

## A. J. Smitherman: Pen Warrior



*By Barbara A. Seals Nevergold\**

Andrew Jackson Smitherman might be described as an accidental journalist, as journalism was not his initial career choice. Smitherman acknowledged that his interest in the profession was sparked by a journalism course he took during his last semester in college at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. However, first choice or not, journalism became his lifelong vocation and the means by which he influenced the communities in which he lived and worked. A self-described “pen warrior,” Smitherman once admonished a young protégé about his responsibility to use the power of the printed word as a weapon “. . . in the liberation of Black people from all their chains—real and imaginary.”<sup>1</sup> A journalist who founded four newspapers during a career that spanned more than half a century, Smitherman dispensed advice that was not just rhetoric. He used his newspapers as instru-

ments to inform, educate, rally to action, defend, and fight for causes that were crucial to the well-being of African Americans.

Smitherman's willingness to be a crusading reporter often put him at odds with the establishment and in personal danger on occasion. Through his editorials and reports he advocated for the black vote, exposed corruption, challenged complicit officials, and demanded equal treatment of blacks. Smitherman was credited with influencing policies that improved the lives of blacks in Tulsa, Oklahoma, when it included a thriving business district known as the "Black Wall Street." His stance on blacks' responsibility to oppose mob rule was thoroughly documented in the pages of the *Tulsa Star*, the first African American newspaper of that city. He beseeched blacks to exercise their lawful right to intervene in threatened lynchings. He personally intervened in at least two attempted lynchings at great physical danger to himself. These beliefs no doubt contributed to his actions on the night of May 31, 1921.<sup>2</sup>

The events of that night and the next day set into motion seismic changes that altered Smitherman's life and resulted in his flight from Tulsa and Oklahoma. Most accounts of the life of this pioneering journalist have documented his Tulsa years before the race riot of 1921 that destroyed his business and home. However, this epoch of Smitherman's life and journalistic career are bookended by two significant periods that were before he established the *Tulsa Star* and following his exile from Oklahoma. Prior to his time in Tulsa Smitherman founded the *Muskogee Star*. But the foundation of his newspaper career was established at the *Muskogee Cimeter*.<sup>3</sup>

As a young college graduate Smitherman had taken a journalism course that intrigued him. Following graduation he talked a family friend into giving him a job as a law clerk and newspaper manager. The *Cimeter* became the training ground where he gained experience that contributed to his development of the philosophy that undergirded his journalist activities throughout his life. This period and the time after the 1921 Tulsa riot and massacre, as Smitherman termed it, spent in Buffalo, New York, incorporate more than half of his life and yet are rarely examined. As publisher and editor of the *Buffalo Star*, later renamed the *Empire Star*, Smitherman resurrected his newspaper career from the ashes of Tulsa and became a productive, influential community and civic leader in Buffalo until his death in 1961.<sup>4</sup>

During the last year of his life Smitherman began to write his autobiography, penning forty installments that were serialized in his newspaper before his death. The decision to write his memoirs resulted from a lengthy response he gave to a survey sent to him by Thelma Thurston

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Gorham, who documented the history of the black press. Smitherman decided to focus these reflections on his newspaper career. He wrote that the motivation for writing this autobiography could “be found in the fact that I have lived to see the full accomplishment of the things that prompted me to go into the newspaper business on my own.”<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, these autobiographical articles provide insight into the life of this pioneering journalist and offer a backdrop against which his early career can be examined in greater depth. They begin with a brief family history.

Born on December 27, 1883, in Childersburg, Alabama, Andrew Jackson Smitherman, fondly known as A. J., was the second oldest of eleven children. His parents were James and Elizabeth Smitherman. Smitherman’s mother was a teacher, and his father was a businessman who ran a charcoal manufacturing company with eighty employees. According to Smitherman his father also had a commissary that served his employees.<sup>6</sup> He was silent, however, on what motivated the elder Smitherman to leave his native Alabama and his businesses to relocate his family to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma. Smitherman stated that his paternal great-grandmother was a full-blooded Indian, but whether this lineage had any influence on the move is questionable. The elder Smitherman took a job as a coal miner and worked his way up to a position as a pit boss in the small mining town of Lehigh, Oklahoma, near Atoka.<sup>7</sup>

A history of Coal County may shed some light on the impetus for the Smithermans’ move to Lehigh Township. Lehigh was founded on the site of rich outcroppings of coal, which contributed to the town’s prosperity for more than forty years from 1881 to 1924. The Atoka Coal & Mining Company, the major mining company in the area, was formed in 1881. In 1898 the company’s miners staged a strike that persisted four years. During this time Atoka recruited black workers from throughout the South as strikebreakers.<sup>8</sup> Since the elder Smitherman found work in the mines about this time, it is conceivable that he responded to this call for workers.

