

Commentary...

The riots that brought us home to Sisters

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

Marilyn and I will sit down with our daughter Ceili this week and watch the History Channel's "The L.A. Riots: 25 Years Later," and the National Geographic "L.A. Burning." The history has profound resonance for her, though she doesn't really know it yet. For the 1992 riots that took more than 60 lives and cost over \$1 billion in economic loss led directly to the life she leads today, preparing to graduate from Sisters High School and head off to the University of Oregon.

I was working at a retail store called Pachmayr on Lake Avenue in Pasadena, California, on April 29, 1992. We sold fine firearms — mostly sporting shotguns — Orvis clothing, books on African history and hunting. It was a fun job for a guy in his mid-20s still trying to figure out how to turn passions for history, firearms, the outdoors and writing into some kind of living.

That afternoon, I walked up the street to get a sandwich at one of Pasadena's hundreds of delectable delis. I walked in shortly after 3 p.m. — just in time to catch a live report on the verdict in the trial of four white Los Angeles Police Department officers in the March 3, 1991 beating of a black man named Rodney King, who had been

pulled over in the northern Los Angeles suburb of Lake View Terrace after a high-speed drunk-driving chase by the California Highway Patrol on the 210 Freeway.

Not guilty. Every single person in the city knew exactly what that verdict, read in a courtroom in Simi Valley, portended: L.A. was going to burn.

Racial tensions in the lead-up to the trial were strung so tight the whole L.A. basin hummed. You could feel it even in the affluent northern fringe up against the mountains where Marilyn and I lived (not affluently, I might add) and worked.

This was pre-Internet, so the staff at Pachmayr gathered around the radio and a tiny portable TV somebody went home and brought back.

Terrible things were happening to the south of us.

Marilyn and I went to her parents' house that evening and sat transfixed in the den, watching Reginald Denny get pulled out of his truck and his skull crushed with a brick. Cars were pelted with stones and debris and fires broke out as wholesale looting began — the liquor stores in South Central going first, and alcohol fueling the inferno.

The LAPD was nowhere to be seen, pulling out of the South Central area that was quickly becoming a war zone. At Parker Center (LAPD HQ), an

enraged crowd, mostly but by no means solely African-American, was protesting in an increasing state of rage at a place that, for them, symbolized an oppressive occupying force.

We went to work the next day with a pall of smoke rising south of us, and an electric sense of crisis in the air. People from all over L.A. were lined up to buy guns, but California had a two-week waiting period and they were out of luck. Myself, I had a pistol in my pocket and had stashed my Remington 700 .30-06 in my little white Toyota truck.

Early that afternoon, we started getting reports that rioting and looting was spreading and that gangs of young men were breaking windows on Lake Avenue a few blocks up. A retired judge who was a regular customer came by and told us we had the legal right to shoot anyone who crossed our threshold with violent intent.

To his everlasting credit, Mark Baker, the co-manager of the store, wasn't having it. He'd fought in Vietnam and had shot people before. He wasn't interested in doing it again. He pulled the steel grate shut across the doors, flipped the closed sign and sent us all home. They hauled the high-grade guns out to the safe at the corporate headquarters and locked the store up for the next few days.

Marilyn called me, nervous. She was working at a travel agency, also in Pasadena, and she could hear crowds of people yelling. I told her to lock the doors, stay put and I headed out to pick her up, the rifle sitting on the seat next to me.

We made it home safely to her parents' house, and that was the end of any direct encounter with the L.A. Riots for us. Though it felt for a few hours there that anything could happen, nothing really went down in Pasadena. With work suspended, we spent the next couple of days watching TV news or sitting in the next-door neighbor's swimming pool in San Marino, watching massive plumes of black smoke rise across the basin below us to the south.

It was the most surreal four days of my life.

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There is a tangled, sordid and violent racial history that built up into the explosion of April 29-May 2, 1992. In that era, the city was a sweltering mire of hate, despair, rage, gangs and drugs. Every actor in this epic drama had reasons to feel aggrieved: An African-American population stuck in a seemingly endless cycle of poverty, apparent abandonment by municipal government, and a fraught relationship with an often ham-handed and unaccountable LAPD; honest cops who were tasked

with a dangerous and virtually impossible job of policing a sprawling, violent city with unbridgeable racial, socio-economic and political chasms; Asian entrepreneurs who opened businesses in the sorely underserved inner city only to be confronted with daily acts of theft and intimidation.

(The most incisive look at race relations in L.A. in the late-'80s/early '90s that I've yet seen is in the fine ESPN documentary *OJ: Made in America* — a must-watch. It brings in a seldom-recalled incident in which a female Korean shopkeeper shot a young black girl in the back of the head after a scuffle over an orange juice carton and was given a no-jail sentence for voluntary manslaughter.)

I loved Los Angeles; it was the land of my birth, after all, and the Angeles National Forest was a wondrous stomping ground. But the human environment was getting increasingly crowded and ugly.

Marilyn and I married in June 1993. By then there had been a federal civil rights trial of the four officers involved in the Rodney King incident. The run-up to that trial was fraught with tension, too. I had international media interviewing me at the Pachmayr shooting range about what people were thinking and

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