

## Ocoee 1920

Orange County, Florida

### In Sixty Seconds

**Before.** Ocoee, Florida, in 1920 was a small citrus-growing town in Orange County, roughly ten miles west of Orlando. Its population of about 800 was split roughly evenly between white and Black residents. Several Black residents, including Mose Norman and Julius "July" Perry, were prosperous farmers and property owners.

**What happened.** On November 2, 1920, Election Day, Mose Norman attempted to vote at the Ocoee polling place. He was turned away twice. That evening, a mob of more than 100 white men surrounded the home of July Perry, a respected Black community leader who had been organizing Black voters. Perry defended his home, killing two attackers. He was captured, lynched, and his body hung from a telephone pole in Orlando.

**Who did it.** An organized white mob drawn from Ocoee and surrounding communities. The Ku Klux Klan had warned three weeks earlier in a public march through Orlando that "not a single Negro would be permitted to vote." Members of the mob included local law enforcement.

**After.** The mob burned 25 homes, two churches, a school, and the Masonic Lodge. The entire Black population of Ocoee, 255 people, was driven from the town permanently. Black property was seized by whites. By the 1930 census, only 2 Black residents remained. No one was ever prosecuted.

### The Named

#### Julius "July" Perry

age 50. Respected Black labor contractor, property owner, and community organizer. Defended his home with his family; killed two attackers before being overwhelmed. Lynched in Orlando; his body was left hanging for most of the following day.

#### Coretha Perry

age 16. July Perry's daughter. Shot through the leg during the siege of her family's home. Survived and was permanently exiled from Ocoee. Her testimony helped document the massacre.

#### Mose Norman

Black citrus farmer who refused to be turned away from the polls. Fled Ocoee after the violence began. Survived and relocated to New York, where he spent the rest of his life.

#### Armstrong Hightower

A Black carpenter in Ocoee whose family survived the attack by fleeing into a citrus grove. His descendants became part of the legal effort for state acknowledgment a century later.

### For Discussion

1. Mose Norman tried to vote twice and was turned away twice. The Ocoee Massacre followed. What is the relationship between specific individual acts of voting and the scale of retaliation, and where in contemporary American voting rules does a version of that relationship still appear?
2. The Ku Klux Klan marched publicly through Orlando three weeks before Election Day. Advance public warning was part of the intimidation. What is the function of openly announced threats in electoral violence, and when do comparable advance signals still appear around American elections?
3. By 1925, every Black-owned property in Ocoee had passed into white hands through tax sales and fraudulent deed transfers. What legal mechanisms today can transfer property against the will of owners who have been displaced, and how do those mechanisms differ from or echo the Ocoee pattern?
4. Ocoee functioned as a sundown town for sixty years after the massacre. A sundown town is a form of community enforcement, not a statute. What makes informal community enforcement as durable as it proved to be, and what finally breaks it?
5. Florida required the Ocoee Massacre to be taught in public schools starting in 2019. A generation of students will learn about it through the state curriculum. What responsibilities does a public curriculum take on when it formally adds an event like Ocoee, and what practical risks does that curricular decision create for the teachers who deliver the lesson?

### Primary Sources

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2. White, Walter. "Election by Terror in Florida." *The New Republic*, January 12, 1921.
3. Hurston, Zora Neale. "The Ocoee Riot." Federal Writers' Project manuscript, 1939. Library of Congress.
4. Orange County Regional History Center. Ocoee Massacre Collection.
5. Florida Legislature, HB 1213, "African American History Required Instruction," signed 2019.  
<https://ledger.newbws.com/record/ocoee-1920>

