

Blacks and the Police in Portland

Part II

By Joyce Boles

(Editor's Note: This is the second part in an investigation of Blacks and the police in Portland. Last week, the *Observer* looked at some history and at the Black United Front's hotline. In this article, we look back at turbulent times in the 60s which helped shape attitudes today, both among cops and citizens.)

It was those turbulent times more than a decade ago that stick in the minds of many. Portland had civil disturbances in 1967, 1968, and 1969, along with most of the rest of the cities in the country. Memories of what happened then vary, but it is clear those memories shape much of today's thinking.

Newspaper accounts at the time list fires, rock-throwing, groups of young persons refusing to disperse. Former Chief McNamera is reported to have met with Albina citizens in August, 1968, who protested discriminatory attitudes of police patrolling the area. A pastor said he thought police were harassing Blacks. The Black Panther Party in December, 1969 took steps to file an initiative petition that would set up separate (but presumably equal) police departments in each neighborhood. A few weeks later, officer Stan Harmon (himself later the victim of a sniper's bullet that left him in a wheelchair) shot a young man during an arrest outside the Panther headquarters. The paper (back in those days a paper could do this) listed the young man's arrest record, which was a long one. After one disturbance, some citizens criticized police for making a show of force in the neighborhood. In June, 1969, the papers list three successive nights of violence resulting in dozens of arrests, fire bombing, looting, and a police field headquarters at McDonald's on Union Avenue with 15 cars operating from there.

One result of the trouble was the formation of the Ad Hoc Committee on Police Community Relations, which continued to meet under the leadership of Rev. Harper Richardson in a local church for the next ten years, but which has since disbanded.

Jim Loving remembers those times. Now coordinator of the King Neighborhood Facility, Loving still tells with feeling his encounter with local police during the riot of 1968, when he and a friend were stopped after returning from the Portland Meadows race track.

"Unbeknownst to us here in the core area a riot was going on," recalls Loving. He and his friend were stopped by 10 or 12 officers brandishing multiple weapons and demands for identification, which Loving and his friend produced. "At that point they proceeded to try and provoke us," he says, by asking inappropriate questions, such as an explanation for why Loving was sitting in the back seat, and other things. Loving says the officers called him and his friend "a bunch of smart niggers," and a few other things. But a standoff ensued. "They were so anxious to catch somebody doing something. I guess there was a lot of action going on. Blacks throwing rocks or bombs or whatever, but they done got away. Here comes a couple of innocent Blacks, and they say, 'We didn't



JIM LOVING

catch us those guys, we gonna get us one nigger tonight.' And that's their approach, and that's their tactics that they done. And I'm sure it still goes on."

Loving adds that he has a son, age 24, who has never done anything wrong but who has been arrested twice. Once, Loving believes it was the presence of a white girl in the car that led to a stop and the ensuing discovery that the young man had a fishing ticket outstanding, resulting in arrest and a trip downtown. Another time, the youth happened to be a lone Black standing in a building downtown when the bank next door was held up by another Black. "Some Black done robbed the bank. (The cops) saw him, they ran and grabbed him, and drug him off to jail. Attempted bank robbery." Loving's son's only purpose in being there was to visit a doctor.

These experiences lead Loving to this conclusion: "There is definitely racism in the Portland police department. I wouldn't be parked in a dark street with a policeman for anything in the world. I'd rather be



DONALD WARREN

caught in a dark alley with a Ku Klux Klansman."

Donald Warren, a Black patrolman in North Precinct, also remembers those times. He was stopped by a large group of officers once when he was on the way to visit a friend.

Rev. Jackson remembers those times, and believes promises made to the blacks have not been kept. For one thing, certain officers who were supposed to be removed from the area are now back, says Jackson, and for another, a promised police officer in Albina never appeared.

Leon Johnson, now with affirmative action for Multnomah County, was a police officer then at age 22. "It was a very interesting time for me to be on the department," he recalls.



LEON JOHNSON

"1968, Portland's version of the riots, which was several kids throwing rocks. I was a motorcycle policeman which made you a member of the tactical operations platoon, which means supreme asskicker job...kids were raising hell in the parks and Portland State and kids in the community were throwing rocks and saying 'whitey go home'...and as a member of the motorcycle unit we were at the fore, the wedge...(I was) in a situation where not many Blacks ever get exposed. A confined situation with a whole bunch of white officers who are responding to a community that's out that definitely does not like the police, and I guess it's just a verbiage that comes out of all that. You just get to the point where you've had enough of that shit. The white officers' verbiage. 'What we got to do is go through some of these parks and bust some of these nigger's heads and all that and let them know who we are.'" Johnson doesn't know if such talk was a factor in his quitting the department but he did.

Officer Dwight Ford was also here then. Speaking wryly: "I have not been pro-police all my life."

Stan Peters remembers it differently. "I was on motorcycles in the Black area during the riots over there when all the furniture stores were being burned up. There was a two-day period (when at the request of Black leaders police withdrew, followed by worse trouble) and two days later the place was ablaze, so they called us back in again. When the riots were happening we had untold numbers of Black citizens saying, 'Get them punks and make them stop their nonsense' just like the people in the white areas..."

