

Headline: “Detroit 67: The deep scars the city still feels today”

Source: Detroit Free Press, July 29, 2017

What: This is four pages of a 12-page story I did for the Free Press in connection with the 50th anniversary of the Detroit rebellion.

Context: I became an adult during the several years after 1967 rebellion, and it was a turbulent time in Detroit.

<https://www.freep.com/story/news/detroitriot/2017/07/30/detroit-67-riot-race/512977001/>

4 pages

Editor's note: *This is the last of a three-part series exploring the 1967 Detroit riot. Complete coverage marking the 50th anniversary of the riot can found at [freep.com/detroit67](https://www.freep.com/detroit67).*

By BILL McGRAW

Traumatized, Detroit buried its dead and displayed a nervous calm as August arrived in 1967.

In the months and early years after the riot, public officials, business leaders, religious groups and community organizations worked endlessly to rebuild the city, and there was a lot of kumbaya-style talk about black and white Detroiters living and working together.

As the city was still smoldering in the riot's aftermath, President Lyndon Johnson appointed the Kerner Commission to look at the cause of rioting in Detroit and other big cities in an effort to prevent future violence. But when the report came out the following February, warning "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal," LBJ ignored its recommendations. Locally, a group of business leaders and community organizations, originally led by J.L. Hudson Jr., formed New Detroit Inc. The group, started at the urging of Mayor Jerome Cavanagh and Michigan Gov. George Romney, was asked to find out what went wrong and how to fix it.

The most visible post-riot contribution by Detroit's corporate leaders was the \$350-million Renaissance Center, the seven interconnected skyscrapers on the east riverfront that was dedicated in 1977. Though ballyhooed, the complex never lived up to its name and, ironically, became a symbol of isolation from the rest of the ailing downtown.

General Motors bought the buildings in 1996 for a deeply discounted price and moved its world headquarters there. But what really shaped Detroit's political future was an often-violent struggle for control of the city, historians have discovered in looking back over the past half-century. On one side were black and white radicals and liberals. On the other side were conservative whites, many of them homeowners in the vast stretches of segregated neighborhoods on the far east and west sides.

Detroit could have gone a few different ways after July 1967. The path it followed was probably the most predictable. "In the wake of the rebellion, Detroit is really up for grabs," said Heather Thompson, the Pulitzer Prize-winning University of Michigan history professor whose 2001 book on the early 1970s, "Whose Detroit?" was recently re-issued.

"There is a real question mark in the air over what is going to happen next," Thompson explained in a recent interview. "Is the city going to be a law-and-order city given that it has just erupted? Are the police going to get more power and the black community less? Is this going to be a city that can finally, finally, bring about more harmonious relationships between black and white Detroiters? Or is this, frankly, going to be a city of more black control, because whites will leave it?"

At the time, one of the most significant developments politically was the rise of militant black Detroiters and the impact they had on white Detroit, which was then 60% of the population, but shrinking.

One key group was the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, whose movements at Dodge Main and other auto plants across the region argued workers should control production, and it attacked the racism of the company and the UAW. When the league demonstrated, the picket line suddenly came alive with rhythmic chants, bongo drums and militants in dashikis.

The black revolutionary union movement lasted for only a couple of years in the late 1960s, but in its militant Marxist-Leninist dogma, incendiary rhetoric and aggressive street tactics, it illustrated the radical currents coursing through Detroit in the several years following the 1967 uprising.

"We came to believe that the working class had to make the revolution, had to lead the revolution, and that we had to concentrate our energies on workers," the late Mike Hamlin, a league founder and longtime activist, told interviewers in that era.

The decade after 1967 was a chaotic and destabilizing period that is hard to imagine today. It led to the election in 1973 of Detroit's first black mayor, Coleman Young, and the subsequent departure from the city of most of the remaining whites, as Detroit became something that few people would have predicted even a decade earlier — a majority black city.

That post-riot drama, which occasionally turned deadly, set the table for 21st-Century Detroit, which, in the past few years, has included a trickle of whites into the city — the first time that has happened in several decades, even as blacks continue to leave for the suburbs.

While the city's industrial decline and white flight had been under way for almost 20 years by 1967 — the white population had declined by more than 362,000 people in the 1950s alone — the riot accelerated Detroit's downward spiral in significant ways.

In the years after 1967, Detroit completed its gradual transformation from a city that was white, Catholic and largely prosperous to one that was increasingly black, Protestant and poor, because

of the flight of wealth that accompanied the departure of upper- and middle-class whites. The city itself experienced increasingly desperate financial problems, which culminated in the 2013 filing for bankruptcy.

White flight

In the immediate post-riot years, Detroit was a tumultuous place.

As business leaders tried to rebuild downtown, white flight spiked.

Sidney Fine writes in “Violence in the Model City” that the number of white Detroiters moving out of the city averaged 22,000 a year from 1964 through 1966, but the numbers jumped to 47,000 in 1967, 80,000 in 1968 and 46,000 in 1969. From 1967 to 1978, the Detroit Public Schools lost 74% of its white students.

Violence surged in Detroit after 1967 and paranoia took hold across the tri-county region. The city buzzed with rumors. Heroin use was growing. Gun sales tripled in the city in the first several months after July 1967 — Mayor Cavanagh called it “an arms’ race.” Gun clubs flourished in the suburbs; crime jumped in Detroit: Homicides — which were 281 in 1967, even with 43 riot deaths — hit 389 in 1968 and in 439 in 1969. (Since 1967, more than 24,000 people have been homicide victims in Detroit.)

The widespread fear manifested itself in the rise of security guards and ads for nighttime events that promised “lighted, secure parking” as the owners of restaurants, bars and theaters reacted to customers’ growing concerns.

Fearful store owners began bricking up their windows and installing barbed wire on the roofs, bars on the windows and Plexiglas shields between customers and clerks. The new, forbidding look spreading across the city became known, cynically, as “Riot Renaissance” architecture. Even the Detroit News, under a previous ownership, installed bricks in many of the first-floor windows of its stately building at Second and West Lafayette, put metal shields behind others and strung barbed wire across the new fence in the truck lot.

Observers considered the News’ security enhancements highly unusual and symbolic of a nervous metropolis. The New York Times did a story. “Paper in Detroit Turns Fortress,” the headline said.

Janice (Karen) Kendall was among the Detroiters who fled right after the riot. She had grown up on the city’s east side in what she called a mixed neighborhood.

In July 1967, Kendall said she was living in the YWCA downtown, working part-time jobs at a bank, the London Chop House and modeling. Downtown, she said, "was so much fun."

Kendall said she was attending a party in Birmingham, celebrating her 24th birthday with family, on that Sunday when she heard the news of the riot. She stayed with family until the violence ended and then moved out of the city, north to Warren in Macomb County.

"My family just encouraged me to get out of there," Kendal recalled last August with the Detroit Historical Museum. "And that's what I did. I packed up my stuff and I left. ... And that was the end of it, but I loved downtown."

Those neighborhoods, littered with vacant storefronts and crumbling apartments a decade ago, are now bustling with new restaurants and shops patronized by thousands of new office workers brought in by Quicken Loans and other companies. Downtown and Midtown real estate, once dirt cheap, is fetching premium prices. The Ilitch family is finishing its \$863-million arena on Woodward in "The District Detroit," a newly named 50-block area of restaurants, bars, shops and sports venues between downtown and Midtown.