In fact, the date of the Smithermans’ move to Indian Territory can be approximated from census data. The family can be found in the 1900 census for Lehigh, Indian Territory. Smitherman was a sixteen-year-old teenager according to this census. The birthplace of his youngest sibling, six-month-old Samuel, was listed as Indian Territory. The next youngest sibling was two-year-old Nellia, whose birthplace, like every other member of the family, was given as Alabama. Given this data, it was likely that the family moved to Lehigh circa 1899 between the births of the two youngest Smitherman children.<sup>9</sup>

According to additional information from the Lehigh history there was no educational system for blacks in the town at this time. The first school for blacks was not built until 1908. Black parents hired and paid teachers privately to educate their children in what were called subscription schools.<sup>10</sup> It is not known whether Smitherman's parents used the subscription schools. However, Smitherman's account of his formative education indicated that he was sent to Centerville, Iowa, where he completed his elementary and high school education. He did not name the schools or indicate in his memoirs whether he attended boarding schools or stayed with relatives during this time.<sup>11</sup>

Smitherman's early work experiences included his first job on a farm where he earned five dollars a month. He also worked in the coal mine with his father for a brief period and for even less money. He said that his mother opposed the work because of the danger, low wages, and difficult manual labor of these occupations. She insisted that he go to college. He attended the University of Kansas and graduated circa 1908, but he did not specify his major.<sup>12</sup> Smitherman also pursued additional education at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, according to his obituary, which also stated that he received a law degree from La Salle University Extension School in Chicago and Boston.<sup>13</sup> However, the exact chronology of his formal education is not clear.

Following graduation from the University of Kansas Smitherman decided to settle in Muskogee, Oklahoma. In his memoir he described a strange dream he had after a visit to Muskogee and his friends the W. H. Twine family a few years before he returned to settle there. The dream eerily mirrored the ultimate course of his real-life experience. Smitherman offered to work for Twine for free, earning only what he could generate through his own efforts. Twine accepted this proposal and hired Smitherman to manage the *Cimeter* and to work as his law clerk. In recounting this dream more than fifty years later, Smitherman described it as one of the "mysteries of my life." Several other factors probably influenced his decision to make Muskogee his home. His move coincided with the discovery of oil in Muskogee County. Smitherman described it as the birthplace of Oklahoma's oil boom, which benefited blacks and whites alike. Muskogee's thriving black community included entrepreneurs who operated a bank, clothing store, and other businesses. Muskogee also had a large black professional class including twenty doctors, six dentists, and fifteen lawyers.<sup>14</sup>

Smitherman family friend and distinguished attorney W. H. Twine was one of the fifteen lawyers and the individual in his dream. Twine was also the publisher and editor of the *Muskogee Cimeter*. But like most African American papers of the time, the *Cimeter* was not a prof-

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itable enterprise. Smitherman described the “dilapidated building” that housed both the newspaper and Twine’s law office as not befitting a man of Twine’s stature. He proposed to make the newspaper a profitable concern if Twine hired him. His salary would depend on his ability to increase the paper’s revenue and be based on a percentage of the profits. Although reluctant at first, Twine was intrigued by the young man’s enthusiasm and novel proposal. He agreed to hire Smitherman for a year in dual roles as his law clerk and the *Cimeter’s* manager. Ultimately, Smitherman stayed in these positions for nearly four years.<sup>15</sup>

From the beginning of his employment Smitherman was a tireless innovator who expanded the *Cimeter’s* circulation and advertising revenue through bold marketing strategies such as creating special subscription offers and hiring traveling sales people to reach beyond the city limits of Muskogee. In a move that marked his approach to journalism throughout his career, he began to regionalize the *Cimeter’s* format to appeal to a broader readership. He employed this strategy in all the newspapers he founded not only to increase subscriptions but also to expand the physical presence of his papers and coverage of regional and national news of interest. Joseph Walker, editor of *Muhammad Speaks*, New York Bureau, began his career as a staff correspondent at the *Empire Star* in Buffalo, New York. Following Smitherman’s death in 1961 Walker discussed the *Cimeter’s* impact under Smitherman’s leadership: “It was also ahead of its time in printing substantial national news and analyses about the Black struggle and international news about struggling peoples in the Third World.”<sup>16</sup>

Smitherman proved himself to be an adept businessman as well as an astute journalist. Within a year of his employment at the *Cimeter* he had succeeded in building a new office building to house the paper, Twine’s law office, twenty rental offices, and several retail outlets.<sup>17</sup> As early as in the January 29, 1909, edition Smitherman signaled his increasing editorial role on the paper in the following advisement: “The editor being busy in court this week and next, this paper is under the control of the advertising manager A. J. Smitherman and we desire to apologize for any short comings in [this] matter.”<sup>18</sup> He retained his responsibilities as advertising manager and law clerk as well, and Twine eventually entrusted him with editorial responsibilities. However, long before he was allowed to act as the *Cimeter’s* editor, Smitherman’s imprint on the paper could be seen as the design, editorial and news content, and tone as well as writing style changed under his management.

In a relatively short time Smitherman’s work on the *Cimeter* cemented his career choice. He quickly became known in wider journalist circles outside of northeastern Oklahoma. Thanks to his business acu-

men the *Cimeter* had several satellite offices and subscribers in Kansas and Missouri. The paper and Smitherman earned national acclaim for its coverage of the critical issues and events of the time.<sup>19</sup>

Smitherman appeared to have found his voice as an activist journalist when he began a series of articles exposing what he described as the guardianship racket. This was “. . . a diabolical scheme designed to dispossess the wealth of Negroes and Indians with the sanction of the county courts.”<sup>20</sup>

