Eastwood Park 1943

Prelude to a Riot

Thomas Haroldson

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In 1943, Eastwood Amusement Park was literally the end of the line. Streetcars, packed with servicemen and factory workers, would cut sharply across Gratiot at Eight Mile, screech around a tight loop at the park's entrance, and head back downtown.

Located in the then semi-rural town of East Detroit, Eastwood seemed removed from the bleak realities of the early Forties—if not from reality itself. In fact, even today, a list of the park's attractions produces a mild sensory overload.

In addition to a quiet picnic grove and an olympic-size swimming pool (with its own sand beach), there were dozens of carnival rides, a monstrous roller coaster, a freak show, a fun house, a skating rink, a real penny arcade, game booths, food stands, fireworks, balloon ascensions, parachute jumps and the nationally famous 5,500 seat outdoor nightclub Eastwood Gardens that featured the big bands of the period.

Eastwood Park was 13 years old when World War II broke out. Built in 1928, it had scarcely begun to operate when the Great Depression hit. During the Thirties it struggled along by offering "crowd-pleasing" events such as Marathon Dance Contests.

Anyone who's seen the movie, "They Shoot Horses Don't They," knows exactly what the dances were like, and exactly what Eastwood Park looked like. Despite extensive modernization in late 1941, it never lost its vaguely haunting Depression atmosphere.

Considering what the park had to offer, it might seem a wonder it didn't become as popular as Disney Land. All things being equal, it might have.

But there was a problem—almost everyone agreed that if a race riot started, it would start at Eastwood Park, and, for once, everyone was right.

Actually, there was no "if" about the Detroit race riot of 1943, it was more a question of "when". During the past three years, the city had experienced at least two serious racial outbreaks and daily incidents were commonplace.

As early as July 4, 1940, there was a minor riot on Belle Isle that threatened to ignite the whole town. Police, who said they were merely responding to the complaints "of good colored people on the island," initiated a sweep to "clean out the roughnecks".

It isn't clear what action was taken, but it obviously involved more than a handful of roughnecks.

"In the evening, after police arrested a young Negro for stealing a canoe, Negroes beat up the white operator of the canoe rental concession. Then about 3,000 Negroes surrounded the police station, hurling rocks and bottles through the windows and yelling: 'Turn him loose.' Police barricaded themselves inside the station until reinforcements arrived to drive off the mob. More than a score of persons, including twelve policemen, were injured."

In 1941 the federal government built a housing project for black defense workers in an all-white neighborhood. The project was named Sojourner Truth, in honor of the black woman who traveled through the North preaching abolition and women's rights.

White reaction to the project was predictable and immediate. In fact, public outcry was so violent that weak U.S. officials at one point said whites instead of blacks would occupy the project. However, white liberals and black militants eventually forced the government to return to the original plan.

In February, 1942, despite dire threats of instant death, black tenants attempted to move in. They paid their rent in advance and were determined not to be stopped.

But, "they were attacked by hundreds of white pickets, many of them wielding knives, clubs, and bricks. Negroes fought back with clubs and bricks of their own and police rushed into the battle." The police, it was noted, attacked and beat the blacks, paying little, if any, attention to the white rioters. (A federal investigation of the incident said bluntly: "Detroit police seemed bent on suppressing Negroes.")

Two months later a few blacks successfully moved into the project under the protection of 1,750 city and state police and the National Guard.

However, as bad as the racial atmosphere was between 1940 and 1942, it grew increasingly worse in '43. To understand what caused the inevitable explosion, it's necessary to look at several widely scattered events that took place almost simultaneously during the first three weeks of June.

When the Los Angeles zoot suit riots broke out on the night of June 3, 1943, few people in Detroit gave it a second thought. The city had so many problems of its own that no one was very concerned about what a bunch of weirdos were doing 2,000 miles away.

However, the California riots provided the catalyst, and more importantly the rationale, for what became, in effect, a national race war. Zoot suiters gave the press, the police and the military a chance to launch open vigilante attacks against non-whites, without appearing to do so.

Clear messages spread across the United States: It was now all right to beat and maim blacks and Mexican-Americans as long as they were called zooters (half the 125 hospitalized in L.A. were straights, but all were non-white). It was now the duty of citizens to do what the police "were not permitted to do" (the L.A. police had openly asked for a "volunteer clean-up campaign" against zooters); servicemen now had special license to attack non-whites (during the fourth night of terror in L.A., 1,000 uniformed sailors roamed the streets without one arrest being made).

