

Urban racial violence is hardly a new phenomenon in America but, until recent times, it never struck with quite the force of the hot . . .

“Red Summer”: 1919

WILLIAM M. TUTTLE, Jr.

William M. Tuttle, Jr., formerly Senior Fellow in Southern and Negro History at Johns Hopkins, is now at the University of Kansas. His book on the “Red Summer,” “Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919,” was recently published by Atheneum, and is recommended for those wishing to read more on the subject.

The parks and bathing beaches,” Chicago’s leading black newspaper, the *Defender*, reminded its readers in July 1919, “are much more inviting these warm days than State Street. A hint to the wise should be sufficient.” Specifically, the *Defender* recommended Lake Michigan’s 25th Street beach, where there were free towels and lockers and where “every precaution is being taken to safeguard the interests of the bathers.” The *Whip*, another of the city’s black newspapers, also boosted the attractions to be found at the 25th Street beach. There were not only bathing beauties there but even a black lifeguard; so come to 25th Street, the *Whip* urged, and help Chicago’s black people “make this beach [their] Atlantic City.”

The temperature that Sunday, July 27, soared into the 90’s. The heat was already stifling by early afternoon when 14-year-old John Harris and four other black teenagers hopped on a produce truck driving north on Wabash Avenue. At 26th Street, the truck slowed down to cross the streetcar tracks, and the boys alighted. They walked seven blocks to the lake. Perspiring freely and carrying their rolled-up swimming trunks, they were naturally eager to get to the cooling water and to a homemade raft at the beach, and to hurry past the hostile domain of an Irish gang that had attacked them with rocks several times before.

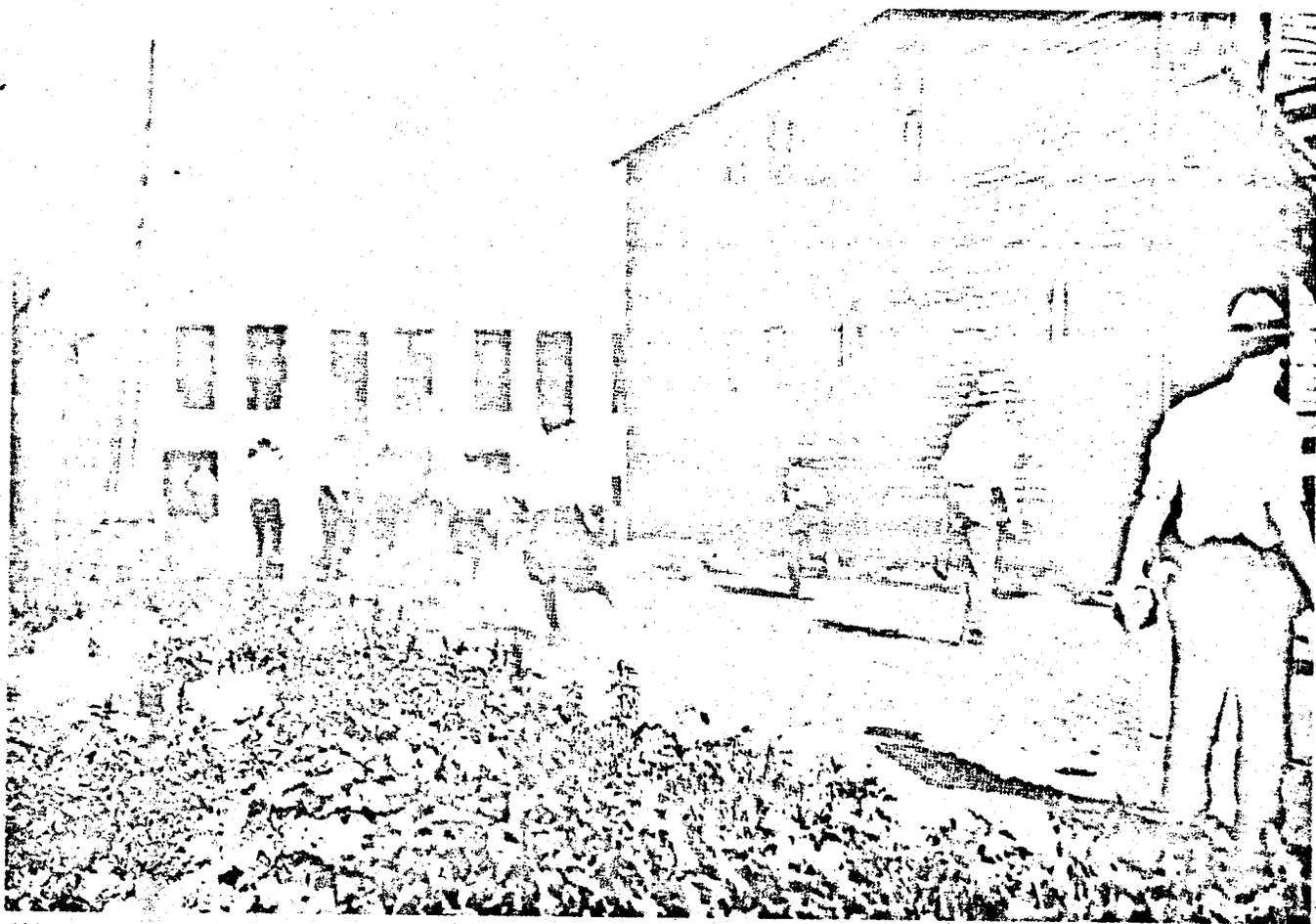
The boys were not headed for the black-patronized 25th Street beach; nor did they intend to try to swim at the white beach at 29th Street. They were going to their own, very private spot, in between, a little island which the boys called the “hot and cold.” Located behind the Keeley Brewery and Consumers