In 1893 the Dawes Commission, appointed by the federal government, negotiated a treaty with the Five Civilized Tribes. American Indians and freedmen, former slaves who also had native ancestry, were given an allotment of land, 160 acres each, as a result of this treaty.<sup>21</sup> Children as well as adults received the same acreage. Also, as a result of the Dawes Commission's treaty the majority of land in Muskogee County was owned by Creek Indians and Creek freedmen. The discovery of oil in Muskogee in 1909 and the subsequent oil boom generated significant wealth for many of these property owners, including minors.<sup>22</sup> In 1910 the state of Oklahoma enacted a law that authorized local counties to appoint guardians for these young landowners. The guardians, usually whites, were appointed to oversee and manage the affairs of their wards, including education, personal needs, property, and business dealings. In fact, they had complete control of all assets. In most cases even when parents of these children were alive and capable of managing their affairs, the courts still appointed nonrelated guardians. The guardians were allowed to take 10 percent of the worth of their ward's estate as a fee. They were only required to provide an annual report to the court. Otherwise, they were rarely scrutinized and were allowed to act with impunity. As a result of this system many native and black children were defrauded of their wealth.<sup>23</sup>

Smitherman wrote of a vivid example of the fraud, which he entitled “My First Scoop.” It was the story of Zeke Moore, a freedman who owned land on which one of the first gushers in Oklahoma was discovered. Moore was in prison when oil was discovered on his property, and by the time he was released he had become a millionaire worth more than \$5 million. According to Smitherman he was the first black in Oklahoma to own a car and to spend his money on many other luxuries. Moore's wealth, however, did not last long. He lost it to various con artists and to the imposition of guardianship for his children. As Smitherman dramatically termed it, Moore's story was a typical one for “Negroes and Indians. . . . Crime rode high and handsome involving the county courts in American's greatest and most despicable steal—the dispossession of the Negroes and Indians of Oklahoma.”<sup>24</sup>

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Soon after the guardianship law was passed, a case involving Warrior A. Rentie served as a platform from which Smitherman launched a fight against this unfair practice. Rentie, a Creek freedman, tribal leader, and prominent businessman, and his wife had eight children. Each member of the family owned 160 acres, totaling 1,600 acres in all. The estimated annual royalties from their property was \$120,000. Although he was a college graduate, Rentie was notified by the courts that a guardian was to be appointed for his children. Initially Rentie sought legal assistance from Twine, but before they could respond to the court notice, a guardian was appointed. Incensed by this decision, Rentie confronted the appointee and threatened to kill him if he undertook the guardianship responsibility. Rentie was arrested and indicted for threatening the guardian. Twine, Rentie's longtime friend and former copublisher of the *Pioneer* newspaper, acted as his attorney.<sup>25</sup>

The case became a "cause célèbre." Smitherman's articles vividly described the injustice to Rentie and his family. Further, through background research Smitherman identified more than three thousand cases where whites appointed as guardians for black and native children had pocketed more than \$100 million dollars. According to Smitherman's research not one black or native guardian had been appointed in any of these cases. The *Muskogee Cimeter's* circulation soared, and extra copies had to be printed to meet the demand. When the case came to trial, the appointed guardian failed to appear, and the case was dismissed. In an unprecedented action the judge also appointed Rentie as guardian for his own children, making him the first freedman appointed guardian in eastern Oklahoma.<sup>26</sup>

Smitherman and Rentie were quick to recognize that as significant as this case was, its impact was limited. They speculated that few other African Americans or American Indians would have this opportunity unless they had assistance. Smitherman proposed the formation of a new organization dedicated to fight corruption in the guardianship system and to provide assistance to blacks and natives fighting for appointment to this coveted position. In addition to Rentie, who agreed to be president of the organization and provide financial backing, John Esco was chosen as vice president, and T. J. Elliott was elected as treasurer. Smitherman agreed to act as the group's secretary. Twine also offered his legal services as the group's attorney. The Negro Guardianship League recruited potential guardians from throughout the state and offered to obtain security bonds for those who needed them.<sup>27</sup>

The group had remarkable foresight. They conducted a survey of lands in eastern Oklahoma that were owned by blacks and natives. They found 20,000 acres that had not been leased by oil companies.



Tulsa Star January 8, 1916, with a headline talking about Smitherman's fight against the selling of land by the appointed guardians of American Indian children (Newspaper archives, OHS Research Division).

They proceeded to buy the leases for 12,750 of those acres. In addition, they offered the lessors membership in the league. The league kept members informed of the fair market value of their land and their legal rights. They also educated members about the “guardianship scheme.” Membership grew rapidly, and within six months of its formation the league succeeded in getting “18 Negroes and 11 Indians appointed guardians” for small estates. According to Smitherman the Negro Guardianship League was the only organization of its kind ever established. Its successes were limited but demonstrated the power of black organization as a means to inform, educate, and motivate citizenry to action.<sup>28</sup>

As early as 1911 Smitherman was expressing his opinion about the relationship between black self-determination and lynching. In a short article that appeared in the September 11 edition of the *Cimeter*, Smitherman observed that the black residents of Bryan County had organized to protect themselves against white mob violence. Further, he noted that these residents were “. . . no longer depending on the law to protect them but will protect themselves.” He echoed the beliefs of his



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friend William Gordon “. . . that our people should obey the law and see that criminals are brought to justice, oppose mob law in all its forms and fight to the bitter end for the protection of home and family and die if need be in the defense of right. Bro Gordon says ‘fight like hell’ and we say amen.”<sup>29</sup>

On May 25, 1911, Laura Nelson, a black woman, was raped and lynched along with her son in Okemah, Oklahoma. This heinous crime was captured in photographs, as Nelson’s and her son’s bodies were photographed hanging from a bridge over the Canadian River. Smitherman’s emotional response to the actions of the Bryan County residents may have been influenced by the Nelson tragedy. In any event his views on the blacks’ responsibility and right to defend themselves and others from lawless whites were expressed repeatedly throughout the following years.<sup>30</sup> This example of his developing thoughts on this subject presaged his actions and the subsequent events of May 31, 1921, just ten years later.

