

## **DETROIT'S 1943 RACE RIOT , 50 YEARS AGO TODAY, STILL SEEMS TOO NEAR**

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Author: BRENDA J. GILCHRIST Free Press Staff Writer

Sunnie Wilson studied four disturbing photographs from the **1943** Detroit **race riot** . People running and reaching for bricks, businesses vandalized, soldiers carrying big guns. His eyes darted from one to another, and the memories came flooding back.

"It's a sad story, very sad," Wilson, 84, a successful show business promoter, said of the disturbance that began **50 years ago** today.

Perhaps what's saddest is that after all the seething hatred, all the blood in the streets, all the looted buildings, all the studies and promises and plans for renewal, **50 years** and many **riots** later -- including the one last **year** in Los Angeles -- he says, "They can't let it happen again."

Several studies were conducted about the **1943** clash that began in the early evening of June 20 on Belle Isle and ended late June 21. A city-wide state of emergency was lifted five days later.

Thirty-four people were killed; 25 were black and 17 of them were killed by police. No whites died at the hands of police. Hundreds of people were injured and more than 1,000 blacks and whites were arrested. Nearly half the rioters were under age 25. The homes of blacks, including Wilson's, were arbitrarily ransacked as police searched for a cop killer and later for stolen goods.

Each time a civil disturbance occurs, a battalion of experts spends months studying the causes and making recommendations. Yet urban areas continue to deteriorate.

One such study following the **1943 riot** was prompted by a newspaper editorial that said people who would engage in such behavior "are not normal social beings."

That study was conducted by Dr. Lowell Selling, then director of the Recorder's Court psychopathic clinic. Selling concluded that most **riot** participants were of below-average intelligence.

But he also found: "Lack of territory into which Negroes could spread to secure adequate housing, economic conflict and insecurity, inadequate outlook for recreation and social achievement, the presence of strong anti-Negro prejudice in the community."

He recommended "interracial decency education, beginning in the lowest grades." Yet even today, the nation's schools struggle with multiculturalism -- not just how to teach it but whether it should be taught at all.

Those findings bear an eerie similarity to those that came decades later in the Kerner Commission report, a study spawned by the 1967 civil unrest in Detroit and other cities. And after Los Angeles erupted in 1992, a community survey was part of a report on the **riot** by a special adviser to the city's board of police commissioners. Prominent among the causes cited by citizens: poor economic conditions, racial tension, and reaction to police treatment of residents.

Such studies long have been a convenient excuse used by the nation's leaders to avoid real change, critics say.

"They don't want to face the reality of the fact that these things are related to the social and economic conditions," Darden, dean of urban affairs programs at Michigan State University, said recently.

"They would really prefer that it be something else, something inherent within the victims themselves and therefore they don't have to pay anything to correct it," Darden said. "It is the unwillingness to deal with the issue of racism."

Wilson has seen some of the answers clearly for more than **50 years** .

"You will continue to have **race riots** unless our white brothers realize the fact that we still are human beings," Wilson said of the nation's persistent **race** relations problem.

"You're American, we're American. We're brothers. You can eliminate all this discrimination, all the **race riots** , all the different things, if you just open that door. Let us be in the mainstream, the stream where we can have security for our children, the stream where we will have sufficient earning power for our families, a stream that will take us through the hearts of all the people as one people, not black and white."

A prominent businessman and owner of a club that figured into the **riot** , Wilson can properly offer perspective on the **race** war.

A friend to the likes of Joe Louis and Duke Ellington, Wilson was known as " **Detroit's** most congenial host." He settled in Detroit in the early '30s after trying to make it big singing and dancing in New York and Chicago. He was not destined to be a showman, but to run the show.

Through the **years** , he brought some of the biggest names in show business to several clubs he owned in Detroit. The Forest Club at East Forest and Hastings was huge, and it was there that the second wave of rioting began. Hastings Street was the center of black-owned businesses and entertainment spots.

'The Gestapo in Detroit'

Wilson went into the streets the second day of rioting, stood atop a police car and urged blacks to return to their homes. "I said bricks cannot fight bullets." When businesses shut down because of the disturbance and groceries were hard to get, he gave away food from the club's stockroom.

Things were tense nationwide, with World War II raging. Detroit was labeled "the arsenal of democracy" because its factories cranked out more than one-third of the war supplies and weaponry.

