

SUNDAY Bulletin

June 6, 1999

SERVING THE COMMUNITIES OF

CHINO • CHINO HILLS • CLAREMONT • DIAMOND BAR • FONTANA • LA VERNE • MONTCLAIR • ONTARIO • POMONA • RANCHO CUCAMONGA • RIALTO • SAN DIMAS • UPLAND

On Dec. 16, 1945, the Short family's hopes and dreams were reduced to ashes as their Fontana home burned to the ground. In a little over a month, they all would be dead from their injuries. Although the district attorney believed it was an accident, there are many today who believe the family was the victim of racial hatred, when in reality...

ALL THEY WANTED WAS THE RIGHT TO LIVE ... ANYWHERE

By David Bradvica
Daily Bulletin

"If I were you, I'd get my family off of this property." "You're out of bounds."

They told O'Day Short they were coming for him. But he didn't listen. They had to be bluffing, he thought.

After all, this was Fontana, not the segregated Mississippi of his younger days.

The Fontana of December 1945 was a place where his two children played with the other neighborhood kids and rode on the same school bus with them.

It was a place where neighbors had invited the Shorts, their home on Randall Avenue half-built and unheated, into their own homes to warm up on a cold day.

But it also was a place where hate could erase all that.

On Dec. 16, 1945, an explosion shook the Shorts' home, shattering the Sunday evening stillness.

The flames quickly devoured the wood-frame structure as the Shorts struggled to get to safety.

Neighbors who ran to help after hearing the explosion described a horrifying sight.

Short's wife Helen, her hair burned off and her face a mass of raw flesh, trying in vain to beat out the flames on the clothing and shoes of her children. The agonized screams of the children as they were driven to the Kaiser Steel Mill Hospital in a neighbor's car.

The following day, Helen Short and her two children, 9-year-old Barry and 7-year-old Carol Ann, were dead. Only O'Day Short, 40, had survived the initial blast and fire, but he, too, would die more than a month later from his injuries.

The Shorts were the first black family to move into the downtown Fontana area.

And for the two decades that followed, they would be the last.

A time for questions

More than 50 years later, Toi Bolton reads over the old newspaper clippings and looks up. Bolton, who has a teen-age daughter, has read about O'Day Short before. Still, she is excited. She has questions.

Why didn't O'Day Short heed the warnings?

Why didn't he at least leave his family out of it?

Why did he move into downtown Fontana in the first place?

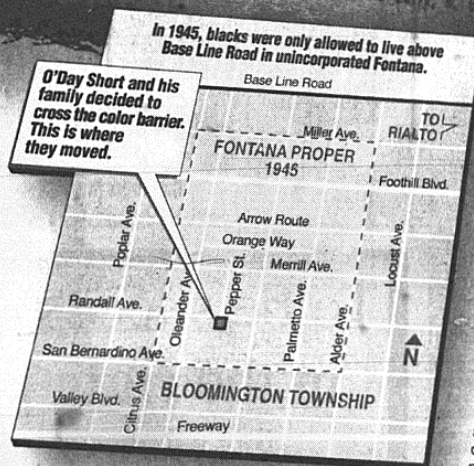
Why is Bolton asking these questions?

Does anybody know the answers?

Officially, the Shorts' fiery deaths remain a mystery. There were charges of a cover-up as local law enforcement officials insist the fire was an accident. A coroner's inquest could not determine the cause of the fire that killed them.

Memories of the tragedy — even within Fontana's black community —

See **SHORT**/A3



HAUNTED BY THE PAST: The California Eagle was one of the few newspapers that covered the tragedy that befell the Short family soon after they moved into Fontana proper. Four days after the fire that claimed the lives of Helen Short, her son, Barry, and her daughter, Carol Ann, the Eagle's front page hinted at vigilantes as the cause of the fatal blaze. One month later, O'Day Short, the father, would die from injuries suffered on Dec. 16, 1945.

Photo illustration by Richard Haselrig and Darren Purcell/Daily Bulletin

NATO sets peace terms

■ Conditions for the allied bombings to halt given to Yugoslav generals.

By Melissa Eddy
Associated Press

BLACE, Macedonia — At a Macedonian coffeehouse on the Kosovo border Saturday, NATO spelled out to Yugoslav generals the exact terms for the withdrawal of Serb troops from the province — a key condition for the allied bombings to halt.

