

by: [Amy Quesinberry](#) Community Editor

After decades of collecting information about their hometown's past, two Ocoee sisters have published a book based on historical fiction.

Myra Kinnie, 76, and Gail Waxman, 70, have written "Ocoee! A Novel," which tells the story of the 1920 election race riot that took place in Ocoee and its subsequent effect on the city's black population for the next 60 years.

"We tried to make it as truthful as we could," Kinnie said. "We tried to soften it as best we could. It's not a soft subject — we know that. But it's one that needs to be told, because it's always covered up."

"So many people want to hear about it and know the truth," Waxman added.

UNCOVERING THE STORY

Her fascination with the story started close to 30 years ago when Waxman was working as a real estate appraiser under Sam Holland and he began telling her stories about the area.

"I started getting abstracts of the area, before title insurance, which told the history of the property, but nothing really official," she said. "An opinion of title, by an attorney. ... I love history, and I started looking at these abstracts of property, and I kept seeing these names."

When she asked Holland about the people, he was hesitant to answer, she said.

"They were some of the black people who had lived there in the 1920s in Ocoee and had owned the properties," Waxman said. "I started to dig deeper."

OCOEE! A NOVEL

"Ocoee! A Novel" can be purchased online at oceanovel.com or amazon.com, as well as at the Winter Garden Heritage Foundation's History Research and Education Center, 21 E. Plant St., Winter Garden.

The authors, Gail Waxman and Myra Kinnie, will present their book and hold a book signing from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 19, at the WGHF History Research and Education Center.

Digging was difficult and fact-finding was tedious in the days before computers and the internet.

“We would hear stories early on but never any fact, no official story,” Kinnie said. “It was behind-the-barn-door-type stuff. ... All we ever knew was there was an altercation basically.”

Waxman began researching the subject at the Orange County Regional History Center in Orlando. She spoke with anyone who would talk to her about the 1920 riot, and, slowly, her collection of information was building.

During a trip to St. Augustine, the sisters met a bookstore owner whose deceased husband, Stetson Kennedy, had spent several years as an undercover federal agent embedded in the Ku Klux Klan. He kept extensive files on his racial discoveries in his home, and when the wife learned what Kinnie and Waxman were researching, she invited them to look in his archives and to make copies of anything they thought was crucial to their book.

Kennedy's findings are now part of the University of Florida Archives.

Closer to home, the writers spent hours and hours at the Winter Garden Heritage Foundation doing even more research.

Fact-finding was difficult at times. There are no voting records for 1920, Kinnie said — not in Orange County and not in Tallahassee.

“So many things we'd get so close to finding something only to find out it burned,” Waxman said.

“We do know that for 17 years, no black person voted in Orange County,” Kinnie said.

“So, it was very effective because it kept women from voting, especially black women,” Waxman added.

OCOEE! A NOVEL

Once the information was gathered, Waxman and Kinnie began formulating it into their book. Where there was no concrete information, the women had to surmise what likely happened, such as the details of how the black residents actually escaped during the night after their homes were set ablaze.

The book is written from the viewpoint of a young woman writing her master's thesis on information shared in the journal of her great-grandmother, who grew up in Ocoee during the race riot. The pages alternate between the old woman's journal and the young woman's thesis paper.

To create the character of great-grandmother Georgia, Kinnie and Waxman incorporated much of their own mother, Eddie Barker, who was 3 when she moved to Ocoee in 1920.

The book, released in May, already has won two gold awards, a silver and an honorable mention in national book contests, which, Waxman said, is giving them the confidence to actively promote this book and start thinking of writing another one.

Good ratings also have been left on Amazon, where the book can be purchased. Friends said they were drawn into the story and couldn't put it down.

Ocoee City Commissioner Rosemary Wilsen called the impact of the novel both horrifying and enlightening.

"This book brings home the harsh reality of the times in the city of Ocoee," she said. "After reading this novel, I am so thankful for the now-diverse community of Ocoee, the one that I am proud to call home."

Contact Amy Quesinberry at AmyQ@orangeobserver.com.