Smitherman’s growing reputation as a dynamic journalist did not go unnoticed by his peers. In 1910 he was elected vice president of the Western Negro Press Association (WNPA) and a year later was elected to that organization’s presidency.<sup>31</sup> Founded in 1895, the WNPA had an established reputation as a vocal advocate for the rights of African Americans. In 1905 the organization’s leadership penned a memorial to President Theodore Roosevelt, urging the denial of statehood to the Oklahoma Territory unless it agreed not to pass any Jim Crow laws.<sup>32</sup> As president of the WNPA from 1911 until 1921 Smitherman maintained the WNPA’s organizational tradition of advocacy for blacks’ civil rights and moved the organization toward providing supportive services for its members. A 1913 article written by B. F. Lee extolled the progress of “negro organizations” in the fifty years since emancipation and offered the following accolade to Smitherman’s organization: “There is also a western Negro Press Association that has done a great deal to stimulate the Negro journalist of the western states.”<sup>33</sup>

Around the same time Smitherman experienced a major change in his personal life when he met and soon married a young teacher named Ollie B. Murphy. Smitherman said he was attracted to Ollie because of “her quiet, demure and retiring nature, her refinement and her beauty.”<sup>34</sup> They were married on June 29, 1910. Following the establishment of the *Tulsa Star* and perhaps even earlier, Ollie Smitherman assumed a role as a contributor to the newspaper. She was identified as the society editor of the *Star* for a period of time. Years later she played a pivotal role in the establishment of the *Buffalo Star*.

Although he would spend almost four eventful years at the *Cimeter*

establishing his credentials as a journalist and creating a profitable newspaper, Smitherman found himself increasingly at odds philosophically with W. H. Twine. In his memoirs Smitherman provided a lengthy explanation for his decision to leave the *Cimeter* and launch his own publication. In brief, his political and thus editorial views differed significantly from Twine's. Twine was a lifelong Republican whose allegiance to the party was unshakable. As a young man who thought that reason should prevail over sentimentality and emotion, Smitherman spent a great deal of time studying how both parties responded to the black vote. In his opinion the Republican Party had taken blacks' allegiance for granted. On the other hand, since Democrats believed they had no hope of getting the black vote, they felt justified in using every means to suppress it, thus preventing an advantage to the Republicans.<sup>35</sup>

Oklahoma's adoption of a grandfather clause in 1909 provided additional evidence to convince Smitherman that his logic was correct. The grandfather clause required that prospective voters document that one of their grandfathers had voted in the 1865 election in order to qualify to exercise this right. Most African Americans could not make this claim as their grandfathers had been enslaved at that time. W. H. Twine had insisted that the grandfather clause was the work of the Democrats, but Smitherman countered that Muskogee County, a Republican stronghold, had voted overwhelmingly for the clause. He believed that ". . . it was simply an attempt to cut out this block of known [R]epublican votes to give the Democrats better chance against the Republicans. It was politics."<sup>36</sup>

Smitherman reasoned that the only way to change this scenario was for African Americans to diversify their vote. While still at the *Cimeter* he began to formulate a strategy that proposed blacks support the Democratic Party to bring about greater leverage of their vote and to create some political clout. In an era when most blacks were staunch Republicans, Smitherman took the independent and often unpopular position of becoming a Democrat. Although it was a difficult decision especially because of his friendship with and loyalty to Twine, Smitherman embarked on the establishment of his own newspaper to advocate this position.<sup>37</sup>

Smitherman founded the *Muskogee Star* in 1912. The "Star" was to become a defining and consistent nomenclature in the titles of future publications. The *Muskogee Star's* premier issue on July 12, 1912, pledged that "we shall persistently plead for law and order and in this connection will demand all that is ours as citizens of these United States. In politics as well as in religion the 'Star' is strictly an indepen-

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dent paper.”<sup>38</sup> This pledge, in differing wording, became the hallmark for all of Smitherman’s publications.

Smitherman launched another innovative marketing strategy when he hired local boys and girls to sell subscriptions for the *Star*. In the initial issue of the newspaper he lauded their work, noting that “we have put them to work on a 100 percent commission which will last the remainder of this month and we are pleased to state that they have done extremely well, thanks to the generous citizens of Muskogee.”<sup>39</sup> He also ran contests offering prizes as incentives to the winners in addition to their commissions. Two decades later with the launch of the *Buffalo Star* Smitherman would again employ “Star Boys and Girls” as his emissaries for the newspaper.<sup>40</sup>

Within a year Smitherman arranged to relocate the paper to the thriving, oil-rich metropolis of Tulsa. He made numerous preliminary trips to the city and even wrote in the *Star* about these visits to Tulsa, announcing in the September 20 edition that “our visit to Tulsa this week convinced us that that city is not near as ‘dead’ as it is reported to be. In fact is quite alive.” He identified some of the citizens he had met there including O. W. Gurney, a prominent real estate man, and a Mr. Williams, a “colored man on the Tulsa police force.” He also talked about Barney Cleaver, who he described as an “honored citizen of Tulsa, who is an old friend of ours.”<sup>41</sup>

Twine and the *Cimeter*, however, were the principal factors in this decision to leave Muskogee, as Smitherman acknowledged that he was motivated to operate his newspaper in an environment where he would not be in competition with his friend and former employer. Although the *Star* boasted abundant advertising, it also stood to reason that Smitherman knew he could not maintain his paper as a profitable competitor of the *Cimeter*. Smitherman’s family had expanded by this time to include two children, Toussaint and Carol. A biographic sketch of Smitherman in a contemporary publication noted that in addition to his job as publisher of the *Muskogee Star*, he also was the foreman of employees in the Oklahoma State Legislature in 1912.<sup>42</sup> However, Smitherman failed in his memoirs to mention this position.