The talks adjourned after five hours, and a NATO spokesman, Lt. Col. Robin Clifford, said the Yugoslav delegation asked for more time to consult "higher authorities" about terms of the withdrawal.

Clifford said the meeting would resume today at Kumanovo base, 20 miles east of Blace and one of two major NATO bases in Macedonia. He called the talks "very constructive ... with positive results."

Just hours after the meeting, however, Serb forces shelled a northern Albanian border town

See **NATO**/A4

A dark day for America

■ Ex-Marine remembers takeover of U.S. embassy in Tehran.

By Robert Monroe
Daily Bulletin

Nov. 4, 1979, started with a display of constants in the Iranian capital of Tehran.

It was another cool, rainy morning and outside the U.S. Embassy, there were the "routine" demonstrations in the street," recalled Kevin Hermening.

Inside the embassy, Marine Staff Sgt. Hermening and Cpl. Billy Gallegos were making plans for a ski trip.

The angry mob invaded Hermening's plans and his whole sense of reality on that day. The experience of the next 443 days

See **HOSTAGES**/A4

Murder or accident?

Short: Unanswered questions surround deaths of first black family to move to downtown Fontana

Story continued from A1

are vague and uncertain, unlikely to start a conversation filled with many solid facts.

Bolton, a black activist who ran for the local school board after moving to Fontana two years ago, thinks it's time for one to begin.

In Short, she sees a hero, a civil rights martyr, a role model.

"That was a helluva brazen thing to have done back then," she said. "I can just imagine only if he had been successful in '45 that maybe, in 1999, Fontana wouldn't quite be what it is now."

Crossing the line

Whites from the South comprise the majority of the population of Fontana. They have brought to that community their backward community mores, their hate-mongering religious cults...

—California Eagle, Dec. 20, 1945

"Fiendish murder or freakish accident?" asked the now-defunct Eagle in that same edition.

The Los Angeles-based weekly was one of a number of black newspapers in Southern California that joined a rising chorus of suspicion that the Shorts had been murdered by white vigilantes determined to keep blacks out of the then unincorporated Fontana township.

Their only sin, the papers declared, was choosing to live south of Fontana's color line of the time, Base Line Road, the northern boundary of the township. Under a "tacit" agreement with the Fontana Chamber of Commerce, blacks were restricted to living north of Base Line Road, in an area known then as Landon.

In mid-November 1945, O'Day Short broke that line with a \$1,000 down payment on an unimproved five-acre parcel southeast of the corner of Randall Avenue and Pepper Street. Many areas in Los Angeles, where Short had lived the previous 25 years and worked as a refrigeration engineer, kept blacks out through the use of racially restrictive covenants. Those covenants, which were common throughout California since the early 1900s, prevented white landowners from legally selling property to nonwhites.

Short's newly acquired property in Fontana did not have such a restriction. There were some strings attached, however.

Shortly after he began building his new home, a sheriff's deputy visited him and advised him that neighbors had complained about his presence. According to a sheriff's report quoted in the Tri-County Bulletin, deputies "told him that he was out of his bounds and advised him that he contact the colored chamber of commerce and get together with the white chamber of

commerce and see if a lot of disagreeableness could not be prevented."

A few days later, in early December, the land dealer who sold him the property advised that "the vigilante committee" had threatened Short's family with violence if they didn't leave.

Short was defiant. He called the FBI, his attorney and the black media in Los Angeles. In the Los Angeles Sentinel, a black weekly, he was quoted as saying of the threats, "They're

just trying to bluff me out of my property. I recognize the old Texas technique when I see it."

It cannot happen here, Short likely believed.

"That he went to the newspaper, his lawyer and the FBI says a lot about his attitude," said Rachel St. John, a Stanford University graduate student who has written about the case. "In the South, if the vigilantes tell you to leave, you probably leave. But it doesn't seem like O'Day Short believed

something bad could have happened to him."

Two weeks later, it did.

"A holocaust"

Three members of a family were dead and the fourth is in a critical condition as the result of an explosion of a coal oil lamp at the home of A.O. Short, Randall and Pepper streets, last Sunday evening about 6:30 o'clock.

—Fontana Herald, Dec. 20, 1945

This was the story that white Fontana was told.

It was a tragedy. A tragic accident. "A holocaust," the Herald opined in its six-paragraph story, which quoted only "hospital attaches" and "investigators."

