



CIVICS IN REAL LIFE

The Ocoee Election Day Massacre

Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how “We the People” interact with the government and each other. Let’s help each other expand our civic literacy.

Voting is one of the most important rights we as citizens of the United States have. As the right to vote has expanded over time, the protection of that right has been at the heart of [multiple amendments](#) to the US Constitution. And yet, there have been dark times in our history when some were willing to resort to violence to keep their fellow citizens from voting. November 02, 1920 was one of those dark times.

[Ocoee](#) is a small community in Florida, just a few miles from Orlando. Right before election day in 1920, the [Ku Klux Klan](#) marched through neighboring Orlando. As they marched, they [threatened](#) Black residents with violence if they tried to vote. And yet, still, there were some Black residents who would not be intimidated, who would not be denied their right to vote. They showed up to the polls but were turned away with threats of violence or mysteriously, their names were missing from the voter registration rolls. But, in the words of Mose Norman and July Perry, two wealthy and influential leaders of the prosperous Black community in Ocoee, “We will vote, by God!”. They and other Black residents of Ocoee returned to the polls after consulting with a friendly judge, demanding their right, before being forced away at gunpoint.



Mr. July Perry
First Victim of the Ocoee Election Day Massacre

The Ku Klux Klan and other members of the white community, including very important local leaders, were enraged at this effort to exercise the right to vote. The Klan tried to track down Mose Norman and showed up at the home of his friend July Perry. Mr. Perry defended his home and family, and engaged in a gun battle with the Klan. KKK members, though, captured Mr. Perry, and then lynched him. The Klan rampaged through the town, destroying dozens of Black homes and murdering an unknown number of residents, [though some estimates](#) say that more than 50 were killed.

No one was ever prosecuted for the lynching of July Perry or the murders and the looting and destruction of the prosperous Black community of Ocoee. Instead, people sold pictures of the lynchings and violence. After the massacre, the remaining Black population of Ocoee, which numbered more than 250 people, were driven from the town, with Whites seizing control of their property. Ocoee became one of many

‘[sundown towns](#)’ throughout the United States. The term “sundown town” refers to towns where non-whites would not be safe in that town after dark. No Black residents settled in Ocoee again until the 1980s.

This scene was repeated throughout the country; Ocoee was the location of just one of many [violent attacks](#) on prosperous black communities throughout the United States. Even in Florida just a few years later, the whole town of [Rosewood](#) suffered the same fate.

Today, the residents of Ocoee, and the state of Florida, have tried to [make peace](#) with the past. Ocoee has established memorial markers, and in 2020, the Florida legislature mandated instruction about the Ocoee Election Day Riots in grades K-12 as part of teaching African American history.

The right to vote is one that people have fought and died for throughout the nation’s history. To honor the legacy of those who lost their lives for engaging in this most basic aspect of civic life, we should always embrace our constitutional right to vote, and stand up to those that would seek to deny it. It is what people like July Perry would have wanted.



To Think and To Do: Though election and voting laws are usually controlled by the states as a result of the Tenth Amendment, in 1965, Congress passed the [Voting Rights Act](#). The Voting Rights Act established federal protections to ensure the right to vote as guaranteed by the 15th Amendment. Based on what you have learned, why might the federal government play a role in the protection of voting rights?

Learn MORE about Ocoee Election Day Massacre and similar events. Free registration may be required.

- [Ocoee, Florida: Remembering the ‘Single Bloodiest Day in Modern US Political History](#), from Facing South
- [Not Just Tulsa](#), from BET
- [Sundown Towns](#), from Encyclopedia of Arkansas



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