

OSSIAN SWEET: HISTORICAL ACCOUNT



Dr. Ossian Sweet was an African American physician who was born in Bartow, Florida in 1895. The son of a Methodist minister, as a young man he had seen first-hand the ravages of racial violence in central Florida. He attended Wilberforce College in Ohio, and Howard University Medical School. He moved to Detroit in 1921, and began practicing medicine in the lower eastside neighborhood, known as Black Bottom, at Dunbar Memorial Hospital, the largest African American-owned hospital in Detroit. Gladys Mitchell was born in Pittsburgh in 1901, and grew up in Detroit, in a neighborhood north of Black Bottom. The couple married in 1922, and in 1923, the couple had a daughter - Marguerite "Iva" Sweet. On June 7, 1925, after living with Gladys' parents, the Sweet's purchased a home in a previously all-white neighborhood at 2905 Garland Street on Detroit's east side for \$18,500 and moved in. They were charged \$6,000 higher than fair market value.

The Spring and Summer of that year saw escalating violent threats from white mobs across the city rebelling against housing integration in Detroit neighborhoods. Then, on the sweltering evening of September 9, 1925, a mob estimated at 500 to 800, surrounded and stormed the home with Dr. Sweet, and 11 family members and friends who rushed to their defense, trapped inside. Under riotous siege, the Sweets defended their home. Shots rang out from a second story window of the Sweet home with one attacker fatally shot and one attacker wounded at the home across the street. The Detroit Police Department broke down the door

and arrested the Sweet's and their 9 companions. They were later charged with capital murder.

The resulting trial became a national sensation and one of the most important test cases for housing discrimination North of the Mason-Dixon Line. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) - both the local branch and the national office in New York - hired an integrated legal team led by the renowned attorney, Clarence Darrow, to defend the Sweets and their co-defendants. Darrow was arguably America's most prominent lawyer at the time having just weeks before the Sweet trial, successfully argued the "Scopes Monkey Trial" which resulted in overturning Tennessee's ban on teaching human evolution in public schools. Because of the racial tensions, all but one of the Detroit Recorder's Court judges recused themselves from being assigned the case. Judge Frank Murphy agreed to preside.

Darrow's closing argument in the Sweet trial is legendary. He argued to the all-white jury that this would be an easy case if not for the issue of race:

"If I thought any of you had an opinion against my clients, I would not worry about it because I might convince you. It is not so hard to show men that their opinions are wrong, but it is the next thing to impossible to take away their prejudices. Prejudices do not rest upon facts, they rest upon the ideas that have been taught to us and that began coming to us almost with our mothers' milk, and they stick almost as the color of the skin sticks. It is not the opinion of anyone of these twelve men that I am worrying about, much less is it the evidence in this case...I know just as well as I know that you twelve men are here at this minute that if this had been a white crowd defending their homes, who killed a member of a colored mob...no one would have been arrested, no one would have been on trial...My clients are here charged with murder, but they are really here because they are black."

The Sweet's were acquitted, and a national legal precedent for equal rights in housing was set.

Because of his fair handling of the case Judge Murphy was subsequently elected Mayor of Detroit, with the first-ever coalition of Irish and Black communities. He later served as Governor of Michigan, Governor General of the Philippines, United States Attorney General, and United States Supreme Court Justice.

After the trials, Dr. Sweet's life continued to be difficult. Both Gladys Sweet and their daughter, Iva, were diagnosed with tuberculosis. Gladys believed she contracted the disease while in jail awaiting trial. Little Iva died in 1926, two months after her second birthday. During the next two years, Gladys' illness drove her and Sweet apart. Dr. Sweet moved into his former apartment near Dunbar Hospital. Gladys Sweet moved Tucson, Arizona for the drier climate. By mid-1928, Dr. Sweet finally regained possession of his house, which had been vacant since the shooting. Gladys Sweet returned home, but later died of tuberculosis at age 27. After her death, Dr. Sweet bought Garafalo's Drugstore and left his practice to run a hospital in the heart of the Black community. He eventually operated a few small hospitals, but all were financially troubled.

In 1930, five years after the shooting, Dr. Sweet decided to run for the presidency of the Detroit branch NAACP, but lost by a wide margin. In the summer of 1939, Dr. Sweet learned that his brother Henry had also contracted tuberculosis. Six months later, Henry died. Dr. Sweet's finances eventually failed, and he faced too much debt to keep the home he had fought for so hard. After selling the house in April 1958 to another Black family, Dr. Sweet converted his former office above Garafalo's Drugstore into an apartment. Dr. Sweet's physical and mental health began to steadily decline, and on March 20, 1960, he tragically committed suicide in his bedroom with a gunshot to the head.

Historian Kevin Boyle's book on the Ossian Sweet case, "Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age" won the 2004 National Book Award for Nonfiction.

The Ossian Sweet trial forever changed the lives of everyone involved, and left a deep impact on the city of Detroit in ways that touch us today...