He did describe, however, in some detail an incident with the Creek Loan Company with whom he had invested and taken out a loan to buy his house in Muskogee. He lost a considerable amount of money when a bank official defrauded the company and absconded with the bank’s assets. This major financial setback had a significant impact on Smitherman’s plans to move to Tulsa and on the initial establishment of the *Tulsa Star*.<sup>43</sup>

Smitherman admitted that he arrived in Tulsa with only enough money to cover his room rent for one month, leaving him a grand balance of \$3.75. However, his good reputation helped him to secure credit. Through a stroke of fate or just good luck he found two employees and a small printing press, which he was able to lease with an option to buy after sixty days. During an earlier visit to the city Smitherman met J. B. Stradford, a businessman and future owner of the largest black-owned hotel in the state of Oklahoma. Smitherman and Stradford became friends, and Stradford would become a staunch supporter of the *Star*. Stradford offered him a short-term loan, and within a week the *Tulsa Star* was born in April 1913. Smitherman also credited his youthful enthusiasm and optimism as factors in this quick turn of events.<sup>44</sup>

Smitherman found a vibrant black community with nearly fifteen thousand residents in Tulsa's Greenwood District. Among them were numerous black businesses, professionals, and institutions eager for the addition of a newspaper to their community. While the *Star* began as a weekly, Smitherman also published the *Tulsa Daily Star* concurrently during a three-year period from 1916 to 1919. An article in the *Tulsa World* reported: "The distinction that Tulsa and Oklahoma gets out of the *Daily Star* is in the fact that this is the only colored daily paper in the United States."<sup>45</sup>

Smitherman quickly became a leading and influential citizen in Tulsa. Through his paper he advocated for voter rights, exposed corruption, challenged complicit officials, and demanded equal treatment of blacks in all aspects of community life. He was directly responsible for the establishment of an all-black election board. Tulsa was the first city in the country to afford this entrée to the vote to blacks.<sup>46</sup>

He continued his fight against the grandfather clause, waging a multiyear campaign against this discriminatory practice. He expanded access to the public library for black Tulsans, even providing space for the location of a public library branch at the *Star* offices.<sup>47</sup>

With the earliest editions of the *Star* Smitherman took on numerous causes, making them regular features in his newspaper. For example, he actively opposed prostitution and gambling and began a campaign to clean up the Greenwood District. A house of prostitution located at 216 East Archer Street became the focus of his fight. It was located near the border separating the white and black communities yet was squarely in the black community. Its "inmates," as Smitherman called them, were white prostitutes. Smitherman wrote scathing editorials and even published photos of the women in his efforts to have the house closed down by the city. One night Smitherman was called to a

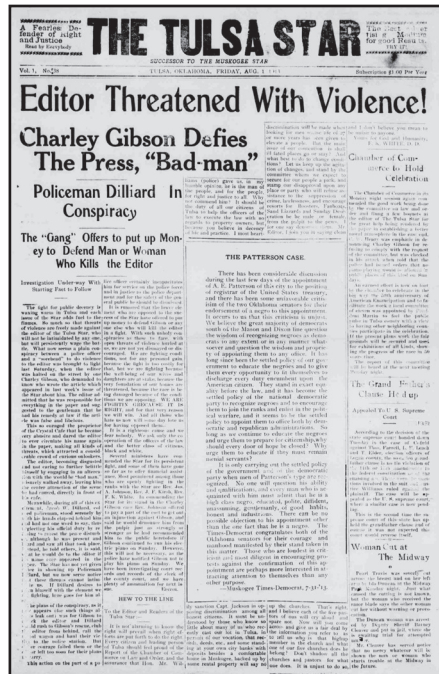
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meeting with Tulsa's police chief. The police chief tried to intimidate him and force him to stop writing about this particular house. Smitherman refused to back down and threatened to write about the chief's scare tactic. The next day police closed the Archer Street house.<sup>48</sup>

This episode was somewhat of an epiphany for Smitherman, as he realized for the first time the power that could be wielded with a pen. He wrote, ". . . the power of the pen, even in the hand of a virtually peniless man and the editor of a little weekly newspaper, was enough to change the destiny of a great western oil metropolis."<sup>49</sup>

A second anecdote from Smitherman's early days in Tulsa was a chilling story of a murder plot targeting him. After his success in closing the house of prostitution he turned his attention to another "public nuisance on my list . . . a gambling den on Greenwood Avenue . . . the Gipson [*sic*] Place." Following an unsolved murder in the bar Smitherman wrote a series of editorials denouncing the Gibson Place's owner, Charles Gibson. Sometime after these editorials appeared, Gibson tried to lure Smitherman into his bar to kill him. Smitherman escaped this attempt on his life and wrote about it in a front-page column headlined "Editor's Death Plotted." A black policeman who conspired with Gibson was eventually exposed and terminated.<sup>50</sup> These high profile

Headline from the Tulsa Star August 1, 1913, discussing the threats made against Smitherman by Charley Gibson (Newspaper archives, OHS Research Division).



victories established Smitherman's reputation as an incorruptible and courageous fighter for justice. Mary E. Jones Parrish's contemporary portrait of Smitherman confirmed this view: ". . . uncompromising and persistent in the conscientious fight he waged with tongue and pen for equal rights for his people."<sup>51</sup>

Smitherman continued to address the issue of lynching as well, reporting national, state, and local incidents and statistics. A 1914 article entitled "Another Man Lynched: And the Murderers, as usual, go unpunished"<sup>52</sup> reported on the lynching of a Eufaula man by a mob of fifty unmasked men. Smitherman accused all law enforcement officials, including Oklahoma's Governor Lee Cruce, for their failure to enforce the law. He described this governmental complacency as "another good reason why Negroes of this State should form an armed organization to protect themselves and uphold the law." He stressed his position: "We believe in upholding the law at all times even if to do so means death. Therefore we are inalterably opposed to mob violence."

