**Wilmington 1898: A Story**

**Son:** “Dad, I was wondering about something?”

**Dad:** “What’s that son?”

**Son:** “It was something we saw on the Tar Heels Go Walking Tour today.”

**Dad:** “Sure, I will try to answer it and if I can’t, we can always Google it, right?”

**Son:** “Okay, here it goes. Today on the tour, we stopped by some memorial – I think it was called the 1898 Memorial.”

**Dad:** “Sure, that is a beautiful memorial off of Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway.”

**Son:** “Our tour guide on the trip seemed to indicate the memorial was in honor of some bad things that happened to African Americans people in Wilmington in 1898. The tour guide didn’t really go into any detail – do you know what she was talking about?”

**Dad:** “Well son, 1898 was a horrible time in our city’s history – a real embarrassment.”

**Son:** “What happened?”

**Dad:** “It’s hard to explain, much less understand. But, I will do my best to try and describe what happened.

After the end of the Civil War in 1865, slavery was made illegal. Because many African Americans had been either slaves or just not treated equally, there was a push by the United States government to grant equal rights to all citizens – including black people.”

**Son:** “You mean there was a push to make citizens of all races equal in America before Martin Luther King Jr.?”

**Dad:** “Yes. Almost 100 years before MLK Jr. came onto the scene.”

**Son:** “So, what happened?”

**Dad:** “The United States Congress passed some laws stating blacks were equal and for a few years, African Americans were voting and even holding political offices in former slave states. It was a revolution. But it did not last.”

**Son:** “Why?”

**Dad:** “Well, some whites in the South and really all over the country, got really mad and started attacking black people. The US Government attempted to stop it, but it was happening in a lot of places and eventually they just quit. African Americans lost many of the rights they had gained after the Civil War.”

**Son:** “I just don’t understand. How that could have happened in this country. Why would people have been so mean?”

**Dad:** “I am not sure this has a valid explanation.”

**Son:** “Okay, but why is Wilmington singled out in 1898?”

**Dad:** “Great question. Wilmington was a little different. Many of the laws and practices that gave black people rights, but had been more or less banished in most of the country, were still taking place in Wilmington, NC.”

**Son:** “So, our city was doing the right thing?”

**Dad:** “More or less, yes.”

**Son:** “Why was our city different?”

**Dad:** “Wilmington had a black majority and a solid black middle class. In fact, Wilmington still had African Americans voting and even holding political offices.”

**Son:** “But it sounds like something may have happened to stop that. Is that what 1898 is about?”

**Dad:** “Yes it is.”

You see, some white leaders across the state started telling people that the reason they were not doing well was because the government had become too African American friendly. That African American equal rights was hurting the development of the state and its people.”

**Son:** “Was that true?”

**Dad:** “No, but they got a lot of people to believe it.”

**Son:** “So, what happened in 1898?”

**Dad:** “Well, after hearing all of these bad things black equality was causing in the city, a mob of whites got together and burned down the black-owned newspaper office. They also prevented people from voting in the November 1898 elections and then they forced some black leaders to resign their offices.”

**Dad:** “And that’s not all of it. There’s more. Some two dozen African Americans were also shot and killed during the chaos and the new leadership more or less stopped black voting and equal rights for all races.”

**Son:** “So, is that why the country needed Martin Luther King Jr.’s marches and speeches.”

**Dad:** “Yes, he was trying to help African Americans gain the equality they were supposed to get after the Civil War.”

**Son:** “I cannot believe all of this happened in Wilmington. The 1898 Memorial we saw today was awesome – very peaceful.”

**Dad:** “It is supposed to be. It took a long time, but the city has apologized for the events in 1898 and on top of the apology, they also built this memorial that you saw today.”

**Dad:** “It is supposed to be a healing memorial. One that says the city messed up, but now we want to work to do better.”

**Son:** “All of that is really sad, but it sounds like the city has taken some positive steps.”

**Dad:** “I believe it has and I think it is awesome that you and your class visited the Memorial and that you followed up with questions.”

**Son:** “Dad, I have heard you say this before: history is complicated.”

**Dad:** “Well, that has been my experience.”

**Dad:** “Would you like to go downtown on Saturday and see the 1898 Memorial again and maybe we can learn a little more about all of this.”

**Son:** “That would be awesome. Can we also stop by Kilwins – I have been wanting some of that ice cream.”

**Dad:** “You got it!!”