

Cass Lake Riot

Fireman

1970

“June 11 was a hot day,” a 17-year-old girl from Birmingham said. “Everyone was hot.”

A girl with long blonde hair in a white bathing suit walked up to one of the TMU riot cops who was clearing the beach at Cass Lake. She petted his German Shepherd. The dog whimpered and wagged his tail. “Goddamit get out of here,” the cop said. And he kicked the dog.

But it was more a tug-of-war than a riot, as thousands of kids from North Oakland County clashed with over 200 police at Dodge Park No. 4 in Waterford Township after two officers arrested a youth for drinking.

Many of the 16,500 people who had entered the park when the trouble began at 2:00 p.m., threw rocks at police and broke windows and slashed tires on 12 police cars.

An elite riot force, the Oakland County Tactical Mobile Unit, hand-picked from 28 departments all over the county, arrived with 12-gauge shotguns, M-1s with bayonets, 5 police dogs and a helicopter to chase people out of the park.

Twenty-three kids, including 4 girls, were busted on charges ranging from disorderly conduct to inciting to riot. They were arraigned by Judge Kenneth Hempstead that night in a closed hearing and released on bonds averaging \$500, but as high as \$5,000.

Pontiac hospitals reported no injuries requiring hospitalization, but many people were clubbed by police with ax handles. One kid with no shirt and white pants on was singled out of the crowd. By the time he was thrown in the paddy wagon his face and pants were red with blood. One cop was felled by a rock that hit him in the leg.

In the past week thousands had been gathering at Cass Lake to swim, lie in the sun, listen to impromptu concerts and make new friends. Grass was smoked back in the bushes, but wine was plentiful all over the beach.

The attitude of the police toward the young people at Cass Lake was made clear by Waterford Police chief William C. Stokes. “Each year the hippie element chooses a spot where they gather and this year they seem to have chosen Dodge State Park 4,” he said. “They figure this is their place. Well, it’s not going to be. It’s not going to be the spot for this element to ‘do their thing,’” he added.

The first sign of a crackdown came June 10 when park police busted a kid for wine and found grass in his possession. At that time a crowd gathered to boo the cops.

The trouble at the packed beach started on the 11th in 90 degree weather when the cops tried to bust John Gregor of Howell for drinking a bottle of Boone’s Farm wine. People encircled the squad car in which they were trying to take him away and shouted, “Off the pigs.”

According to Waterford Township Police officer Ronald West, “We were pinned down with rocks, bottles, sticks and anything they could get their hands on.” One rock crashed through the patrol car windshield.

But according to one girl, “Not too much happened before they called the troops in.” Only 25 were involved in the fighting, which looked as if it had ended. “Most of the people in the park didn’t even know what was going on,” she said.

When the TMU cops arrived they were greeted by shouts of, “Too late, put your gun away.” “Did it ‘take you that long to polish your gun?” Many of the people were shocked by the number of cops that had been called in.

This is the point at which the cops decided to close the park. A helicopter flew overhead squawking, "This beach is officially closed. Go home. Go to your cars." The TMUs began to sweep around the beach, herding people in their path.

"The cops were irrational about the whole thing," a girl from Bloomfield Hills said. "Only a few were causing the trouble. Why kick everyone out?"

A young mother with pre-school children yelled at the cops, "Why are you closing it?" "You had your dollar's worth of fun," the cop replied.

The violence broke out as the cops swept the beach. One girl with black hair was sitting near the water. "I'm scared. I'm not gonna move." The cop hit her on her leg with his club and she limped away.

Several people were bleeding from their chins where they had been clubbed as the cops methodically cleared people out.

"Don't go," a curly haired youth urged a group of 400. "This park belongs to the people. They can't make us leave."

The cops fired a canister of tear gas at this group. It was thrown back. Another canister was fired from a helicopter. The kids ran.

By this time half the kids in the park were throwing rocks.

Police busted one person in waist deep water and another at the top of a twenty foot tree who was beaten by several cops with ax handles after he was dislodged.

One kid swung a piece of 2 x 4 lumber at two Waterford Township cops. He missed and was arrested for felonious assault.

Inside the paddy wagon arrested freaks greeted each other with the clenched fist salute. Outside others surrounded it. Police were unable to remove the truck for 30 minutes.

The exodus of cars from the parking lot created a two hour traffic jam. Both lanes of the road were used for exiting traffic. The park was completely cleared by 3:30 p.m.

The 23 youths arrested were arraigned at 8:30 p.m. in a secret hearing in the office of Oakland County Sheriff Frank Irons. This was only the second time court had been held there. The first was during the Pontiac riots in Summer '67.

Outside the hearing 50 of their friends gathered. They tried to raise bail by asking lawyers and courtroom employees for spare change.

No personal bonds were granted by Judge Hempstead. He later explained that the youths who appeared before him had no jobs and few ties to the community.

The pig riot at Cass Lake was over in a very short time. But the beach will never be the same. From now on, every young person that goes out there must be ready to fight.

fifth Estate

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