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Springfield riots of 1908 are focus of historical fiction novel

By **ARLENE MANNLEIN**, Staff Writer

In August 1908, a crowd outside the Sangamon County Jail in Springfield, where two black men were being held for alleged crimes against whites, turned violent, according to www.springfield.il.us.

Black-owned businesses and homes were targeted during riots as the prisoners were moved, and at least seven people were killed. Though 117 people were indicted for various crimes, only two were punished for the riot.

"Jolted to action by the violence in Springfield, social activists founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," the Web site said.

Springfield resident Melinda McDonald has written a piece of historical fiction, "Water and Fire," using two characters she invented and those real events.

"The book is 170 pages," she said, "fairly short."

It covers the course of two years with the primary female character, Sheba Tully, only 16 years old when the action begins. She becomes a maid to Susan Lawrence Dana, a prominent member of the community.

The male counterpart is Elliott Loper, a white reporter for the Springfield Record who wants to become a respected journalist.

The male and female lead characters are fiction, while the details of many of the events are based on historical fact.

For example, Sheba comes from the Lincoln Colored Home, a home for black orphans and a building that still stands today on 11th Street, she said.

McDonald, an Iowa State University graduate, said she has always been interested in writing, though she started about three years ago.

"One reason I wrote the book," McDonald said, "is because there are many people like myself that probably wouldn't read history but would read historical fiction. It's a great way to learn.

"I tried to be as accurate as I could be. But there's much that isn't documented."

She did cite two particularly useful books, "Summer of Rage: the Springfield Race Riot of 1908" and "The Sociogenesis of a Race Riot: Springfield, Illinois, in 1908."

McDonald said she also used oral history records at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

"Those were very, very helpful. Some of those people, they were there. They lived in the city at the time," she said.

The book's cover, designed by Kelvin Owens, incorporates a taste of the Dana-Thomas House, where McDonald is among the volunteers. The former journalist-now-public-relations-specialist does the volunteer newsletter for the house.

The house, McDonald said, adding a plug for the historical site, has been restored and maintained very well.

"People in Springfield and Central Illinois can be very proud of it."

Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, the house is what helped draw her into the book.

"As I learned more about the Dana-Thomas House, of course I was interested in the inhabitants and what life would have been like," she said.

McDonald got to thinking, she said, about how closely the path of the rioters would have been to where the house is.

"One of the lynchings occurred within a couple of blocks of the house.

"There was a lot of fear among the city's black population. What would it have been like if there had been a black woman servant working here?"

"So that's the story I followed."

And she deliberately used black and white characters because, as she explained, "There were certain things about the riot that a black

person couldn't have seen."

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