

Detroit Riot 1943

Thomas Haroldson

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During the American Civil War, Detroit's population scarcely exceeded that of a modern day university. But, with 1,400 blacks and 43,000 whites, it wasn't too small to have a race riot.

On March 6, 1863, rampaging whites left one dead, dozens injured, and scores of homes burned.

About 500 troops had to be called in from Ypsilanti to restore order.

Over the next 50 years the non-white population remained virtually static. As late as 1910, there were only 5,000 blacks in the city.

But the automobile, heavy industry, and Ford's unprecedented offer in 1914 to pay workers five dollars a day, produced a boom town of major proportions.

The black population shot up from 5,000 in 1910 to 40,000 in 1920; to 120,000 in 1930. White population growth was equally staggering—in 1943, despite the presence of 200,000 blacks, 91% of the people in Detroit were white.

As a rule, boom towns are ghetto towns, and Detroit was no exception. In the early Forties, the black ghetto occupied a relatively narrow one-mile corridor on the east side of Woodward. It ran without interruption from Jefferson to East Grand Blvd.

At least half the homes in the black section were sub-standard. In fact, the posh area now known as Lafayette Park, was little more than a shack town. In 1943, over 3,500 houses still had outside toilets.

During World War II, a five-room shanty rented for as much as \$100 a month. To make ends meet, five families were often forced to share a single dwelling—which is understandable. Rent in the black ghetto was five times higher than in white neighborhoods.

This jumbled, crowded scene of rural-like lean-tos, small frame homes, storefront sleeping rooms, lofts, run-down shops and cobblestone streets was called Paradise Valley.

No one really knew how many blacks lived in Paradise Valley. The official estimate in 1943 was about 90,000, but the actual figure was probably closer to 120,000. (In 1950, the official count was nearly 150,000.)

However, the ghetto's main street, Hastings (now the Chrysler Freeway), provided a temporary escape. Dope, sex, booze, good food and great music were to be had for the asking.

In time, Hastings Street became almost a legend—bluesmen sang about it, and a black writer, Clarence L. Cooper, Jr., even wrote a novel about it.

But not everyone hung out on "The Street." On the weekends, most black families would head for Belle Isle, a picnic area almost within walking distance of Paradise Valley.

When Charles Lyons arrived at Belle Isle on Sunday, June 20, 1943, he was greeted by an incredible crush of humanity. Over 100,000 people were milling about in 91 degree heat attempting to use recreational facilities designed for half that number.

About 3:30 in the afternoon Lyons ran into Aaron Fox, a 17-year-old black zooter, who, like himself, had been attacked by whites at Eastwood Park on Tuesday night. Evidently Lyons had been brooding over the treatment he received, and the chance meeting with Fox made him decide finally to take some action.

“Let’s go fight and do like they done to us at Eastwood Park,” he said. Picking up a stick, he walked over to a white boy and hit him with it. Then Lyons approached a group of white men and struck one of them. “Time to get home,” he said. “Get going!” The white men fled.

Fox and six other 17-year-olds decided to follow Lyons and see what he was up to. The “gang,” as it was later called, eventually launched a series of hit-and-run attacks on whites, stealing food from some, robbing others, and terrorizing all.

Lyons, of course, was playing with emotional dynamite. The 10,000 whites on the island, surrounded by 90,000 blacks, could very easily have panicked. A blind freak-out on either side might have produced a massacre.

But, despite some cursing and shoving, a few routine fights, a massive traffic jam, and impossible crowding, the island remained reasonably peaceful throughout the day.

However, around 10:30 P.M. things began to get a bit tense. On the only bridge connecting Belle Isle to the mainland, it was still hot, horns were blowing, people were tired, nerves were raw, tempers were short. It was the worst possible moment imaginable for Lyons and his raiders to appear on the scene. But that’s exactly what happened.

About half way across they knocked down a white man and started kicking him. One of them said: “Let’s throw him off the bridge.” (These were to become the six most deadly words ever spoken in Detroit. They conjured up a particularly horrifying death, and struck a responsive chord in everyone who heard them. They provided the basis for innumerable rumors, and would eventually be responsible for the death of 34 persons.)

The man being beaten became so terrified that he managed to break free. Several sailors from the nearby Naval Armory were on the bridge and saw what happened. One of them blew a whistle for help and shouted: “Let’s go kill that nigger!”

By 11:00 P.M. there were over 200 sailors and blacks fighting on and near the bridge. But, apparently, the sight of servicemen and non-whites fighting had become so common since the zoot suit riots 17 days before, that no one got very upset. About 5,000 gawkers loitered on the mainland side of the bridge, but most avoided getting involved.

What happened during the next hour can only be described as another “Miracle of Dunkirk.” A handful of traffic cops managed to direct tens of thousands of people over a single bridge, past a riot in progress, without any serious incidents.