But vigilante threats? Racially inspired violence? The story didn't even mention the Shorts were black.

Those issues also didn't appear in the pages of the San Bernardino Daily Sun, the only daily newspaper to cover

Fontana in those days. Nor did they matter much to the law enforcement officials charged with investigating the incident. Coroner R.E. Williams thwarted efforts to introduce evidence of vigilante threats at a coroner's inquest on Dec. 27. He said he wasn't interested in hearsay evidence, the Tri-County Bulletin reported.

Fire officials told the coroner's jury it was impossible to say how the fire started.

See SHORT/A5

EXTENDED

SALE ENDS Today
Sunday
June 6
at 6pm

MEMORIAL

25%

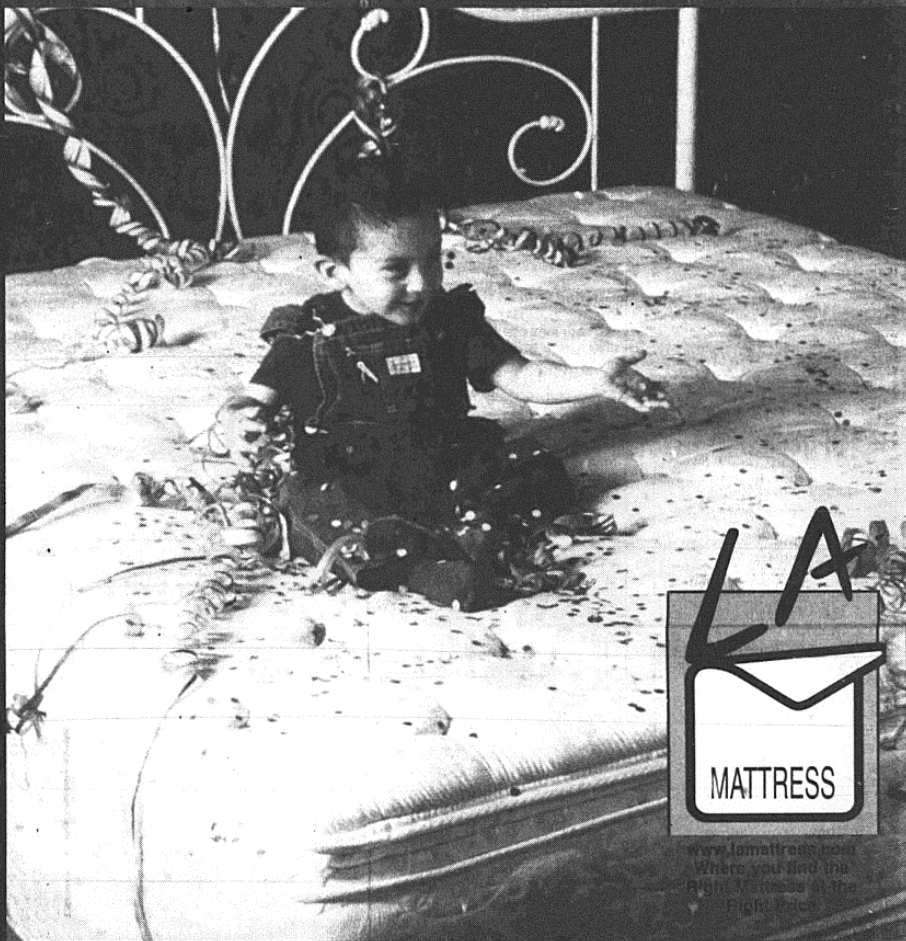
Additional Rebate

on Serta Moonlight & Perfect
Night Lines, Simmons World
Class & Ultra Premium Lines,
plus Spring Air Four Season &
Symphony Collection Lines
coupon exp. 6-6-99

FREE SALES TAX*

we pay sales tax for you

2 FULL



www.lamattress.com
Where you find the
Right Mattress in the
Right Place

Short: Unanswered questions surround deaths of first black family to move to downtown Fontana

Story continued from A3

However, District Attorney Jerome B. Kavanaugh said he knew how it started.

O'Day Short had told him, he said.

Kavanaugh introduced a statement from Short at the inquest that he was filling a lantern "when there was a sudden explosion" and that it was "his opinion that the fire was an accident," the Fontana Herald reported.