Ice, the “hot and cold” got its name from the effluence discharged by these companies. The waters of Lake Michigan could be as cold as the melting ice from Consumers, but the run-off from the vats at the brewery was not only hot but chemically potent as well. It could even temporarily bleach a black person white. “It was hot as Jesus,” John Harris recalled, “I would be as white [as a white man] when I got done—so actually no women or nothing ever come through, so we [often] didn’t even wear a suit, just take our clothes off and go down to the bank. . . .”

Tied up at the “hot and cold” was the raft the boys had built: “a tremendous thing,” fully fourteen by nine feet, with a “big chain with a hook on one of the big logs. . . .” Harris and his friends could hang onto the raft and propel it by kicking. The goal of the youths that Sunday was a marker nailed on a post several hundred yards from shore. At about 2 o’clock, the boys pushed off, angling their raft south toward the post—and toward 29th Street.

Meanwhile, at the 29th Street beach, the fury of racial hatred had just erupted. Defying the unwritten law that the beach was for whites, several black men and women had strolled to 29th Street to enter the water there. Curses, threatening gestures, and rocks had frightened the intruders away. Minutes later, however, their numbers reinforced, the blacks reappeared, this time hurling rocks. The white bathers fled. But the blacks’ possession of the beach was only temporary; behind a barrage of stones white bathers and numerous sympathizers returned. The battle that ensued was frightening in its violence but it was merely Act One in Chicago’s long-feared race war.

Innocently unaware of the savage exchange of projectiles and angry words at 29th Street, the five boys continued to “swim, kick, dive, and play around.” Then, as they passed the breakwater near 26th Street, a white man began hurling rocks at them. It was simply “a little game,” the boys thought. “We were watching him,” said Harris. “He’d take a rock and throw it, and we would duck it—this sort of thing. . . . As long as we could see him, he never could hit us, because after all a guy throwing that far is not a likely shot. And you could see the brick coming. . . .”



Chicago race riots. Typical hit-and-run tactics of a group of whites. Note man with bricks in foreground. (UP Int., Inc.)

tically dead from injuries. One black man had suffered severe head wounds; but, as he was not dead yet, the mob decided to hang him. "To put the rope around the negro's neck," noted a reporter, "one of the lynchers stuck his fingers inside the gaping scalp and lifted the negro's head by it, literally bathing his hand in the man's blood." Whites did not allow their black victims "to die easily"; when "flies settled on their terrible wounds the dying blacks [were warned not] to brush them off." Law enforcement was worse than nonexistent. Many police and militiamen, instead of trying to quell the violence, worked in collusion with the white mobs in their quest to "get a nigger." State troops fraternized and joked with lawbreaking whites, and many were seen helping in the murders and arson.

The factors that had caused East St. Louis to explode were evident in varying degrees in other American cities in 1919 two years later. It seemed, in fact, that the atmosphere during the first year of peace after World War I was even more conducive to racial violence than that during the war itself. When black intellectual and civil rights leader James Weldon Johnson originated the title the "Red Summer," he was referring to the race riots that bloodied the streets

of twenty towns and cities in the six-month period from April to early October 1919. One of these riots was a massacre, with an indeterminate number of black people slaughtered in rural Phillips County, Arkansas, and it is thus impossible to determine exactly how many died in race riots that summer. But the number of blacks and whites killed must have exceeded 120.

The Red Summer was consistent with the nation's history of racial violence. Yet it was also part of a generalized climate of violence in 1919, and this helps to account for the great number of race riots that year. It is thus not coincidental that the summer of 1919 also marked the beginning in the United States of the xenophobic and hysterically antiradical "Red Scare." Both phenomena were the ugly offspring of some of the same unrest, anxieties, and dislocations that plagued America and, indeed, the immediate postwar world. Mankind's values, attitudes, and expectations were in disarray in 1919, and the resultant violence was worldwide.