Of course, if the people hadn’t cooperated, it would have been a different story. But patience, self-preservation and utter exhaustion prevailed, and nothing happened. Despite the widespread brawling, not one person was seriously injured, and no one was killed. By midnight the so-called Belle Isle riot was over.

But back in Paradise Valley it was a different story. Lyons, who had managed to escape from Belle Isle, made his way back to the Forest Club, a popular zoot night spot on the corner of Forest and Hastings. That night Louis Jordan was the featured band, and the dance floor was jammed with over 700 young blacks. It was almost midnight, and there had been more than a little drinking going on.

There is some argument about what happened next, but apparently Lyons convinced Leo Tipton, who ran the checkroom, that an atrocity had been committed on the Belle Isle Bridge.

Tipton leaped on the stage and shouted: “There’s a riot at Belle Isle. The whites have killed a colored lady and her baby. Throw them over the bridge. Everybody come on. There’s free transportation outside.”

It’s worth noting that the racial situation had become so bad in the U.S. that there wasn’t any reason for a black to doubt such a story. Charles Lyons was the only person in the room who knew for certain that the story was a lie.

Tipton’s announcement had an immediate effect: “None of the dancers at the Forest Club paused to ask any questions. In their rush, they clogged exits, and some even climbed out the windows.”

But, of course, there was no “free transportation outside.” About then, word arrived that streetcar service to Belle Isle had been discontinued. The enraged crowd found itself on the street with no place to go.

When a white motorcyclist went by, someone threw a rock knocking him off his bike. The bike, in Easy Rider fashion, crashed and burst into flames. The Detroit race riot of 1943 had officially begun.

In utter frustration, some of the Forest Club patrons began to smash windows of white businesses on Hastings. One group (perhaps led by Lyons) set off on a-mysterious trek that took them two blocks down Forest to Beaubien, up five blocks to Ferry, and back several blocks to what is now the Chrysler-Ford interchange.

It isn't clear what they originally had in mind, but when they got to Oakland, about twenty of them boarded a streetcar, stoned six white passengers and beat the white conductor and motorman with an iron bar.

When the police arrived on Oakland about 1:00 A.M. another streetcar was being attacked. The cops dispersed the blacks by shooting a man in the stomach.

Meanwhile, back on Hastings, cops had already been busting heads for a good half hour. Some of the blacks attacked were so far from the so-called riot scene that they didn't have the vaguest idea what was happening. One black soldier in uniform was clubbed unconscious as he calmly walked down the street.

Serious looting began about 2:30 A.M. Charles Lyons, who was caught looting a drug store on Hastings near Oakland, was one of the first arrested. Only eleven hours had passed since he said, "Let's do like they done to us at Eastwood Park." But in a way he was lucky—later in the day many looters would be shot on sight.

Around 3:00 A.M. a white riot broke out on Woodward Avenue. Woodward, Detroit's bustling main street, ran parallel to Hastings and was located only five blocks away. For all practical purposes, it was also the western boundary of Paradise Valley.

During World War II, Woodward was a 24-hour street. Restaurants, movie houses, and other recreational spots remained open all night. Even some bars remained open. Police, with the help of a little patriotic graft, managed to look the other way.

Some of the whites who had been on Belle Isle, began spreading the rumor that a white woman had been raped and thrown off the bridge. Nothing much happened at first, but when reports of black rioting drifted in, the story seemed confirmed.

When the movie houses let out at 3:00 A.M., the whites were ready. Black moviegoers were attacked and beaten to a pulp. The police, as they had done during the zoot suit riots, made no move to interfere. When a white teacher from Wayne University attempted to help a beaten black, a cop told him: "Okay, nigger lover, get going, quick."

The group rules of the '43 riot were quite simple: Any black caught on Woodward could expect to be beaten to death; any white caught in Paradise Valley could expect to be stoned to death. However, the night passed without anyone being deliberately killed. Victims of stabbings, stonings, shootings and beatings somehow managed to survive.

The first killing occurred at 7:30 A.M. on Hastings behind what is now the new Medical Center. Carl Singleton was shot in the back after he allegedly threw a chunk of concrete at a cop.

Thirty minutes later two more blacks were dead. When a police patrol tried to arrest William Hardges, he grabbed a cop's gun and started shooting. He hit two cops before he was almost cut in half by the rest of the patrol. One bullet hit and killed Robert Davis, an innocent bystander.

At almost the exact moment Hardges was being gunned down, a gang of 250 whites smashed and burned a black motorist's car on Woodward. It was the first car to be destroyed—19 more would be demolished before the day was over.

Two hours later the first white was killed. Around 10:00 A.M., Dr. Joseph DeHoratiis ignored the ground rules of the riot and drove into Paradise Valley. When he arrived on Beaubien, several blocks behind the Detroit Institute of Arts, he was stoned to death.

