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“Red Summer” Author at Carter Library *The Story of the Bloody Summer of 1919*

Atlanta, GA.- The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library welcomes Wall Street Journal reporter Cam McWhirter on Wednesday, August 3rd at 7pm. McWhirter is the author of *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America*.

Take a look at some of what author Jonathan Yardley wrote about *Red Summer* in the *Washington Post*.

Human memory being both short and unreliable, most Americans today who know anything about the history of race riots in this country probably assume that “the greatest period of interracial strife the nation has ever witnessed” took place in the 1960s and ’70s: riots set off by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., by police violence against blacks in Los Angeles and elsewhere, by agents and opponents of the Black Power movement. Those were indeed bad times. But the comment above was made by the prominent historian John Hope Franklin about the summer of 1919, known, according to Cameron McWhirter, as “the Red Summer because it was so bloody.” He writes:

“The violence enveloped towns, counties, and large cities from Texas to Nebraska, Connecticut to California. Though no complete and accurate records on the months of violence were compiled, analysis of newspaper accounts, government documents, court records, and NAACP files, show at least 25 major riots erupted and at least 52 black people were lynched. Many victims were burned to death. Riots were often over in hours, but some immobilized cities like Chicago, Washington, Knoxville, and Elaine, Arkansas, for days. Millions of Americans had their lives disrupted. Hundreds of people — most of them black — were killed and thousands more were injured. Tens of thousands were forced to flee their homes or places of work. Businesses lost millions of dollars to destruction and looting. In almost every case, white mobs — whether sailors on leave, immigrant slaughterhouse workers, or southern farmers — initiated the violence.”

It was an unhappy and confusing time. What Woodrow Wilson and many others had foolishly and naively called “the war to end war” had left the world in turmoil and this country bitterly divided along many lines: between isolationists and internationalists, between wets and dries, between whites and blacks, between patriots and anarchists, between liberals and communists. As was to be the case a quarter-century later, at the end of World War II, black Americans who had fought for their country came home to find that the rights for which they had risked their lives on the battlefields of Europe were still denied them in their native land, not merely in the South but in the North.

Black veterans’ anger did not set off the violence that tore the country apart between April and November of 1919, but it did contribute to a slowly growing sense of militancy among blacks, especially in cities.

There had been a number of organizations working on behalf of black rights, but mostly they were toothless, and too often they were mere cat's paws for paternalistic whites. That certainly was true of the NAACP until three exceptionally determined and able African Americans — W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson and Walter White — asserted themselves and began to steer the organization in a more active, assertive direction. As McWhirter points out, even as African Americans were suffering devastating discrimination and violence, “an unprecedented political awakening” was taking place:

“In 1919, blacks began to broadly challenge the long-held premise that they must exist in this country as inferiors. Led by the NAACP and other groups, they began to assert themselves as equals — many for the first time in their lives. They started fighting in legislatures, courtrooms, and the streets to become full partners in the American democratic experiment.”

“Before the very gates of the White House Negroes were dragged from streetcars and beaten up while crowds of soldiers, sailors and marines dashed down Pennsylvania Avenue, the principal thoroughfare in the downtown section, in pursuit of the fleeing Negroes. In one instance a restaurant, crowded with men and women diners, was invaded by a crowd of uniformed soldiers and sailors in search of Negro waiters.”

Finally, President Wilson, who had no friendly feelings for black Americans, reluctantly ordered federal troops brought in, and they got things calmed down after several days of violence. “No one ever determined a final tally of death and injuries,” McWhirter writes. “Conservative reports listed seven killed: four blacks, three whites (one of them [a] police detective). Hundreds were injured; an untold number later died.” Not until 1968 would the Nation’s Capital again undergo racial violence of such ghastly intensity.

On and on the grim procession marched: Chicago (“Thirty-eight people — 23 blacks and 15 whites — were killed. At least 537 were seriously wounded”), Knoxville, rural Arkansas and Georgia and Mississippi. That it is one of the most shameful periods in our history is beyond question. Yet McWhirter is right to insist that during this same time, forgotten though it may be, “Black America awakened politically, socially, and artistically [as] never before.” The first stirrings of what became the Harlem Renaissance were felt, and seeds were planted that bore fruit in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. As McWhirter says, if you explore the whole story of those troubled months, you are left not thinking of America’s bald and cruel failings, but of its astounding and elastic resilience. “The Red Summer” is a story of destruction, but it is also a story of the beginning of a freedom movement.

The talk is free and open to the public. Acappella Books will be selling ***Red Summer*** and you can get it autographed.

For more information, call 404-865-7109. You can keep up with the Carter Library events at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library page on Facebook and follow the CarterLibrary on Twitter. If you wish to unsubscribe to these news releases, simply email tony.clark@nara.gov and put “UNSUBSCRIBE” in the subject line.