One response to the troubled time in 1968 was the formation of a police community relations project with offices in Albina. The unit was supposed to have young Blacks working in it who would attempt to be liaison with the community. The City Council at the time expressed doubt publicly that as many as 20 qualified young Blacks could be found. Sgt. John Roe, who commanded the unit, was quoted in the paper as saying he thought all police were racist, a remark which probably sealed his fate. By 1972, after three bombings and transferring Roe out (he later quit the bureau altogether, and was variously accused of having been a poor administrator and an embarrassment, but defended as having tremendous rapport with the street, a man who was called "nigger lover" frequently but took



ROBERT PHILLIPS

it like a gentlemen), and \$200,000, the main accomplishment of the unit was listed as its own survival.

Robert Phillips, a Black social worker and political activist, remembers one aspect of the project, the Seven of Diamonds Club, he says was doomed from the start because of its location on the toughest part of Williams Avenue, so that teenagers had to find their way into it among all the most unsavory types of street characters. Phillips ascribes this to typical bureaucratic bungling.

Det. Janisse, who was not here then, was heard that the purpose of the PCR unit was to "gather intelligence information from the community." Certainly, the unit lasted not much longer than the troubles, and was disbanded by 1973.



CHIEF BAKER

Chief Baker recalls PCR to have been a police administration fad that swept the country in those times. Not only do they tend to separate themselves from the rest of the department, but they tend to foster good community feeling toward their own unit while community feeling toward police in general remains unchanged. Other police officers tend to leave community relations up to the special unit, rather than undertaking anything themselves. For these reasons, Baker has no intention of forming another similar program in Portland.

The area where the old Seven of Diamonds club was has changed radically since those days. "The Avenue" is no longer there, all the buildings at the corner of Williams and Russell having been leveled, victims of federal urban renewal policies of the day. "The Avenue," which Baker calls one aspect of "police cultural myth," or a concept raising out of police work, has moved to Union, where periodic police efforts net hundreds of prostitutes and their customers.

Union still shows scars of the riots. There are boarded-up buildings and burned-out buildings, and vacant lots. Overlooked in the usual discussions of Union are the effects of building the northbound interstate freeway to the west, leaving the commercial strip without as many customers. The City of Portland is presently beautifying Union with trees, a median strip, and new design.

Rev. Jackson believes the area gets more police attention than do other areas, a belief shared by many. Says Stan Peters: "In this city last year, 40 percent of the major crimes were committed by Blacks. the majority of those crimes were committed against Blacks...there has to be more attention given to that area. We know the people that are committing these crimes..."

National statistics appear to support Peters. Ebony magazine (August, 1979) reports that more Blacks were killed by other Blacks in the streets in 1977 than were killed in the entire nine-year Vietnam war. FBI numbers cited in the same magazine show that of the 1,639 murder victims in 1977 between the ages of 15 and 19, 702 were Black. Of the 1.8 million persons under 18 arrested in 1977, 24.6 million were Black, as were 59 percent in this age bracket arrested for rape and 64 percent of those arrested for robbery. Young Blacks accounted for 53 percent of those arrested for violent crime and 29 percent of those arrested for property crimes. Also in 1977, 1.8 million juvenile offenders were arrested in this country and 80 percent were Black.

Worse, 1976, 131 of every 1,000 Black households were burglarized, compared with 84 of every 1,000 white households. Fourteen of every 1,000 Blacks were robbed, compared to six of every 1,000 whites.

However, the Portland Police Bureau's own annual reports seem to call these national reports into question, for the call districts (districts of the city in which officers are assigned; for example, districts 561, 562, 571, 572, 621, 622, 631, 541, and 542 are heavily Black areas; on the police radio, an officer is called by the number of the district to which he is assigned) in the Black area are not the highest in the city in any category of Part I, Part II, or Part III crimes. Part I, II, and III are uniform crime reporting categories defined by the FBI and have no relations to local laws. The 1977 annual report seems to point at district 22 in St. Johns, and at districts 731, 732, and 742 in the far southwest as the roughest and toughest in this city.

However, the 1978 report, which lists the characteristics of arrestees by age, sex, and race, seems to indicate a disproportionate number of Blacks arrested compared to whites. Of persons under 18 arrested in 1978, 4,670 were white, and 1,264

were Black, and 105 were other races. This means that 21 percent of the arrestees were Black. A similar 21 percent of the arrestees over 21 were Black.

With the last complete census more than a decade ago, accurate and believable data about the percentage of Blacks in the Oregon population are hard to find, but it is known that 20 percent of all the children in the Portland school district are non-white. This tends to show, when compared with figures above, that disproportionately more Blacks are arrested than whites. Estimates of the percentage of Blacks in Portland range from six percent to 20 percent. The 1980 census should provide more information on this matter.

The bureau's own report also shows that assaults on officers are more likely to occur in Central Precinct, the downtown and West Hills area, rather than in North, where most of the Blacks live, at least in the 1977 report. The 1978 report shows officer assaults pulling ahead in North, with 38 percent of the assaults occurring there, while in 1977 only 31 percent occurred there. Officer assault is frequently given as the reason for more intensive and defensive police work.

Says Commissioner Jordan: "Most of the assault on officers comes from the Black community. Given that mindset you're going to treat Blacks differently. It's human nature to do that. Stan (Peters) and I debate this."

To a man, however, police officers agree that there is more "action" downtown, in the Skid Road area, than there is in North Precinct, thus refuting the frequently aired charge that those officers who are fond of "taking care of business" will request North Precinct as an assignment.

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