Meanwhile, back downtown, the white rioters, now 800 strong, began chasing blacks and raiding Woodward streetcars. Some whites, including a few cops, managed to rescue isolated blacks, but generally it was a losing battle.

At 11:00 A.M. Anderson L. Ford, an alleged looter, was killed by police on Beaubien near downtown. About the same time another alleged looter, Roy Jackson, was killed two blocks away. Jackson's death was the sixth in four and a half hours.

The white army on Woodward was growing by geometric progression. By noon it numbered 2,000, but few police were to be seen—almost the entire Detroit Police Department had been sent into Paradise Valley.

Around 2:00 P.M., the killing of an alleged looter on the corner of Warren and Brush prompted a group of nearby blacks to stone and stab to death a white truck driver who had made the mistake of stopping on Warren.

And so it went for the rest of the day. Carrie Hackworth, a black woman who looked white, was killed by a group of blacks. Henry Wood, an alleged looter, was riddled by a cop's personal submachine gun. A black worker was shot to death by a gang of white teenagers. A 68-year-old white man was killed by a flying brick. A cop died after catching

a shotgun blast in the groin. His slayer was killed instantly in the return fire. And, of course, “looters” continued to be shot down even after the riot ended.

The final official body count was 25 blacks and nine whites. The police admitted killing 18 blacks; most were called looters; most were shot in the back. However, after more than a quarter century, the exact number of riot deaths remains a mystery. No one has ever satisfactorily explained why a number of observers, including a doctor who worked at Receiving Hospital during the riot, insisted that at least 200 died.

In many ways it was a strange riot. Huge armies of blacks and whites rioted almost side by side for 16 hours without one group making a move on the other.

But, around 6:00 P.M., things began to change. By that time there were about 15,000 whites assembled on Woodward. In sort of a slow motion human wave attack, they began to move along a ten block front. In a matter of minutes the invading army was in Paradise Valley.

Fortunately, the riot began to wane. The police managed to halt the massive infiltration at Brush Street, just three blocks short of Hastings. Within an hour, the whites were pushed back to Woodward. For all practical purposes the riot was over.

In fact, when federal troops finally arrived in town around 9:30 P.M., it only took a little over two hours to clear the streets. By midnight, barely 24 hours after the first stone was cast outside the Forest Club, the situation was “under control.”

The riot, as conservatives are quick to point out, accomplished nothing. Despite a vigorous campaign by the then militant NAACP, the police remained as oppressive as ever. Articles such as “The Gestapo in Detroit,” by Thurgood Marshall, and “Is the Detroit Police Department Fascist?” fell on deaf ears. Twenty-seven years later, police would still be shooting blacks down in cold blood.

But changes did take place. The white retreat to Woodward during the last hours of the riot was symbolic of how whites would behave in the future.

During the next seven years alone the population of Detroit’s suburbs increased by almost half a million. Racial hatred, compounded by racial fear, was so intense that most whites simply ran away. By 1970, Detroit’s school population would be 60% black and still growing.

“Negro removal,” or urban renewal, as whites call it in public, eventually destroyed Paradise Valley. The Chrysler Freeway wiped Hastings Street off the map. The gigantic Chrysler-Ford, and Chrysler-Fisher interchanges tore additional chunks out of the ghetto. Lafayette Park took a huge piece, as did the Medical Center, the widening of Warren, etc. Today, the only thing that remains of the Paradise Valley of 1943 is a few decaying blocks along the Chrysler Freeway, and a relatively well preserved cobblestone neighborhood off St. Aubin Street near Forest.

Strangely enough, the stampede to the suburbs gave Detroit a long period of peace—24 years passed before there was another riot.

The impossible black housing situation in 1943 was greatly alleviated when whites started moving out. Within seven years, 16,000 blacks were able to move into the previously white Northwest section of the city. Since movement is often confused with progress, the racial situation remained cool for many years.

Probably no story of the Detroit race riot of 1943 would be complete without briefly mentioning what happened to Charles Lyons and his fellow zoot suiters.

Lyons, who might have become a folk hero if he hadn’t gone back to the Forest Club, was denounced on all sides. His mother-and-child-off-the-bridge hoax turned the entire black community against him.

Feeling was so strong, over 20 blacks testified for the prosecution, and two black jurors were excused on grounds they couldn’t be objective. Needless to say, he was convicted and given four to five years for “rioting.”

Aaron Fox, the 17-year-old who had been with him at Eastwood Park and Belle Isle, wasn’t so lucky. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison for a riot murder he couldn’t possibly have committed. After a two-year legal hassle, he was finally cleared and released.

After 1943, the zoot suit and the zoot suit riots were forgotten. The uproar caused by the “neat pleat with a drape shape and a stuff cuff” was dismissed as being nothing more than a wartime aberration.

It seemed quite unlikely at the time that young people would ever again be assaulted merely because they smoked a little dope, had long hair, wore bizarre clothes and listened to strange music.

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