Detroit papers, of course, made everything perfectly clear. One editorial implied that L.A. authorities had the right idea when they attempted to let "our Pacific heroes" take care of "the problem." Another said that it couldn't have been a race riot, because the victims were merely zooters who just happened to be non-white. Besides, it added, all the victims were American citizens, not Mexicans.

The highly touted open season on zooters electrified the bigots. In San Diego, servicemen pulverized a dozen zooters; in Philadelphia, sailors beat up Two zoot members of Gene Krupa's band; in Baltimore, police raided black neighborhoods looking for zoot gangs. Black zooters were attacked and beaten in almost every major city by servicemen and "white youths." In Detroit, a gang of 65 black high-school zooters retaliated by stabbing one of their antagonists.

Needless to say, it was a busy week. But the zoot incidents were only a part of the total racial upheaval taking place. At the same time the zoot suit riots were raging in Los Angeles, 25,000 workers were out at a bomber engine plant in Detroit protesting the upgrading of three black employees.

A spokesman said: "I'd rather see Hitler and Hirohito win than work next to a nigger." Another said: "The diseased blood runs out of their fingers onto the machine, and you catch syphilis if you handle the same machine."

Such public statements were not uncommon in Detroit. In 1942, Councilman William Rogell (who, 28 years later, is still sitting on the Council) said: "I've got a 30–30 rifle, and if any niggers tried to move in next to me, I'd know what to do." After the '43 riot, Rogell added: "I'd like to see the Negro get a city of his own with his own schools. We need a Harlem for them."

By Sunday, June 13, things were beginning to come apart at the seams. A racial fight broke out at Inkster Park involving "300 Negroes and white civilians and 200 soldiers stationed in neighboring Romulus Township. It took most of Inkster's police force, plus the sheriff's deputies, state troopers and military police to clear the streets."

The next day, June 14, 1943, Life, Time and Newsweek appeared on the newsstands featuring lurid pictures of the L.A. zoot suit riots. A few words of reservation were thrown in, and Time gleefully attacked Hearst's yellow

journalism (which provoked the riots), but for the most part the widely read national magazines followed the same "open-season-on-zooters" line taken by the local press.

Magazines such as The New Republic, Christian Century and Commonweal appeared about the same time containing bitter criticisms of the press, police and government for their racist zoot suit campaign. Needless to say, no one paid any attention to them. Eleanor Roosevelt released a statement calling the attacks on zooters blatant racism. Even fewer people listened to her.

The servicemen who assembled at Eastwood Park on Tuesday, June 15, probably never heard of Commonweal, but they undoubtedly had thumbed through Life the day before—they seemed to know exactly how servicemen were supposed to handle zooters.

About 50 black zooters (one paper magnified the number by saying there was " half a hundred" there), had made the mistake of showing up at the park on an off night. It didn't take long for trouble to break out, and when it did they were outnumbered six to one.

The press called it a "free-for-all between Negroes and whites," but of course with six whites on each black it wasn't much of a fight. East Detroit police, expecting the worst, called for assistance from three neighboring police departments. To make certain that the "fight" didn't spread, arriving blacks were prevented from getting off streetcars at the park.

The next day, June 16, while police were congratulating themselves for averting "real trouble", a massive vigilante attack was launched against blacks in Beaumont, Texas.

For fifteen hours, 10,000 whites roamed through Beaumont "beating negros and burning homes. Two persons died, scores were injured. The violence started after a white woman complained that she had been raped by a Negro. Later, however, a doctor who examined the woman found no signs of rape." The FBI said Nazi agents had incited the riot.

Meanwhile, back in Detroit, a young twenty-year-old black zooter, Charles Lyons, known as "Little Willie," apparently decided that the next time any inciting was done, he was going to do it.

Lyons was one of the 50 who had been beaten and chased out of Eastwood Park on Tuesday night. The incident produced what one writer later called "a big chip on his shoulder," and what the Prosecutor called a "grudge" against society. No one could accept the fact that he was simply an outraged black man.

It's impossible to know what went through Lyons' mind during the next five days, but it's certain that his treatment at Eastwood Park was not forgotten.

In any event when he headed for Belle Isle on Sunday, June 20, he wasn't worried about being hassled by whites. On the contrary, on his own turf, surrounded by thousands of brothers and sisters, he would be in a position to do a little hassling of his own.

What he didn't know was that the temperature would hit 91 by mid-afternoon and that the island would be jammed with 10,000 whites and 90,000 blacks—almost half of Detroit's black population.

(Continued next issue.)

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