While that sounded convincing to the district attorney, it didn't sway the coroner's jury, which decided the fire was of unknown origin.

The decision did nothing to appease the black newspapers following the case. Within a day of the tragedy, reporters from the Tri-County Bulletin, the Eagle, the Sentinel and other papers were at the scene and finding things that were both complex and disturbing.

Black residents in North Fontana told of rumors of vigilante threats. One white neighbor confessed to the Eagle that, until after the tragedy, she hadn't known that the Shorts, who were of light complexion, were black.

Perhaps, the Eagle suggested, that was the reason O'Day Short was able to purchase land south of Base Line Road in the first place.

The Eagle also attacked the reliability of the statement the district attorney said he had obtained from Short. It charged that he "unscrupulously used on the sick man the technique of auto-suggestion."

And the small kerosene lantern, the supposed origin of the explosion, was found relatively intact by J. Robert Smith, the editor of the Tri-County Bulletin. That piece of evidence - and a white neighbor who said the fire appeared to start from the outside - only fueled the outrage that followed.

And justice for all?

Fontana is a bit of the old south, with orange trees instead of cotton, and the smell of pig feed instead of magnolias. But it bears strange fruit.

—The Daily World, Dec. 22, 1945

To the local civil rights community, Fontana appeared in December 1945 to be the land of Jim Crow transplanted to the land of sunshine and citrus.

Black civil rights activists and their allies in Southern California were used to fighting segregation in the form of restrictive covenants. From 1945 to 1948, more lawsuits against restrictive covenants were filed in Los Angeles than in any other part of the country.

But white vigilante violence? It was almost unheard of in Southern California.

Ku Klux Klan rallies had been common in the Inland Valley in the 1920s. Fontana itself later became known in the 1960s and 1970s as a center of KKK activity.

The end of the war and the rapid growth of the state's black population - it nearly quadrupled from 1940 to 1950 - brought an upsurge in race-related violence, as the Eagle and other black newspapers reported. And the Shorts, it appeared, had been caught in the middle of it.

Jolted by the brutality of the case, the ACLU and NAACP led a coalition of civil rights and trade union groups to demand a full investigation of the tragedy. The coalition mustered rallies in late January of 6,000 and 5,000 in Los Angeles and San Bernardino, respectively. Participants in the San Bernardino rally demanded the firing of the sheriff's deputies who had warned Short to get out instead of protecting him, the Tri-County Bulletin reported.

Paul T. Wolfe, a retired Los Angeles arson investigator retained by the NAACP, concluded after examining the kerosene lamp and the ruins of the home that the fire had been intentionally set.

However, his conclusion did not sway authorities.

Kavanaugh stood by the statement that Short himself had allegedly made in calling the fire an accident. He even insisted in a letter to the ACLU that there was no evidence of a "so-called vigilante committee or group existing in Fontana."

Although the state Attorney General's Office and the FBI launched preliminary investigations because of the controversies, neither concluded anything more than that the fire was either a complete mystery or an unfortunate accident.

On Jan. 22, 1946, O'Day Short died. "Last Fontana Victim Gave Up Fight for Life When Told of Fate of Wife, Kids," charged the headline in the Jan. 24 Eagle. The paper charged that Kavanaugh had, in effect, killed Short by the "brutal manner" in which he informed him of the deaths of his wife and children.

But slowly, the furor faded. The Short case, it quickly became clear, was a lost cause, St. John said.

"Everybody drops it all of a sudden," she said. "The KKK is active in Big Bear and Riverside at the time and that takes the attention of the activists away from O'Day Short. When the state came to the conclusion that it was an

accident, it just died out. People gave up on it as a lost cause."

A scar on the past

Children study and play where the Shorts' house once burned.

They are the 1,000 or so children who attend Randall-Pepper Elementary School. Fewer than one in four are white.

None of them have any idea of the tragedy that's buried

beneath them.

They are not alone.

Writer Mike Davis stumbled across the Short case while writing a chapter on Fontana's history for his book, "City of Quartz." He could hardly believe what he was reading.

Davis had lived briefly in Fontana after being born there in 1946, a few months after the tragedy. His parents never mentioned it to him. "That's a major reason I ended up writing about it," he

said.

The account caught the attention of Joe Bono, the president of the Fontana Historical Society. He accepts Davis' conclusion that the Shorts probably were murdered by vigilantes. But the incident is not something the historical society has spent much time looking into, Bono said, because it is a scar on Fontana's past.

