

MEMPHIS RIOT OF 1968

When I got up Thursday, March 28, 1968, I knew that there was to be a massive demonstration in downtown, Memphis, but until 11:00 o'clock, it never dawned on me that there was actually something more than just the peaceful demonstration for the striking sanitation workers.

At eleven o'clock, my cousin called me from Carver high school pleading with me to get her out of school. She said that "these people have gone crazy over here and I am afraid to stay here. There are some boys standing across the street, but I don't know if they are trouble makers or not but a lot of students have left with their parents already and I can't get in touch with X my mother." At 12:00 noon, the principal, no longer able to stop students from leaving after continued pleas over the intercome, dismissed school. The police had been called but were not able to stop fleeing students.

After I finished talking to my cousin, who is a high school senior, I turned my radio on and I heard that there was an outbreak of violence at Hamilton high school and that there was an outbreak of violence and window breaking in the downtown area. My neighbors, by this time, had gotten their children out of school and were in the frontyard listening to the radio (WLCK & WDIA). They cheered and laughed uncontrollable as the accounts of vandalism and violence poured out of a transistor radio.

Rumors spread like wildfire by both the news media and observers. At five o'clock, on channel 5, the news reporter said that a sixteen year old youth had been shot and killed while robbing a service station as he pulled a butcher knife and on police officers who tried to arrest him. On

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the April 2, 1968 news, channel 5 said that this same youth was shot while stealing a TV set and that he was armed with a knife. This and other false accounts places doubt on the information of the news media on the local level.

Later that evening, I went to a neighborhood store and I heard a Negro store owner denouncing the youths who reportedly invaded a nearby elementary school. He said that they should have been shot down (invaders). Two hours after he closed his store, I saw a fire truck extinguishing a small fire on the ground around the store. There was no damage to the store but a telephone post was burned.

Fire trucks and police ran through my neighborhood all night long.

One man said that he was approached Friday, after the riot, by a man who offered him a color TV set and a leather coat Cheap.

A participant in the march said that the police triggered violence around the area where he/she was when they brutally forced an old woman back into the crowd with a club, nearly striking a infant in her arms.

This riot was not a surprise to me because I had been informed (by some strange character who called himself a soul brother) that there would be a riot and this was two weeks before the riot occurred. It really didn't take someones telling me, though, for me to guess that there would be one. Personally I wondered why Memphis hadn't had one sooner. Many persons became bitter and frustrated when Mayor Loeb won the election for Mayor. Many felt that his being elected was a white backlash. The day of the riot, I heard a woman (about 60 years old) crying and upset because Loeb was not killed, say that if she could have just 2 minutes with him she would strangle him, but her terms were not as mildly stated as I have paraphrased here.

I feel that this riot will promote change or if it dose not many youth will die in the street. Many youths are afraid of being drafted and are

tired of being discriminated against in job opportunities. In short, they do not care weather they die here or in Vietnam-either way they will die a useless death.

Dr. Martin L. King said, on a TV interview concerning the Near riot, that he did not know that Memphis had within the Negro community elements that might trigger such disturbances. These elements grew each summer when youths sat in Job Corps centers or employment offices and were denied the same opportunities for jobs as whites. The old lie about being qualified in cases where Negro youths were involved was an obvious fraud.

These elements grew each time a youth was beaten or shot to death, senselessly, by sadistic policemen (white and Black) who had a license to kill Black people.

These elements grew as youths were left idle with no recreational facilities each summer.

These elements exploded when Henry Loeb entered office. His lack of response to end the sanitation strike, through reasonable settlements, lit the awaiting fuse of the frustrated youth and community.