

NYT. Michigan Race Riot

Fatal Police Chase Ignites Rioting in Michigan Town June 19, 2003 By JODI WILGOREN

BENTON HARBOR, Mich., June 18 - When they threw the bricks and smashed the windows, when they set the blazes that devoured a dozen buildings over the past two harrowing nights, the people of this depressed city on Lake Michigan were not just angry about the 28-year-old motorcyclist killed early Monday in a high-speed police chase. They were still simmering, many said, over 7-year-old Trent Patterson, who died in a police chase a few years back, and Arthur Partee, who was strangled by police officers only two months ago. They said they were still seething over a teenager's mysterious drowning in the St. Joseph's River in 1991, and the man who was shot in the back by an officer the year before.

"We're just tired, we're sick of them killing us," Bonita Bulger, 28, said this afternoon as she stood at the corner of Empire and Pavone Streets, opposite where the motorcyclist, Terrance Shurn, crashed to his death and the smoldering remnants of an apartment building burned in the riot.

"Our backs are against the wall," Ms. Bulger added. "The jobs are low. Our kids have nothing to do. You know what's the highlight of our day? Standing on the four corners right here."

Tonight, some 250 police officers from surrounding communities, in riot gear and armored vehicles, patrolled this city of 11,000 people, nearly all African-American and poor, 100 miles around the lake northeast of Chicago. The neighborhood that had been roiled by violence for two nights was eerily quiet as scores of state police cars with lights flashing, but sirens silent, slowly snaked through the streets.

Several hot spots were blockaded, and officers shined flashlights into oncoming cars and warned them sternly to turn around. City officials vowed to enforce an existing 10:30 p.m. curfew for children 16 and under but declined to extend the curfew to older teenagers or adults or to ask the state to match their declaration of a state of emergency.

Fifty ministers also patrolled the neighborhood, after a candlelight prayer in Mr. Shurn's memory. Residents and some community leaders said the violence started on Monday night after a tense City Hall session that was disbanded when an outraged resident used profanity. By Tuesday night, rioters were chanting "no justice, no peace" as they overturned vehicles, tossed small firebombs into houses and shattered windows with bottles and rocks, injuring 12 people.

Capt. Roy Bell of the Benton Harbor Fire Department said 13 structures, 4 of them occupied, were burned, 11 of them to the ground. Twelve people were arrested, said Joel Patterson, the city manager.

This afternoon, some here shook their heads at the self-destructive nature of the rioting, while others applauded it for bringing national attention to festering complaints about the criminal justice system.

"I hate to see this happen, but sometimes you have to get your message across," said the Rev. Edward Pinkney of the Bethel Christian Restoration Center. "I believe this: There's never change without conflict. Read your history." A resort town in the 1930's and 1940's, Benton Harbor is now a dilapidated backwater, with a median household income of \$17,000, and a third of households earning below \$10,000, according to the 2000 census. It remains the headquarters for Whirlpool, but most of the factories that lured African-Americans from the South have long been closed. Census figures show that 17 percent of residents are unemployed.

The city of four square miles - nestled among the Harbor Country villages where Chicago's wealthy and powerful, including Mayor Richard M. Daley, have weekend homes - is governed by a black city commission, mayor, city manager and police chief. But there has been racial strife for decades between residents of Benton Harbor and the authorities in rural Benton Township, and the 95-percent-white beach community next door, St. Joseph.

The contrasts are abundant. Newspapers fill the windows of the Main Street Café in Benton Harbor. The Kitchen Mart Home Center looks as if it has been shuttered for decades. The siding is peeling from a long-empty office building at 133 West Main.

"It's like two different Americas," said Alex Kotlowitz, whose 1998 book, "The Other Side of the River: A Story of Two Towns, a Death, and America's Dilemma," examined the 1991 drowning of a 16-year-old Benton Harbor boy who was either running from the police after breaking into a car or lynched for dating a white girl, depending on where you live.

"It's completely - economically, spiritually and geographically - isolated," Mr. Kotlowitz said of Benton Harbor. "I'm not surprised at the anger; I felt it. You could tell it had a lot more to it than one individual's death."

As with past incidents, details remain murky over the circumstances of Mr. Shurn's death, which is being investigated by the Michigan State Police. City officials and residents say that Mr. Shurn, who lacked a driver's license and registration for his motorcycle, was chased through a residential area at speeds of up to 100 miles an hour by a white officer from the Benton Township police. Captain Bell, of the Fire Department, said the buildings were left burning the past two days because fire trucks were barraged with bricks as they entered the area, injuring a driver. A man with a sawed-off shotgun also fired at one engine, he said. "I just laid down and screamed at police that we're under heavy fire," Captain Bell recalled. "I started shaking the lieutenant and he gunned it. We got out of there."

The city's two fire engines sustained \$40,000 in damage, and one of the 22 firefighters, a 20-year veteran, quit in disillusionment.

"We couldn't do our job last night; we don't let buildings burn to the ground," said another fireman, Tim Robertson. "9/11, we're heroes. Now, we're the enemy."

City leaders, along with representatives of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People who came from Detroit, begged for peace this afternoon. Steven McCoy, a city commissioner, said: "We, as a people, must stand up, but not in anger, not in violence. We can march on the township. We can march on the courthouse. But let's not destroy our city."