"We tend to be upbeat," he said. "This would be a negative thing. We wouldn't necessarily

look into it very much."

Bolton wants to change that disinterest. She wants the fate of O'Day Short and his family to become part of the official history of Fontana. Naming the school after him would be a good start, she suggested.

"Look how far we've come in the last (54) years," Bolton said. "Now here's a school where children of color actually attend. On a place where a black man gave his life. Why can't we recognize that?"

FATHER'S DAY SALE

XERXES The Sale Is On! 20%-50% Off. Casual, Business & Formal Wear.
319 Yale Avenue, Claremont Village Full Scale Tailor Shop 909-482-1111

DON'T PAY MORE! OUR UNEQUALED VOLUME BUYING POWER GUARANTEES THAT YOU CAN'T BEAT OUR PRICES! STORES OPEN TODAY 11-6, DAILY 10-9, SAT 10-8

MATTRESS DISCOUNTERS®
The Nation's Largest Mattress Retailer, And Now The World's Largest Sealy Retailer!

Sealy
Posturepedic

MATTRESS DISCOUNTERS
THE NATION'S LARGEST MATTRESS RETAILER!

DON'T PAY MORE!

OUR UNEQUALED VOLUME-BUYING-POWER GUARANTEES THAT YOU CAN'T BEAT OUR PRICES!

Sealy
Posturepedic

CORRECT COMFORT
An Advanced State Of Individual Comfort

Posturepedic
Crown Jewel
The Ultimate in Support

S&F
STEARNS & FOSTER

NO RISK GUARANTEE
100% CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

THE BRANDS YOU WANT...

PRICES YOU'LL LOVE!

LOW PRICE GUARANTEE
YOU CAN'T BEAT OUR PRICE OR IT'S FREE

SUPER VALUES

Sealy MILAN	VALUE PRICE
Twin each piece	\$49
Full each piece	\$79

COMFORT SOURCE CHIRO-PROTECTOR SQUIRE

VALUE PRICE	
Twin each piece	\$99
Full each piece	\$129
Queen 2 pc. set	\$299
King 3 pc. set	\$449

Sealy Posturepedic HOTEL DELUXE

VALUE PRICE	
Twin each piece	\$119
Full each piece	\$169
Queen 2 pc. set	\$399
King 3 pc. set	\$549

FREE BEDFRAME OR FREE DELIVERY

Receive a **FREE** heavy duty steel bedframe with the purchase of any full, queen or king size mattress set.

Receive **FREE** delivery with any purchase over \$499.

UP TO A \$70 VALUE!

SLEEP ON THE BEST

Sealy Posturepedic WINDHAM II

VALUE PRICE	PRICE
Twin each piece	\$179
Full each piece	\$239
Queen 2 pc. set	\$499
King 3 pc. set	\$749

SEALY POSTUREPEDIC SPECIAL PURCHASE

Sealy Posturepedic HANOVER II PLUSH SPECIAL PURCHASE

PRICE	
Twin each piece	\$199
Full each piece	\$279
Queen 2 pc. set	\$599
King 3 pc. set	\$849

Only available from 4 limited time!

SEALY POSTUREPEDIC GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY MODELS!

Sealy Posturepedic	Sealy Posturepedic
ROSELAND PLUSH	MARTIA FIRM
\$229 Twin each piece	\$229 Twin each piece
\$329 Full each piece	\$329 Full each piece
\$699 Queen 2 pc. set	\$699 Queen 2 pc. set
\$949 King 3 pc. set	\$949 King 3 pc. set

YOUR CHOICE OF FIRMNESS... SAME INCREDIBLE VALUE PRICE!

THE ULTIMATE IN SUPPORT

Sealy Posturepedic CROWN JEWEL ABLE PLUSH

QUEEN SIZE SET JUST \$999!

You Deserve a Stearns & Foster™

STEARNS & FOSTER DILTON LTD.
QUEEN SIZE SET JUST \$1199!

NO MONEY DOWN! NO MONTHLY PAYMENTS FOR 1 YEAR! NO INTEREST FOR 1 YEAR!

MATTRESS DISCOUNTERS®

Have a good night's sleep on us.®

Visit Mattress Discounters' Web Site at www.mattressdiscounters.com

EVENTS ENDS 6/12/99