

ROYAL HOMECOMING 2019 CHURCH SERVICE PRESENTATION- total time approx. 12 minutes

Instruction: Once Steele is at the podium; please start the power point.

Good Morning. I am Beverly Steele, Founder of Young Performing Artists (YPAs), Inc., CEO of The Steele Organization, LLC and a member of the Anderson, Robinson, Steele family.

I'm sharing a little bit of the well-known African American Florida History of Rosewood, FL. In comparison, I will share a little bit of the unknown African American Florida History of our very own Royal Citizen: Mr. Jesse Woods.

ROSEWOOD, FLORIDA

Even though it was originally settled in 1845 by both blacks and whites, the black codes and the [Jim Crow laws](#) in the years after the [Civil War](#) fostered segregation in Rosewood (and much of the South).

By 1890s, the white families moved away and settled in the nearby town of Sumner.

By the 1920s, Rosewood's population of about 200 was entirely made up of black citizens, except for one white family that ran the general store.

But on January 1, 1923, in Sumner, [Florida](#), 22-year-old Fannie Taylor was heard screaming by a neighbor. The neighbor found Taylor covered in bruises and claiming a black man had entered the house and assaulted her. The incident was reported to the Sheriff, with Taylor specifying that she had not been raped.

White mobs prowled the area woods searching for any black man they might find.

Law enforcement found out that a black prisoner named Jesse Hunter had escaped a chain gang, and immediately designated him a suspect. The mobs focused their searches on Hunter, convinced that he was being hidden by the black residents, who wouldn't say where he was hiding.

This is when the Rosewood Massacre occurred. The town was entirely destroyed by the end of the violence, and the residents were driven out

permanently. Today, the only thing that remains of Rosewood is a state historic marker designating that the town did exist.

Let's fast forward to 1956 in another Florida City call Wildwood and more specifically the small rural Community of Royal. Listen to the similarities of Jesse Hunter's/ Rosewood story and the little-known story of our very own, Mr. Jesse Woods.

In the words of Robert W. Saunders, Sr., who 4 years, earlier had suspended his legal studies to accept a position as Florida field director for the NAACP after the state's first field director, Harry T. Moore, was killed in a Ku Klux Klan bombing of Moore's home. Mr. Saunders was instrumental with Mr. Woods story. I will share his words during a January 2002 interview:

CB: 1956 had looked like the verge of a great leap forward for the NAACP, then suddenly it was cast back into the shadows that it had operated out of a few years earlier. People were afraid now. The Klan is more active. Through 1958, for example, racial violence escalated throughout Florida. We even had a situation that year of the possibility of the lynching of Jesse Woods in Sumter County.

RS: The state NAACP conference was meeting in Tampa. All of the top leadership, including Dr. Von Mizell,

RS: We're meeting in Tampa at St. Paul A.M.E. Church. Roy Wilkins is the speaker for the next day. I had to pick Roy up at the train station, and when he came in, Roy said to me, "What about this lynching or would be lynching"—I think he said—"in Wildwood, Florida?" I said to Roy, "We know nothing about it because we're in conference here, and the news media hasn't said anything about it." Roy proceeds to tell me what happened is alleged that white Klansmen broke the jail down in Wildwood and took a black youth out. They don't know what happened to him. I told Roy, "We'll get right on that."

CB: Roy learned about it because

RS: all black railroad men knew Walter White, Roy Wilkins, and Thurgood Marshall. When the train pulled into Wildwood, that's where it switches, they told Roy about Jesse Woods.

RS: That Monday morning, I got up and went by the office and let them know where I was going. They said, "You're not going there by yourself." There's one fellow who is appointed to travel with you. We get into Wildwood, and the streets are absent. There's nobody on them except one elderly black gentleman. I stop, and I said to him, "We're traveling, and we want to know where we can get breakfast." He says, "I'll show you." He got in the car, and we turned it around. He says, "Are you from the NAACP?" I told him, "Yes, we are," and I gave him my card. He said, "We've been looking for you." He carries us out to State Road 48, and we're traveling west. We get to a turn off, a sandy road. We go about a mile or so into one of these areas where it reminds you of earlier days during slavery.

RS: There are media people from everywhere, people with cameras. They were from the Chicago Tribune; Fort Pierce News Tribune; Madera CA Tribune; New York Times; Orlando Sentinel; Miami Times; Florida Star; Daily Commercial; The Associated Press; The Willington Delaware News Journal; Biloxi Mississippi Daily Herald; and of course, Betty Murphy with the Baltimore Afro American Newspaper, the largest African American newspaper at that time.

I identified one of the two guys from the Associated Press. Seated on one of the porches is a stout guy with a pad. This elderly black fellow said, "Don't stop here, because that guy sitting there says he's from Governor Collins' office, and we're not going to talk to him,". We proceeded on. Later, we talked with some people, and they told us what happened. Woods was accused of winking an eye or something or insulting a white woman in the A&P [Supermarket] store in Wildwood. He was arrested and locked up in this jail, even though, the woman said Jesse did nothing.