Furthermore, he challenged blacks: "Negro men, it's up to us to act. We must have justice! Our wives and children are not safe in a country so rent with outlawry. Let us respect the law and enforce it at the point of guns. When a Negro is charged with crime let us aid the officers in apprehending him and then take our guns and protect him against mob violence."<sup>53</sup> Smitherman was clear that he advocated opposition to law breakers regardless of their ethnicity, even though he anticipated that blacks had more to fear from mob violence than whites.

Smitherman's involvement in the antilynching movement clearly demonstrated his adherence to a "walk-the-walk" as well as "talk-the-

*Article about an unpunished lynching in the Tulsa Star November 8, 1913 (Newspaper archives, OHS Research Division).*

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 Vol. 1, No 56 TULSA, OKLAHOMA, SATURDAY, NOV. 8, 1913 Subscription \$1.00 Per Year

## Another Lynching In Oklahoma

Colored man swung up and dedicated to Gov. Cruce. No investigation. Will Gov. act.

**Theatrical Doings**  
 (By Buddy Okonus.)  
 PASTIME THEATRE.  
 Mr. Smith, manager, has had somewhat of a hard time as the old saying goes, "It never rains unless"

**The Star's New Force**  
 "Billy" McClain, Noted Sportsman and Thatrical Man takes up Newspaper Work.

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talk” philosophy. He personally intervened in at least two lynching incidents at great physical danger to himself. In 1918 when he learned of a threatened lynching, he led a small group of black men to the nearby town of Bristow. He prevented the lynching but was held hostage by the mob for a period of time before he escaped.<sup>54</sup> In a second incident that he was unable to prevent, he investigated the lynching and reported his findings to Oklahoma’s governor. As a result of his report the town’s mayor and thirty-six others were charged with the crime, an unprecedented action for this period.<sup>55</sup>

As a result of his activities and his personal qualities, Smitherman earned the respect of whites as well as blacks as a community leader of great intelligence, moral integrity, courage, and commitment. In 1919 he was invited to join the Governor’s Reception Committee to welcome President Woodrow Wilson. Smitherman was the only African American given an opportunity to speak during the president’s visit.<sup>56</sup> In 1920 he also served at Governor J. B. A. Robertson’s Inter-racial Conference to develop an agenda to address lynching, civil rights, racial cooperation, and education.<sup>57</sup>

By personal example and philosophic predilection Smitherman advanced his position on the black man’s responsibility regarding lynchings that held that they should not be passive observers to these atrocities but should actively intervene in any such attempts. In his articles and editorials he regularly exhorted blacks to exercise their lawful right and moral obligation to oppose mob violence, even if it meant using force. Historian Larry O’Dell asserted that “the quick reaction of the black community to a threatened lynching on May 31, 1921, can be attributed directly to the admonishments of Smitherman and the *Tulsa Star*.”<sup>58</sup> The arrest of Dick Rowland for the alleged sexual assault of a white girl, the gathering crowd of whites threatening Rowland, the incendiary rhetoric of a local white newspaper, and the attempt of a group of black men to offer their services to the sheriff to protect Rowland were the sparks that ignited the worst race massacre and riot in the history of the United States. In the aftermath of the events of May 31 to June 1, 1921, hundreds of blacks lay dead; the Greenwood section of Tulsa was destroyed, including the *Tulsa Star* and the Smitherman home valued at \$40,000; and A. J. Smitherman found himself a fugitive on the run.<sup>59</sup>

For nearly eighty years the history of the Tulsa Race Riot was clouded in a conspiracy of silence. In 1997 the state of Oklahoma established a commission to fully study the riot, its causes, and its impact. The few contemporary accounts that described the events preceding the riot included grand jury testimony given by O. W. Gurney and J. B. Stradford



Ruins of the Tulsa Star office after the Tulsa Race Riot in 1921 (23129.BLA, John Dunning Political Collection, OHS Research Division).

and recorded in their memoirs. They provided a portrait of the actions of a group of black men who met in the offices of the *Tulsa Star* on the night of May 31. In response to the perceived threat to Dick Rowland the men offered to help the sheriff protect Rowland from an increasingly boisterous and growing group of whites. Smitherman was identified as being among the armed black men who went to the jail that evening to personally offer assistance in Rowland's defense.<sup>60</sup>

A brief article in the February 2, 1922, edition of the *Black Dispatch* noted that although Smitherman had been indicted for inciting the riot, the "riot survivors had stated that Smitherman tried to quiet the Negroes and did all that he could to effect peace out of the chaotic conditions that prevailed."<sup>61</sup> However, the record remains incomplete as to Smitherman's specific actions on the night of May 31 and the day of June 1, 1921, for he never wrote about his personal experience. He died before he could pen his account of his activities that night, as his memoirs end with his first years in Tulsa. But early in his newspaper career Smitherman began writing poetry, periodically publishing it in his newspapers. His epic poem the "Tulsa Riot and Massacre," prob-