Southern whites and blacks poured into the city for jobs. The city's population had swelled to two million, and there was a severe housing shortage. The city's 200,000 blacks were packed into two areas. The larger, known as Paradise Valley, was on the east side, bounded by Jefferson, John R, East Grand Boulevard and Russell.

Whites needed more housing too, and fought to keep their neighborhoods free of blacks. Many also resented having to work with blacks. Fistfights and brawls were common between blacks and whites **years** before the **riot** .

The precursor to the **1943** disturbance came when whites tried to block blacks from moving into the Sojourner Truth Homes on the city's north side in February 1942. The project had been built for blacks and many had paid rent to move in when whites attacked the movers and smashed their furniture.

"Your police force was mostly filled with white Southern officers who hated the Negroes from the start," Wilson recalled.

An investigation by the NAACP after the **riots** ripped the mostly white Detroit Police Department for brutalizing blacks. The situation prompted the late Thurgood Marshall, then a special counsel to the NAACP and later the first black U.S. Supreme Court justice, to write an article entitled "The Gestapo in Detroit."

Blacks made up 10 percent of the population and one percent of the police force. Today, the department is about 52-percent black.

Wilson said many blacks found good jobs in **Detroit's** booming war economy, but often were paid less than whites doing similar work.

"Same as it is now," he noted.

Countless surveys and studies report that minorities and women are often paid less than white males for doing comparable jobs.

Wilson said he can't believe **50 years** have passed.

"It's as if it was yesterday," he said; the horror is something he can never forget.

He recalls watching from the Forest Club window as blacks and whites bloodied each other with fists, bricks, clubs, knives and guns.

One incident in which a black youth was killed captures the chaos that ruled the streets for two days.

"This white policeman knocked this boy's sister down, and this boy knocked the policeman down. The policeman's buddy came up and blowed his head off. It was the most brutal thing I've ever seen; that's why I don't like to talk about it," Wilson said.

Official reports said the trouble began earlier in the day when a group of black youths began assaulting and harassing whites on Belle Isle. That followed an incident five days earlier when stone-throwing white youths had kept them out of a park just outside Detroit.

Skirmishes continued as the 100,000 people who had visited the island that day began leaving. Passersby on East Jefferson joined in.

The false rumor that white sailors had thrown a black woman and her baby into the Detroit River ignited a full-scale **riot**. By 11:30 p.m. that Sunday, 5,000 people were fighting in the middle of East Jefferson, at the Belle Isle bridge entrance. Police restored order around 2 a.m.

Rumors fan **riot**'s flames

But around midnight, an employee of Wilson's Forest Club had jumped on the stage to spread the rumor about the alleged drownings.

The club was packed with about 700 black people, many of whom poured into the streets and began attacking whites. Around the same time, another false rumor spread to a white neighborhood near the Roxy Theatre on Woodward at Temple that a black man had raped a white woman on Belle Isle.

Whites leaving the theater gathered on Woodward, which separated the white neighborhood from Paradise Valley. They dragged blacks from automobiles and streetcars. At one point, the crowd on Woodward was estimated at 10,000. As daylight approached, the fighting continued.

The disturbance was not quelled until late Monday night after Army troops began patrolling.

Wilson said the **riot** would have come even without the rumors.

"The **race riot** was a smoldering killer for months and months, perhaps **years**. The Negroes were tired of being beat down, kicked and arrested and whipped in the precinct," he said.

"It's like California. They resent this situation."

Minorities, said Wilson, must learn to walk past, and if necessary over, racism and oppression.

"Mr. Jim Crow, he will be right there, regardless of all the laws you make and what not. If he leaves, his children will take over -- like the skinheads. Who's bothering the skinheads? I haven't bothered the skinheads, you haven't; they just don't like you."

All today's social troubles cannot be blamed on whites, Wilson said. Black people have stopped helping each other out as they did in **1943** , he said.

Many successful blacks "leave the little people who aren't doing well," he said.

"We don't love our brother anymore. So when you take that love away, you will have chaos."

Still, the problem is not unsolvable, Wilson said.

"America is the symbol of liberty. I want you all to believe that things are going to be better, because the march goes on."

"Tell them Sunnie said so."

Caption: Photo HUGH GRANNUM; Chart, Map PATRICIA CHARGOT

: "It's a sad story, very sad," says Sunnie Wilson, 84, as he recalls the terror and horror of **Detroit's 1943 race riot** . The second wave of the **riot** began at his nightclub, the Forest Club. Attacking whites close in on a black man during the **1943 race riot** in Detroit. Twenty-five of the 34 people who died in the **riot** were black.

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