

Fatal firetruck accident sparked riot in 1965



A workman begins boarding up a smashed window in a store at 3939 W. Madison St. on Aug. 14, 1965, after riots erupted overnight by blacks angry over the death of woman hit by fire truck. (William Yates / Chicago Tribune)

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Fifty years before Sandra Bland was arrested after a minor traffic violation in Waller County, Texas, a fatal traffic accident involving a firetruck on Chicago's West Side lit a powder keg of resentment that exploded into a riot. But the Garfield Park violence, which injured dozens and led to widespread arrests, didn't even lead the Chicago Tribune's final editions as black smoke billowed over the city.

The nation's attention was on the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, where a black motorist's arrest had sparked rioting, looting and deaths. Both events spoke to African-Americans' deep frustration at the slow pace of progress on civil rights. In Chicago, Garfield Park was a microcosm of that broader story. For decades the area welcomed young white couples eager to start a new life and raise their families. They bought up the graystone two-flats around Washington Boulevard and Pulaski Road and the tidy single-family homes that shared easy access to Garfield Park's lagoon and the nearby conservatory.

African-Americans wanted the same thing. During the 1950s, 30,000 blacks were arriving in Chicago every year, escaping the degradations of the Jim Crow South, hoping for a better life in Northern cities. But racism proved inescapable. Stuffed into segregated neighborhoods, many blacks struggled to find good-paying jobs. Escape was difficult because mortgages were nearly impossible to get, and even if they could afford to buy, blacks met fierce resistance and often violence when they tried to move into white neighborhoods.

When blacks did move into all-white communities, whites fled by the thousands. That's what happened in Garfield Park. In June 1963, a black family moved onto one block, and by August, four houses were black-owned. By 1965 the community had flipped completely.

Despite the radically changed demographics, the firehouse at Pulaski and Wilcox Street remained all white. Sheila Radford-Hill, then a sophomore at Garfield Park's Providence St. Mel High School and now the chief diversity officer at Dominican University in River Forest, said that in 1965, blacks "didn't want to call the Fire Department (because) the firemen would treat you with disrespect. The services that you would think, as a white person, would be there for you were against you as black person."

Garfield Park was a tinderbox. The match was lit on Aug. 12, the day after Watts erupted in flames. A fire crew dispatched from the now-shuttered Wilcox-Pulaski fire station raced away without its tillerman, whose job it was to control the ladder. The Tribune reported what happened next: "A Negro, Miss Dessie May Williams, 23, ... was killed when a hook and ladder unit went out of control and hit a street sign, knocking it over on Miss Williams." Her death turned simmering anger into roiling outrage.

"It was the straw that broke the camel's back," Mary Nelson said in a 2005 interview. A Garfield Park resident for the past 50 years, and founder and first president of the area's community development organization, Bethel New Life, Nelson said, "There was a lot of anti-white resentment."

Rumors flashed through the neighborhood that the tillerman had been drunk. Angry leaflets calling for a mass rally circulated among black residents, fueling the growing rage. One (a photo of which was printed in the Chicago Daily News on Aug. 14), screamed for attention in huge bold type: "DRUNKEN WHITE FIREMAN KILLS BLACK WOMAN!!" and "NO MORE ALL WHITE FIRE STATIONS IN ALL BLACK COMMUNITIES."

The Tribune reported that Lawrence Landry, "an organizer of the ACT group, spoke during the rally and told a swelling crowd at the Wilcox firehouse, 'You are misused in a white-controlled society.'" As darkness fell, clusters of angry blacks scattered into the surrounding streets. From housetops, curbs and doorways, youths pelted police with bricks, stones and bottles. The crowds surged into the West Side's commercial district, just a few blocks north, where they broke windows, threw Molotov cocktails and looted stores.

Two Chicago Daily News reporters, one black, one white, covered the unrest. The black reporter, Burleigh Hines, mixed with the rioters. Hines wrote, "Young punks swarmed in the area yelling and cursing. Some of them seemed almost hysterical with hatred. The hatred was directed at white men — all white men."

The paper's white reporter, Edmund J. Rooney, wrote, "A young Negro boy stuck his head in the window of my parked car at Wilcox and Pulaski and shouted, 'You get out of here, white man, and don't come back ... don't ever come back.'"

The police called in civil rights leader Albert Raby to try to quell the riot, but "the rioters ignored him and other recognized civil rights spokesmen who pleaded with the mobs to disperse," the Daily News reported.

On Aug. 14, a Saturday, two headlines emblazoned the Tribune's front page: "4 DIE IN LOS ANGELES RIOT" and "Racial Violence Continues Here."

The article on the West Side disturbance reported, "During the three days of disorder, more than 80 persons were injured and 169 arrested." That same day, at the request of Chicago police Superintendent O.W. Wilson, Gov. Otto Kerner alerted 2,000 National Guardsmen to be ready should rioting resume. By Monday, Kerner released about half after tensions on the West Side had lessened.

That same Monday, Mayor Richard J. Daley called in 30 West Side residents to thank them for helping to restore order and prevent violence from spreading. The Tribune quoted Daley as saying, "I don't think the west side situation was a question of civil rights. It was a question of lawlessness and hoodlumism."

The 11-member Kerner Commission, established by President Lyndon Johnson two years later to investigate race riots, offered a more nuanced assessment. Its report concluded, "Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans.

"What white Americans have never fully understood but what the Negro can never forget — is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.

"Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal."

Half a century later, the unequal treatment of blacks and whites is still roiling American society.

Linda Gartz is a freelance reporter and television writer-producer who grew up in West Garfield Park in the 1950s and '60s.