

(VIRGINIA PARK - 04/05/1990)  
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(EM) In 1960, why did the neighborhood feel they needed to get together to do something? Obviously there was concern at that time, right?

(Ollie Foster) The city had plans for that area and they revealed them along about that time, 1960. Nobody trusted the city. They used to have the city come out and tell them all the plans. They were going to build some football fields in there, and they were going to have some baseball diamonds. The people said where are all the people going to be when you do all of this? There were a lot of apartment buildings at that time, and it was overcrowded.

I think the controversy in the area probably came from what you would call a melting pot. There were a number of union people. There was a lot of school teachers and things in that area. Even at that time there were some poor people who were on ADC. Some block clubs didn't want renters to belong to the block club. Then you had some very militant people in there. I remember some of them, after the civil disturbance and New Detroit came into being. New Detroit gave them some jobs and you wouldn't know they were the same people. They'd come out there reading things that New Detroit had told them to say.

They had a master plan for the entire city, and this was the one that they were going to work on first. We were supposed to get \$43 million. This was prior to the civil disturbance. The planning committee had not agreed on what

they were going to do. Along about the same time, it was over crowded because of all the apartments buildings in there. Whatever area you picked for development, that was one of the really controversial things. If you were on the committee, and it was a friend's area about to be taken, they'd come to you and say, "I didn't think you'd do this to me." It was some trying times. I remember Fred Thomas, they wanted to take his house. He thought I had voted to take his house. It was said in the community that if you raise enough hell, the city will pick you up and give you a job.

They knew that civil disturbance was going to happen. There were some people that were part of a watch committee that was supposed to alert the police I understand if something jumped off. Blacks were feeling more and more that they were being disenfranchised, that they weren't getting their fair share.

(Hershel Richie) One month before the 1940's riot I had written an article that said that Detroit was a boiling pot ready to erupt at any time. The same condition prevailed in the 60's.

(Walter Rosser) Gentlemen, I think we've overlooked one critical element. The Virginia Park area as I remember it in 1948 when I moved there was one of the most attractive neighborhoods in the city of Detroit, structure-wise. The type of Black families who were moving in were those who could accumulate a down payment on a house and buy it. The majority

of the first Black residents in the Virginia Park area were home buyers. Then suddenly the criminal vice element was relocated because of the highway construction in the Hastings area. This element relocated 100 percent up to 12th Street. Southfield was opening, and the Jewish merchants had an opportunity to go out there and establish businesses. So here you've got a neighborhood of working, struggling Black people trying to make it and suddenly the entire vice community is dumped right in their midst.

(Hershel Richey) You had a much more crowded situation then because you had numerous apartments there, oh brother, dozens and dozens of apartments.

(Walter Rosser) That's usually the case in any large city in America where a Black community settles that there's a housing shortage. They jam the people up by subdividing.

(Hershel Richey) They had one apartment there, remember the one on Seward and Woodrow Wilson. It was a nice apartment to begin with but they began to cut it up and it was rehabilitated. They had planned to build a high rise. The peculiar thing about it was that they got the government's permission, state's permission, city but they didn't get the Virginia Park District Council permission. When it came to us we turned it down so it never did happen. They were going to put a high rise up. The concept at that time was let's try to get rid of some of the apartments and maybe have only two story buildings. A funny thing happened during that time. They

wanted to put in a shopping center. I was in favor of them putting a shopping center on the east side of 12th. They put it on the west side of 12th which was a very good thing I think because we got rid of all those apartments over there. It was nothing but apartments over there.

(Ollie Foster) They were mostly owned by outside people at what we call absentee landlords and they began at that time to drain them off, just get money and make no repairs or nothing like that. There was very little rehabilitation work done, in fact, I think a lot of them stopped paying city tax and all of that. After Blacks started coming in.

At that time it wasn't as much hold up and things then. Prostitution and gambling and numbers but some people didn't mind numbers as bad as they did. The only thing was when they had these runners picking up the numbers in what they call single action, some of the block clubs didn't like that because of the image for the youngsters that this was a way to make it, and we know well that it's not a good way make it. No illegal activities is the way to make it. You might make it for awhile in that but we know that's not that. Along about that era was the time that the police became kind of corrupt. If you complained to them about something like that, them people knew it two hours after that. They'd come back some time and ask you "Are you against this, are you against that?" The police told them and I'll say that anywhere.

(Hershel Richey) There was a very bad relationship

between the police and the Black community back at that time, and it continued until they eliminated STRESS. I think some of them even admitted that they got on this STRESS in order to kill a nigger. Of course they had that controversy over at the church where they went in and shot up people.

(Ollie Foster) They had loaded rifles patrolling up and down in front of the church where a meeting was taking place. They were not the people from the church but they were the people from the Republic of New Africa, a militant Black organization who was meeting there. These were their people who were guarding the building. They knew that the police would probably disturb them or break in on the meeting.

(Hershel Richey) I think somebody probably took refuge in the church so they just came in the church after them; and, of course, there was some other type of service in there so they just began to shoot inside the church. It was a very unpleasant situation.

(Ollie Foster) They just went in there and they shot them up and then went in there and arrested all the people, children too, and herded them off and put them in a garage. Crockett went down there.

The police and community is what brought it about. I don't think they expected it to come off when it did. I think they was expecting something much larger than that to happen. You read how it happened; it was a blind pig place and they raided it. I guess they may have shoved somebody around and

that's when it started. But the police brutalized quite a bit at that point and they was expecting something else to happen.

