

Racist Slayings Hit South End

Free Press Distorts Dearborn Attacks

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Billowing smoke pours from the stacks that surround the huge water tower on the edge of the Rouge River. A too-familiar blue and white emblem proclaims the domination of the area by Ford Motor Company's massive Rouge Plant complex, once the largest industrial plant in the world.

East of the railroad tracks that cross Dix Road, UAW Local 600 faces a strip of small stores and coffee houses. On a weekday afternoon, sometime between the changeover of a factory's day and afternoon shifts, groups of men gather along the street. Dark complexions and painted shop signs are the only indications of the largest Arab Muslim community in the U.S., located in the shadow of the Rouge Plant in the South End of Dearborn.

There is an undertone of hostility towards outsiders walking along Dix, evidenced vaguely by pointed questions from men standing outside a coffee shop. After the brutal shotgun murders of two Arab workers within the last month, the community is distrustful of strangers, but friends talk freely inside Kamal's restaurant.

According to Abdeen Jabara, a Detroit attorney well-known to many residents of the South End, the peaceful members of the community are being made to look like the attackers in a situation motivated by racist attitudes.

"It seems as if there was great deliberation in the killings," Jabara said. "Both happened in the morning when the men were going to work, and the fact that the murderers were laying in wait shows that they were not just out joyriding.

"The robbery was probably done as an after-thought to 'Let's go out and get a couple of Arabs.'"

Police from Dearborn and Detroit's Fourth Precinct are reportedly looking for three white men in their late twenties who fired close-range shotgun blasts at the Yemeni immigrants. Saleh Nagi Shahbain, 34, was murdered on May 17, the day after a Palestine Day celebration in Dearborn; Ali Shebrin El Sheman, 22, was killed in the same neighborhood on June 5.

Jabara points out that the *Detroit Free Press* account of the murders has distorted the situation to make it appear like a Hatfield-McCoy feud between the Arabs and Southern whites in the South End.

Jabara denounced the "scurrilous reporting" by the *Free Press* in alleging that the killings were sex-motivated revenge by whites for rapes of white women in Dearborn. The *Free Press* also suggested that the killings might stem from competition over prostitutes, but when Jabara contacted police, he was told that there was no evidence relating either to rape or prostitution.

Jabara added that the police said they had no statistics on rapes in the area for the past year and that the number of arrests for prostitution was also unknown.

As for the *Free Press* description of the killers as "hillbillies," Jabara explained that the use of the term probably stemmed from the reporters' misunderstanding of the Arab meaning of the word.

"Many Arabs see all poor whites as hillbillies," he said.

Since the murders several other attacks against Arabs in the South End and whites from the adjacent working class communities of South West Detroit have led to charges and counter-charges.

Preserve the Community

Struggles against the city of Dearborn and corporate encroachment to preserve the unique community in the South End have been continuous. Although a 1974 study estimated the total population at about 5,000, Nabeel Abraham, a community member researching a dissertation on the Yemeni workers, put the figures closer to eight to ten thousand.

Although there are other Arabic communities in the Detroit area, among them the Lebanese Christians in Southfield and the Chaldean community north of Highland Park, the South End represents the largest working-class Arab sub-culture. Most of the residents come from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Yemen, countries whose annual budgets pale besides Ford Motor Company's yearly net profits. Most work in the Rouge Plant or at Dodge Main in Hamtramck. According to the 1970 census, the median income for South End families was \$8,006, compared with \$11,429 for the rest of Dearborn.

Eighty-six percent of South End residents were born in Mid-East villages. The community is a close-knit one which maintains close ties with other Mid-East relatives, especially since many residents regularly head home to visit families who have been left behind. This is particularly true with Yemenis, whose country's strict immigration laws have made it difficult for women to emigrate. Of course, the goal of returning home to buy land, a goal for many ex-patriates, is also especially strong among Yemenis.

Yet despite the closeness of the community, there are divisions which reflect kinship, religious and political differences carried over from the homeland. The 1974 survey previously mentioned shows the close distribution of 400 to 600 people within a five-block area, all from the single Lebanese village of Tibnine. The same study also mentioned a distribution of tables in a local coffee house according to village.

Religious differences stem from the distinction between the two primary Muslim sects, the Sunni and the Shia. The Sunni mosque, another of the few indications of the Arabic community, stands on W. Vernor, its silver dome a strange contrast to Ford's water tower. The Shia sect attends the Islamic Center on Joy Road, next to the Episcopal cemetery where Henry Ford is buried.

The major political division exists between the North and South Yemenis, according to Abraham.

He explained that North and South Yemen have separate governments, the South being Marxist-oriented. The South End contains both a North and a South Yemeni Club.

"We tried for unity immediately after the shootings," Abraham said, "But it's died down since then. The South Club says that it is in favor of unity, and that the North can join it at any time." He spread his hands in a gesture of futility.

Stop Urban Renewal

The South End has struggled for twenty years against urban renewal attempts by Dearborn, which gets 53% of its tax revenue from Ford Motor Company. Nine different renewal plans have been developed since 1962 and although they have been stalled by successful lawsuits, vacant, overgrown lots dot the neighborhood attesting to the area's 25% housing reduction in recent years.

Moreover, Dearborn evicted 85 South End families in 1962 to clear land for the Levy Asphalt Company which moved in six years later. Levy has been a constant source of irritation to residents who once responded to slag heaps on their front lawns by presenting Levy officials with oozing, slag-filled coffins.

The deaths of the Yemeni workers were particularly shocking to the community since the South End has the lowest crime rate in Dearborn. Both attorney Jabara and the police ascribe this fact to the close ties among the residents, especially the Arabic members. This closeness is perhaps the best deterrent to crime; people who have an affinity with their neighbors are obviously less likely to commit crimes against each other than those for whom the city is only an anonymous mass of humanity.

Although the Dearborn police have given the residents and the media constant assurance that the case is being investigated thoroughly, they admit that since there are no witnesses, there are fewer leads.

The traditional liberal approaches of police-linked community patrols and ethnic cops are the only solutions thus far proposed. A community patrol was formed for two nights, but even that collapsed for lack of interest in the face of police objections to the use of police equipment. Other suggestions for increased security included more Arabic-speaking cops and even the placement of a police mini-station in the area.

The lack of solidly based alternatives, such as community defense squads composed of Arab workers has become the dubious reasoning for falling back on the power of the State for protection. Liberal solutions such as these can only reinforce what attorney Jabara describes as “the white colonialist attitudes” of city officials and police.

It seems that residents of the South End resent all the recent attention given them in the wake of the murders. Newspapers have made slanderous assumptions about the people, and the Dearborn police, always an oppressive force in the area, have stepped up their patrols, a move unlikely to benefit the Arabs.

All the while Ford Motor Company and Chrysler Corporation continue to extract their pound of flesh from the immigrants.

In the end, all they really have to fall back on is the cohesiveness of their own community and protection of themselves. The low crime rate in the area attests to the effectiveness of this, but it may be of dubious value in preventing the intrusion of racist assassins. There is however no doubt that the less South End residents depend on protection from the city, the safer they will be.

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