That night, the jail was broken into. Woods was taken out into the woods. They beat him and left him for dead. The family said that he had been taken to Miami. What happened, Jesse Woods was not dead, but he was beaten. An uncle of his and his aunt were leaving to go back to Fort Walton where this uncle was working on the road project. Jesse had come to the edge of the road. The uncle saw him, carried him back to one of those houses, wrapped him up in a rug, and put him in the back of the car, got him out of Wildwood, and took him up to Fort Walton.

We go back into Wildwood. The same elderly fellow who met us on the streets on [Highway] 301 in Wildwood says, "Come with me; I know where we can get the information." We go back to Highway 44, and we go down to the Withlacoochee River.

There's a white fellow there who operated running rowboats and everything. He says, "I know what you're here for." He says, "The family is down the river about a mile, fishing. You can use the boat and go down there." Incidentally, traveling with me was Bettye Murphy, a journalist from the Baltimore Afro American. They had asked me to let her go along, because she is the only black major media person there. We get into the boat, and we row down the Withlacoochee River and about a mile or so down, there's about eight or nine people out there with cane rods casted. We pull up to it.

This elderly fellow walked up and talked to somebody. He said, "This is Jesse Woods's aunt." He said, "These guys are from the NAACP. They're working on the case. They're trying to find out what happened to Jesse." The elderly woman said, "I'll tell you what. You go back to my house, and when you get to the front door, there's a board there that you can lift. There's a letter from Fort Walton Beach. That's where he is."

We went back there, and sure enough, when we got to the house, we lifted this carpet up, and there was this board. We lifted this board, and there was this letter. Things began to get really amusing then. We got back into the car, this fellow the longshoremen had sent with me and Bettye. We go back to Tampa. I just walk into our NAACP office, and I said, "I'm going up north," or something to that effect. Bettye Murphy says, "I'd like to go with you." She agrees to pay my transportation round trip, provided I let her go along as the representative of the black press. We caught National Airlines out of Tampa, and we got in Jacksonville and went over to Panama City. We got the treasurer of the NAACP branch in Panama City to drive us to Fort Walton Beach.

Sure enough, when we got to this house, nobody was there. Bettye Murphy did something that I never would have done. She tried the door and went in. When we went in, in the back room we found the rug, medicine, and towels, bloodstained and everything. We knew we were on the right track. We waited around, and about half an hour later the uncle and his aunt came back and told us that they had taken Woods into Dothan, Alabama and that he was in the custody of an AME preacher. Bettye wants me to go into Alabama. I wanted to go, too, but we were in litigation with Alabama.

Alabama had outlawed the NAACP.

RS: They had outlawed the NAACP from operating in Alabama, and I knew if I was caught in Alabama, [I would be held] in contempt of court, so I told them no. We went back to Panama [City] and into Tallahassee. Bettye was on the phone calling her paper long distance. Bettye, after about fifteen minutes, heard the operator say, "They found that nigger who was supposed to be lynched down in Wildwood." Bettye hung up her phone and said, "No, I'm going back to Baltimore." I was on my way back to Tampa. That frightened her because she thought that the telephone operators were listening in on the telephone calls.

When I got back to Tampa, as soon as I drove up to my door—my wife had left and carried the boy with her. There were two FBI men waiting for me. This is my first confrontation with the FBI. They said, "Come on down. We want you to come down to our headquarters. We want to talk to you." When I got down there, they said, "We understand that you know where Jesse Woods is." I said, "Yeah." They said, "We want you to tell us where he is." I said, "I'm not going to tell you anything until I talk with the governor of Florida. I want to be assured that if he's brought back to Florida that he's going to be protected."

They got in touch with Governor Collins and told him what had happened. I talked with Collins, too, and told him that I was going to advance the information to the FBI, but I wanted his assurances that Jesse would not be harmed. The FBI went into Dothan and got Jesse, brought him back, and turned him over to the state of Florida. The interesting thing is that they prosecuted Jesse Woods on minor charges of something. I forgot what it was. The last I heard of Jesse Woods was he was down in Miami. This was an interesting case because that's the first time I've ever been involved in investigating a would-be lynching.

CB: This happened in 1958. This is when most folks alive today would look back and think, Florida had burst into the modern world. You're having to drive through the night with guards and end up trekking up in boats up the Withlacoochee River, digging letters out of floorboards, and finding bloody blankets to save a man's life from lynching, Jesse Woods. Governor Collins, had opened up lines of communication with us, given us his phone number by his bed at his home, which we used whenever we felt we needed. We

were beginning to develop some trust, but the NAACP continued to pressure Collins to move towards a protector of and advocate for civil rights. In the Jesse Woods case, he honored his promise to us. Jesse Woods was protected.

Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Jesse Woods lived to the young age of 35 and is buried in our Oak Hill Cemetery. Mr. Jesse Woods took the beating, but he saved the entire Community of Royal. Let's thank God for his legacy.

Now, I introduce Mr. Cliff Hughes, Chair of the Community Of Royal (COR), Inc.

Instruction: PowerPoint will remain on Mr.Woods.

Instruction: After Cliff, end the PowerPoint.

THANK YOU.