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CONTACT: Chris Angermann
Bardolf & Company
(941) 232-0113

c.angermann@verizon.net
www.bardolfandcompany.com

Two Sisters Write Novel about 1920s Voter Disenfranchisement

At a time when efforts to prevent minorities from voting continue in a number of states, and white supremacists openly rally, shouting hateful, racist slogans, two sisters in Florida have drawn back the veils on a little-known massacre that offers an important historical parallel to today's practices. During the presidential elections of 1920 when African-Americans tried to vote in Ocoee, a small town near Orlando, white supremacists went on an all-night rampage, torching the black neighborhood and killing at least five people.

Worried by successful African Americans voter registration drives, the Florida Ku Klux Klan had promised that no blacks would be allowed to vote. They held marches and surrounded voting stations throughout Florida with gun-carrying members to intimidate blacks. In Ocoee, it led to horrific violence and death.

Within days of the massacre, all but one of the 500 members of the African American community fled or were forced off their properties. Many whites bought up their fertile farmland at cut-rate prices. Ocoee became a lily-white "sunset" town – no blacks allowed after dark – for the next sixty years.

The electoral intimidation worked, too. Over the next 17 years not a single black vote was cast in Orlando's Orange County.

Myra Kinnie and Gail Waxman grew up in Ocoee in the 1940s and 50s. They heard bits and pieces about the massacre but found that people didn't want to talk about it. An attempt at reconciliation in 2008 brought some discussion, but it became clear to them that most people preferred to sweep what happened under the rug. Although white, Kinnie and Waxman didn't agree and decided to do something about it.

They wrote *Ocoee!* based on extensive historical research. The young adult novel tells the story of what happened through the eyes of a young girl growing up at the time. Published by Bardolf & Company, their powerful coming-of-the-age story bears witness to the anger, violence, and heartbreak, and the deep divide of racial relations in the rural South nearly a century ago. But the book doesn't just document a distressing chapter of American history. Ultimately, it is about the power of forgiveness that points toward the possibility of a better future for all of us.

Ocoee! has been honored with two gold medals at the 2017 Florida Authors and Publishers Association President's Book Awards, and received an honorable mention in the young adult fiction category at the San Francisco Book Festival Awards.