In the United States, the "search for the 'inner enemy,'" bolstered as it was by the force of law and the nation's mores, became institutionalized in 1919;

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they were even using this time to destroy evidence which would prove the guilt of the murderers. The men returned to the judge, who told them that he had informed the district attorney of their suspicions. Again the judge advised "no talking."

A Saturday morning event in Longview's black district was the arrival on the train of the weekly *Chicago Defender*. And the issue of the newspaper that July 5 was of special interest, for it had a story about Longview. Lemuel Walters, read the article, "was taken from the Longview jail by a crowd of white men when a prominent white woman declared she loved him, and if she were in the North would obtain a divorce and marry him." His only offense, the *Defender* added, was having had a white woman love him, and the penalty he had paid was death.

S. L. Jones, who was also the local *Defender* agent, drove his automobile to the downtown business district the following Thursday, July 10. There he encountered three white men, who brusquely demanded that he come with them. Jones refused and tried to pull away from one of the men who had grabbed him. Another of the men struck Jones a heavy blow on the head with a wrench. Other blows followed. Jones fell to the pavement, struggled to get up but fell again. Since he had written the *Defender* article, his attackers insisted, it would be much easier if he simply admitted it. When Jones denied that he had, they beat him again. Finally, the pummeling stopped, and Jones dragged himself to Dr. Davis' office.

Meanwhile, there was talk of impending "trouble that night." If Jones were still in Longview by midnight, according to one rumor, he would be lynched. Mayor G. A. Bodenheim sent a messenger to Davis to warn him and Jones to leave town at once. But Davis sent word back that he was staying. Davis also learned that the mayor and other city officials were meeting in emergency session at city hall, and he decided to join them. When he arrived at city hall, however, all that the white authorities would tell him was to take off his hat. "Yes!" Davis replied heatedly. "That's all 'you all' say to a colored man who comes to talk serious business to you: 'Take off your hat.' I am not going to do it. I want to know what protection we colored citizens are going to have tonight." "You will have to take your chances," the mayor replied.

As darkness settled on Longview, black volunteers met at Davis' house, "pledging their lives in his defense." The doctor assumed command of the men, posting them "where they could safeguard every side from which an attack could be made," and instructing them not to fire before he did and "under no circumstances to shoot into white people's houses." At about 11 p.m., Dr. Davis sneaked through alleys and dark

streets to within eyeshot of the city hall. It was just as he had feared; white men were gathering, using the fire department as their command post. Returning to his house, he told his troops what the prospects were, and "offered to allow any of them who did not feel like risking his life . . . to retire. . . . Every man stayed and said he was prepared to take what might come." About midnight, Davis and Jones recalled, "the mob came down through a back street." The black men crouched quietly, waiting in ambush until Jones's house was "approached or attacked. Four white men came on the back porch of the house and called to Jones to come out." There was no answer. "When it became evident that they intended to force their way in, Davis fired the first shot and the melee began." Over 100 shots were fired in a half-hour, and four whites fell with fatal wounds, causing the rest of the mob of about a dozen whites to retreat to the town square. Minutes later, and one at a time, automobiles sped down the street leading to Jones's house, white men hopped out, picked up the dead and wounded, and sped away.

Throughout the night, a fire bell was sounded, eventually summoning about 1,000 white men to the town square. Until almost daybreak the leaderless crowd simply milled around; then, as if suddenly energized by the first shafts of daylight, men began smashing their way into the hardware store and helping themselves to rifles, pistols, and ammunition. Thus armed, a mob headed back to Jones's house. By then, however, Jones and Davis were in hiding, and the mob occupied itself by dousing their homes with kerosene and igniting them, along with the homes of four other of the "principal" black residents. The next day, police officers, aided by bloodhounds, tracked down Marion Bush, the 60-year-old father-in-law of Davis, and shot him dead in a cornfield three miles south of town.

Davis and Jones succeeded in escaping from Longview. Dressed in a soldier's uniform and improvised leggings, Davis boarded a train a few miles from town and knowing that authorities searching for him would be looking for a doctor, he "bought some popcorn, some red pop and some other refreshment and walked around . . . throwing the bottle in the air, drinking from it ostentatiously and eating and singing, like a simple 'darker.'" Fearing worse violence, the governor of Texas declared martial law in Longview and ordered the state militia and Texas Rangers into the town. Yet there was no more bloodshed. Certain white citizens of the community even adopted a resolution deploring the "scurrilous [*Defender*] article" about "a respectable, white lady." That day and night of rioting, however, had left five dead, a score wounded, and many homeless.