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*An African American man surveying the ruins of the Tulsa Race Riot in 1921 (16943, box 1, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS Research Division).*

ably written in late 1921, chronicled the course of the riot in poetic verse. In the end Smitherman left a historic legacy in his eyewitness documentation of the destruction of an entire community.<sup>62</sup>

Smitherman and his wife and five children were forced to flee Tulsa, Oklahoma, never to return to the state. A Tulsa grand jury indicted Smitherman, his brother John, and J. B. Stradford for inciting the riot. In all more than seventy men were charged with this crime. However, the majority of the accused were African Americans, and the grand jury placed the blame for the riot squarely on their shoulders.<sup>63</sup>

In 2002 Carol Smitherman Martin, Smitherman's daughter, was interviewed about the riot. The Smitherman's second oldest child, Martin was eight years old at the time. In recalling the early morning hours of June 1, 1921, she described how her mother awakened the children, dressed them, and took them to the basement. They were still hiding there when looters invaded the home and set it on fire. They escaped the burning building by hiding next in a church and then at a family member's home.<sup>64</sup> A significant section of Smitherman's epic poem offers a dramatic, heartwrenching depiction of his family's ordeal and survival of this home invasion. Following are excerpts from Smitherman's poignant work:

All night long a mother waited  
For her husband to return,  
Every minute filled with horror,  
Lest the worst she soon would learn.  
“Children!” sadly called a mother,  
“Father’s been away all night.  
In the fray where duty calls him,  
But we know he’s in the right!”

.....  
To the basement they descended  
Thinking that they might escape,  
Hoping that some friend would find them  
And make their rescue ere too late.

.....  
Then they heard the roaring blazes  
When the torch had been applied,  
Soon they heard the falling timber,  
“Oh, we’re lost! The mother cried.  
Through the smoke and almost stifled,  
Groping, gasping for their breath,  
Mother saved herself and children  
From a cruel and fiery death.  
Not alone their home was burning,  
Not alone they suffered so,  
Clouds of smoke ascending skyward  
Told the awful tale of woe.<sup>65</sup>

*Smoke billowing over Tulsa during the race riot (16939, box 1, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS Research Division).*



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Smitherman's life, and that of his family, was changed immeasurably. Following their flight from Tulsa the family remained in hiding for several months. However, by December 1921 the Smithermans were living in Boston. He communicated in a series of letters with National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) officials, including Walter White and Moorfield Storey, requesting their assistance in mobilizing public sentiment on behalf of the Tulsa riot and massacre victims and for Smitherman and his family, personally. He wrote to White during the Christmas season in 1921, announcing his decision to come out of hiding and tell his story via his epic poem and personal experience. In fact, he included a copy of the poem with this correspondence. Smitherman told White, "I hope you approve my plans. I have given it considerable thought and am convinced that it is the only manly course open to me. I owe it to the brave fellows who fought and died for a great cause on May 31 and June 1st, and to the Race."<sup>66</sup>

On January 7, 1922, Smitherman wrote White again. This time he enclosed a copy of the article he wrote about the riot and its aftermath for the *Boston Herald*. Storey was instrumental in getting the paper to publish this piece. Smitherman received twenty dollars for this article and noted that he had three goals for writing it: "(1)- to show the guilty hand of the Tulsa whites, (2)- the present need of outside financial assistance for the Tulsa sufferers and (3) – to arouse sentiment in favor of the Dyer Bill." He asked for White's help in getting this article reprinted in other newspapers as well as in securing speaking engagements in the Boston area.<sup>67</sup> White responded that once published it was unlikely that another paper would reprint it and suggested that Smitherman consider writing another article for that purpose. He also referred him to Butler Wilson, head of the Boston NAACP, to assist with the arrangement of speaking engagements.<sup>68</sup>

Smitherman found some interest in the Boston area for lectures about the Tulsa riot and his experience. His family also participated in these events. A contemporary news article said that the ". . . life-like portrayal of the tragic, terrible, Tulsa Massacre by A. J. Smitherman and his wife and children thrilled and held spell-bound the people assembled in the large vestry of the Peoples Baptist Church, last night." The article indicated that a second presentation was slated at another church. Smitherman was introduced by Monroe Trotter, editor and publisher of the *Boston Guardian* and a founding member of the Niagara Movement.<sup>69</sup>

Oklahoma City's *Black Dispatch* also reported the performance of Smitherman's poem by his wife and children. Mrs. Smitherman recited

the poem, "assisted by the children, four of them in uniquely dramatic and pathetic, one never to be forgotten one which brings tears to the eyes of the men as well as the women hearers, a live chapter from the tragedy of the colored American in his own land."<sup>70</sup>

The response to Smitherman's *Boston Herald* article was swift and ominous. For some unknown but suspect reason the *Herald* article included the address of the Smithermans' residence. Oklahoma authorities issued extradition papers for Smitherman in three states. Publisher Richard Lloyd Jones of the *Tulsa Tribune*, who had received an advance copy of the article, telegraphed the publisher of the *Herald* urging him to kill it: "Smitherman fugitive from justice. Extradition papers granted by three governors, Stop bad actor, Stop Writing."<sup>71</sup>

Alarmed by this threat, Smitherman wrote another letter to Walter White in which he stated, "I suppose the fight is on. . . . extradition papers have been issued for me in three states . . ." He also took the opportunity to express his lack of confidence in Wilson, who had urged him to flee the country after receiving word of Oklahoma's extradition attempt. Smitherman reported wryly, "When I told him I had no money and that my wife and children were dependent upon me, he still insisted that I go some place away from here. But he did not offer to assist me financially . . ." <sup>72</sup>

Whatever the reason, Smitherman was not arrested and returned to Oklahoma. Certainly, the NAACP deserves some credit, as it was already involved in fighting several extradition cases. Sometime in 1922 Smitherman quietly moved his family to Springfield, Massachusetts, where he established a publishing enterprise. His obituary noted that he had published a newspaper named the *New World* from 1922 to 1926 in Springfield.<sup>73</sup> No copies of this paper appear to have survived, however.

