for those who wanted the name completely changed. It was a decision made to appease a neoliberal agenda of doing the absolute minimum to appease community without causing economic disruption (Brasher, 2020).

Those who argued for the name Reconciliation Way found the meaning to be quite literal: they wanted reconciliation for the hurt caused by Brady and his fellow terrorists during the Tulsa Race Massacre that caused irreparable damage to the Greenwood District and people of Tulsa: it never financially fully recovered and was literally and metaphorically buried by the city history. Adding a few letters onto the original name was not a change that was acceptable to many Tulsa residents. Reconciliation would not come if generations later, people are still referring to Brady by name for landmarks of the city with no clue of his ties to the destruction of Black Wall Street. Especially landmarks that serve the community, like the arts district and schools. As residents continued to challenge this mediocre decision, they were able to enact change that felt a little more than a placation, but not much better.

The year is now 2018 and five years after the original name change from Brady Street to M. B. Brady Street. It has been decided once again to change the official name, this time to Reconciliation Way. The street, including several other landmarks of Tulsa city, have distanced themselves from the name Brady—although areas like the historic Brady Heights remain unchanged. Just as the first name change, community members seem divided about how to feel. While many felt accomplished, some claim the name change is just as performative as the first one, arguing that real reconciliation would have meant naming the street after Tulsa massacre survivors or in memorial; others suggested changing the name is like covering up the bad parts of history and to acknowledge the man who used to practically run the city was a racist is to address the problems that sparked the riots (Jackson, 2018). Both groups who disliked the change essentially agreed that it was like slapping a bandage on a wound that really needed stitches. The loss felt that night enacted a ripple across the future generations of Greenwood and Tulsa that can still be examined today. An entire community of wealth and prosperity destroyed over the



idea that one race was superior over another. It could have grown into an even more impressive hub for Black prosperity and community, but instead it's a buried memory.

While the change to Reconciliation Way might be argued as again the bare minimum, more change has come from acknowledging the past. The people of Tulsa are now mandated to teach in schools the incredible loss that happened in the Greenwood District at the hands of white supremacists. While the immediate action of the law was to cover the story up and instill further power through fear by the local chapter of the Klan, in the recent millennium more work has been put into the community to support the descendants of those who escaped the massacre and chose to stay and rebuild Greenwood to a place that was at least inhabitable. There is no way to magically bring back the lives that were lost or the projected \$32.65 million of damages which was estimated for inflation in 2020 (Brasher, 2020). For those who lost their businesses, family, and everything that night, there is no home to go back to: just a gorge where the roots had been ripped up from the ground. Reconciliation will take more than agreeing to change a few signs but in reparations for those who lost everything that day. When you consider just how much was lost, changing the name of a street really does seem like last place prize. But for those who choose to make Tulsa their home and refuse to let the past be buried or glorified, it is a baby step in the right direction to recognize what was lost and start to make amends to those who were harmed in the generations to come.

### **Revision Reflection**

After going over both the professor's and my peer editor's feedback, I have added a roadmap of my paper near the introduction of my paper to better layout my direction and argument. I checked for flow issues by trying out the tactic of highlighting every topic sentence and setting them up like an outline. This led me to breaking up some of my longer paragraphs to

better guide readers and make it harder to get lost in the text. I added a lot more personal writing and feeling into the last section of my paper to emphasize the conflict and slow healing the Tulsa community has felt; and how far they still need to come to combat for the violence of the Massacre. Some smaller adjustments I made are word choice sprinkled throughout. For example, I have reworded the tail end of paragraph six, since my peer editor ended up with some confusion with my wording. I had “the damage is done” and they interpreted it as no more harm was done; what I had hoped to communicate was by arresting only Black residents, even if they had rectified the action by releasing them and instead arresting the white terrorists, the damage was already done to those who had been wrongfully detained. Other word changes are in hopes to further implement their suggestions to make this conversation seem less sterile and with a further appeal to ethos, as it is a conversation that requires people to really feel deeply the hurt of the generations of those affected by the Massacre. To accurately depict the sense of wealth and identity lost, I wanted the reader to feel cheated as many of the residents of Tulsa do. I didn’t want to make it too much longer, as it already is 9 pages.

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