There was a lot of them blind pigs and what we called house rent parties. A lot of times people didn't want it happening in their neighborhood because what happens is that sometimes a guy goes there and loses all his money, and he's scared to go home. If he should happen to come out and see somebody walking alone, he's libel to take him some money.

(Hershel Riley) In the other riot, you did some looting, you were shot. I was standing on the porch of Great Lakes Insurance Company and they broke into a store on the corner of Brush and Warren. I saw one fellow come out with a bottle of wine or liquor. The police came up at that time and, they just shot him and killed him. That's what they were doing with looters back in that first riot, but hey must have had orders not to shoot the people in this riot because they just carried out all kinds of material. A few of the kids in my neighborhood hid some of the stuff in my basement and I didn't even know it. I found it and I took it out and I put it in the alley.

(Walter Rosser) I believe you can't call them all criminals but I refer to them as the night people. The people who more or less did what they called hustle. The pick-pockets and the gambling hustlers and a group of youngsters who more or less looked to them as role models as well as the youngsters who like all youth in America at that time, were



becoming anti-establishment, anti-authority. That mood got in them that the "pigs" as they called the police, apparently have orders not to crack down on us, so let's just go ahead and make a killing.

(Hershel Richey) I'm standing in Grace Church yard and there were several people standing there watching the buildings across the street burn down and they would fall in the street. I would say, "Why are they burning those houses down?" One of the fellows said to me, and I think he probably was involved in this burning, he says, "Well, the house may belong to one of the brothers, one of the brothers might live in the house but whitey, owns it and we're burning it down because he will be responsible for rebuilding it."

(Walter Rosser) There was a nihilistic attitude amongst these street people and young people. They didn't particularly adhere to or follow any given ideology. Some called themselves militant, but the majority of them were nihilistic just anti everything. When an occasion came for them to loot and steal and parade and claim themselves militants, they did so.

(Ollie Foster) I guess the word got out that they weren't going to burn any Black guys establishment because they said you were supposed to write on there "Soul brother." I remember a Chinese had on his window, "Me Soul brother too"?

(Walter Rosser) What really hurt me about this business is that it triggered off on a Sunday. The following day it was

extremely hot. The following day, what few small neighborhood groceries that were spared were Black owned. These guys raised their prices two or three hundred percent. I had to get in my car and drive way to Inkster. There's this Black fellow that had this supermarket over there. I went out and loaded up my trunk with bread and milk and came back so my neighbor's kids could have milk and bread. Otherwise, if they bought in the neighborhood, where it normally sold for 35 cents a quart, these fellows were asking \$1.10, \$1.25 for a quart. These were Black merchants. Another thing I suppose people don't realize, in the Black community throughout America, ten years earlier you had Brown vs. Board of Education. There were great promises and a lot of people just didn't see fulfillment of these promises and expectations. There was a mood of anger. Statistics will prove that at that time Detroit, with a great majority the rest of the rioters were working here and held steady jobs. The people who they arrested. Everyone's not that way, I don't know. A good 65% had good paying jobs in the auto industry. Jerry Cavanaugh said it could never happen here but he was thinking through the liberal perspective.

The National Guard in the 68 riot was mostly composed of young men who did not want to get drafted into Vietnam. The majority of them were in the guard because they didn't want to perform military service. I believe they pulled some units that were camped at Grayling. These guys are all from small rural communities out in Michigan where they don't communicate



with or they don't know anything about Black people. God knows what they had heard. They weren't in the very best of moods and they weren't too well disciplined. There was as much difference as night and day in the areas where the troopers from the 101st were.

(Hershel Richey) They had a curfew at that time. My son and a kid next door, I guess they were young teenagers. The curfew didn't mean anything to them, but the National Guard stopped them and knocked them down. The kid next door was one of these brave kind of people. He was crying like a baby. They made them lie on the ground. It took me week before I found out where my son was. They locked him in a pen over some place. I got in touch with some city council people and we finally found out where he was.

(EM) How did it end? What made it end?

(Walter Rosser) When President Johnson got tired of playing politics with Romney. . .they dispatched the 101st Airborne Division and that ended it. Their presence alone seemed to give the people the impression that these guys are professional and they mean business and they had better stop.

(Ollie Foster) You've got to remember that during that time there was efforts for civil rights all across the country. Martin Luther King and people were beginning to say that we've had enough. We're not going to take it anymore. If you had anything in you at all, you had to be of that same philosophy that I'm paying my taxes, I'm doing everything that

every other citizen is doing and I ought to be getting some of the spoils. When you could see the things that was happening down south. People here were saying that I won't take that. That was a part of that march here in 1963 that Franklin lead along with other ministers. That we're not going to take this anymore. We want something different. Until they started doing that in the south, many people in the north didn't realize just how segregated or how they were being discriminated against here. There was housing patterns and that you could only live here or live there, irrespective of how much money you had. Banks wouldn't loan you any money. I remember that I was selling real estate, and if no Black lived in an area and you were trying to buy a house in there, this bank said we will not be the first one to break the neighborhood. It just went on that way. Of course, some of them bought on land contract.

These are the things that were happening. Ministers began to talk about it. Rev. Hill and Franklin and there were a couple of other ministers that began to talk about these things. That we ought to have what we are really entitled to. Ministers were coming from the south, and they were trying to get some help with the things that were happening to them. That made you realize more and more that the same thing almost was happening to you.