In 1925 Smitherman moved his family to Buffalo, New York. Why Buffalo? Other than the fact that his brother Albert lived in the city, there is little other information that offers a rationale for Smitherman's choice of Buffalo as his new home. However, the 1930 census and Buffalo city directories recorded Smitherman's mother, Elizabeth, as living with the family in the early 1930s. Whether she lived in Buffalo with Albert prior to Smitherman's move or traveled from Oklahoma and Boston with them is unknown. For the remainder of his life Smitherman made Buffalo his residence.<sup>74</sup>

In mid-1960 A. J. Smitherman made the decision to write his autobiography. More than a half-century had passed since he had decided to become a newspaperman. He thought it was time to record the events in his life that had contributed to and shaped his journalistic career. He

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began with a brief family history but concentrated his articles on his newspaper experience beginning with the *Muskogee Cimeter* in 1909. Each week he wrote another installment revealing an extraordinary memory for detail and a passion for the events that shaped his career. By June 21, 1961, he had completed forty installments and was sitting at his desk working on the forty-first article. The *Buffalo Criterion* reported, "He was stricken as he was writing the weekly installment of his autobiography in his office. With 2 and 3 fourth pages written he began a new paragraph, "For the next 45 minutes . . ." Thus "minutes" was the last word A. J. Smitherman ever wrote in his life. The irony of this "pen warrior," still armed for battle to the very end, was not lost on his fellow journalist.<sup>75</sup>

Unfortunately, he was not able to complete his memoirs, and thus many questions about his role in the events of May 31, 1921, will never be answered. Nonetheless, in the pages he did write, he provided a glimpse of the life and career of an extraordinary pioneering journalist. If there were words to sum up the essence of such a man, they most assuredly can be found in his voluminous writings, including editorials, reports, and poems. But a fitting summation is provided by the man himself, who was reported to have said of his philosophy in dealing with the setbacks in his life: "I'm never licked. . . . When anyone tells me they are at the end of their rope, I always advise them to tie a knot and hang on."<sup>76</sup>

In 2007 a campaign was launched to clear Smitherman's name of charges that he was an instigator of the Tulsa Race Riot. As a result of this effort the records of all fifty-five African American men who had been indicted in 1921 were cleared in an historic court proceeding on December 11, 2007. A. J. Smitherman was truly a pioneering journalist who has finally received some measure of vindication regarding his alleged role in the Tulsa disaster; however, he still has not received the place in history that he deserves.

### Endnotes

<sup>75</sup>Barbara A. Seals Nevergold earned her doctorate in counseling education from the University at Buffalo, Buffalo, New York. She retired as the director of student support services at the University at Buffalo. Currently, she is an adjunct professor in the African American Studies Department at the University at Buffalo and at Empire State College, Saratoga Springs, New York. Dr. Nevergold is the cofounder of the Uncrowned Queens Institute for Research and Education on Women, Inc., a nonprofit organization that identifies, collects, and preserves biographies and photographs of little-known African American community builders. These biographies, photographs, and research articles are housed in an online archive at [www.uncrownedcommunitybuilders.com](http://www.uncrownedcommunitybuilders.com).

<sup>76</sup>Joseph Walker, "A. J. Smitherman, Pioneer Newspaperman," *Muhammad Speaks* (New York, NY), March 29, 1974, 17, 24.

<sup>2</sup> Mary E. Jones Parrish, *Events of the Tulsa Disaster: Some of the Activities of Andrew J. Smitherman* (Tulsa: Out on a Limb Publishing, 1998), 100; Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report* (Oklahoma City: The Commission, 2001), 100.

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Smitherman, "A Biography: The Beginnings of My Fight for Citizenship Rights," *Empire Star* (Buffalo, N.Y.), September 17, 1960, 9.

<sup>4</sup> "Smitherman: A 'Star' Studded Life," *Empire Star*, June 6, 1957, 1.

<sup>5</sup> A. J. Smitherman, "A Biography: Introduction," *Empire Star*, September 3, 1960, 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Betty Poe, ed., *History of Coal County, Oklahoma* (Dallas: Curtis Media Corporation, 1986), 65-66.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Census, Indian Territory, Choctaw Nation, South, Range 10, East, June, 1900.

<sup>10</sup> Poe, ed., *History of Coal County, Oklahoma*, 65-66.

<sup>11</sup> Smitherman, "A Biography: Introduction."

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> "Publisher of Nation's First Negro Daily Paper is Dead," *Buffalo (NY) Evening News*, June 22, 1961.

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<sup>16</sup> Walker, "A. J. Smitherman," 24

<sup>17</sup> A. J. Smitherman, "A Biography: De Ole Shack," *Empire Star*, October 8, 1960, 5.

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<sup>22</sup> Smitherman, "A Biography: The Great Oil Boom."

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