

# Ossian Sweet

Dr. Ossian Sweet, an African-American physician, found himself at the center of a landmark lawsuit that defined Detroit's race relations following World War I. Born in 1895 in Orlando, Florida to tenant farmers, by the age of 14 he had already begun an impressive academic career that would eventually lead to his graduation from Howard University's Medical School.

Sweet established his Detroit practice in 1922. Following his marriage to Gladys Mitchell, they honeymooned for one year in Europe, where he studied further in Vienna and Paris. Sweet returned with his wife and newborn daughter and became a well-respected practitioner.

The family moved into a home in a middle class, white neighborhood on Detroit's eastside in 1925. The following day, a protest demonstration outside his home grew violent. Two men were shot and Sweet was arrested for murder. After two trials and a passionate defense by famed attorney Clarence Darrow, the jury acquitted him.

Ossian Sweet eventually lived in that house for 16 years. While successful professionally, his personal life was turbulent. He took his own life in 1960.



# Ossian Sweet's Detroit

It is easy to paint Detroit during the 1920s as the most exciting city in the country. Businesses flourished, new skyscrapers redefined the skyline and neighborhoods were built almost overnight. However, for African-Americans living in Detroit, it was far from the American dream.

The black population swelled as workers came by the tens of thousands for factory jobs. However, blacks were restricted to living in a one-half-square-mile area called Paradise Valley – seven percent of the population was crowded into one percent of the housing.

There were many black-owned businesses in that neighborhood, perhaps more than any place else in the country, but crime was rampant. Shootings by police far exceeded the national average.

Detroit membership in the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan peaked in the 1920s. The group demonstrated openly, burned crosses in front of government buildings and backed mayoral candidate Charles W. Bowles. He was defeated on a technicality, but anti-African-American sentiment remained strong in the city.



# Hero?

When Dr. Ossian Sweet moved into his new home on Garland Avenue in September 1925, he was fulfilling the American Dream. He wanted to provide his wife, Gladys, with a beautiful house in a comfortable neighborhood, to give his young daughter a yard in which to play and to secure for himself one more accomplishment in a life of remarkable achievement.

But Dr. Sweet's move was much more than that. By deciding to buy a house in a white section of Detroit, he was also taking on one of the great civil rights challenges of his day. White Detroiters were rapidly drawing a color line across the city, forcing African-Americans to live in only a handful of neighborhoods, and harassing, even attacking, those who dared to defy the mounting segregation. Dr. Sweet insisted that he had a right to live wherever he pleased and that he would not be intimidated by racism and the threat of violence. When the mob came for him, he stood his ground.

Dr. Sweet "fought a brave fight against fearful odds," noted attorney Clarence Darrow proclaimed, "a fight for the right, for justice, for freedom, and his name will live and be honored when most of us are forgotten" – the very definition, Darrow said, of a hero.



# Villain?

Even some of Dr. Sweet's supporters admitted that he could be a difficult man, aloof, judgmental and aggressively self-confident. "Each day he got more egotistical," complained an official of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People after spending a week in Sweet's company.

Some of Dr. Sweet's critics charged that his ego, not his sense of justice, led him to buy the house on Garland Avenue. Moving into a white neighborhood was a needlessly provocative move, they said, and was sure to trigger violence. In their view, Dr. Sweet put himself, his family and his new neighbors at grave risk so that he could own the biggest and best house he could afford. He had a right to buy the home, the mayor of Detroit conceded. But, it was observed, a different man might not have insisted on exercising that right at risk to himself and his community.

The Wayne County prosecutor went further, charging that Dr. Sweet moved into the neighborhood hoping to cause an incident. When that incident occurred, a 32 year-old father of two, Leon Breiner, who was in the wrong place at the wrong time, lay dead. The prosecutor charged Sweet with murder in the first degree. "Back of your prating of the civil rights ... and your theory of race hatred and fear," the prosecutor said during Dr. Sweet's trial, "back of all that rises the dead body of Leon Breiner with a bullet hole in his back."

