

"'68: The Fire Last Time," Part 3

Narrated By Sunni Khalid

On the morning of April 7th 1968 church bells rang for Palm Sunday and in East Baltimore those people who ventured out of their homes saw their neighborhoods transformed into war zones.

TAPE: (6 SECONDS)

IC: What you saw was smoke and fire.

Sgt. Bishop Robinson was one of the few black police officers on the Baltimore force in '68.

TAPE: (16 SECONDS)

IC: Lines of storefronts all burning at the same time and more being burned by individuals throwing Molotov cocktails :16

TAPE: (XX SECONDS)

IC: All around me, everywhere I looked was fire

Mike Olesker, was 22-years old, three months out of college and a reporter for the News American assigned to cover the riots.

TAPE:(30 SECONDS)

IC: It was just buildings going up in flames everywhere and pockets of people .people throwing rocks pockets of people running through the teargas. Scores, then suddenly they'd change direction.

The night before, the city had imposed a curfew from 11 to 7am in an effort to stop the looting and burning. But as soon as the curfew lifted .the rioters were out again.

Two pillars of the black community drove through the streets together to survey the situation and see what they could do to bring things under control. Homer Favor, a professor at Morgan State and Reverend Marion Bascom of Douglas Memorial Community Church watched the chaos philosophically. Bascom was Baltimore's first and, at that time, only black Fire commissioner.

TAPE: (19 SECONDS)

IC: [Marion Bascom] I don't think you could say anything but to deliver your presence there. The terrible stench of smoke that could be seen across the city, vandals loose in the fields.

TAPE: (16 SECONDS)

IC: [Homer Favor] We saw a lady, nondescript, had two or three children, and they knocked the window out to a cleaning shop and next door was a liquor store. She had the bottles of liquor and they had the clothes from the cleaners and we spoke and she said,

mind your own business.

The OWNERS of the stores WERE trying desperately to mind their own businesses. Young Billy Murphy drove around the city with his father, William H. Murphy, one of the city's prominent lawyers.

TAPE: (12 SECONDS)

IC: I remember seeing those signs, Soul brother, soul brother, soul brother. In other words, don't bomb me, bomb the white man.

Murphy remembers a white shop owner who tried the same tactic.

TAPE: (13 SECONDS)

IC: It was a Jewish business. The man was smart enough to understand.. until they ratted him out and then his business got burned down too.

Other merchants used different means to protect their livelihoods. Jerald Lewis was watching the news on television with his father who owned the Excelsior Cleaners on Edmondson Avenue. (:10)

TAPE: (29 SECONDS)

IC: We saw that The riots were coming up Gay Street I thought, I'm not going to stand idly by and watch.

Lewis grabbed a shotgun and drove over to the family's main plant on Edmondson. The windows and front door were broken; people were coming out with armloads of clothing. And two officers sat outside in a squad car.

TAPE: (50 SECONDS)

IC: As I made the u turn and pulled up behind em I said what's going on? They've broken into my location and you're just sitting there. He said, We have orders not to do anything. I said, OK, will you protect me if I go into my place? They said, You better stay outside, cause we can't protect you once you go inside. So, I walked to the front door, fired one shot into the air after the store had been cleared out, I went in, turned the lights on and stayed there for the rest of the evening. Nobody came in.

Lewis says the owners of two liquor stores next door stood guard on their roofs that night -- also armed with rifles.

But most merchants were helpless to stop the destruction and retreated to wait it out. On Harford Rd, four blocks south of North Ave., the Harford Cleaners was on fire.

TAPE: (XX SECONDS)

IC: Somebody had thrown a gasoline bomb into the store, a three inch gas main had burst and the steel girders just melted like spaghetti.

College student Jim Constantinides says the family hadn't heard from his uncle, George

Sapounas, who owned the store. Then they got a phone call from some of the employees.

TAPE: (XX SECONDS)

IC: They said, Uncle George is down in the basement and we're taking care of him. And when things cool down, come and get him.'

The Harford Cleaners black employees had whisked Sapounas out of the store when the trouble started and hidden him in a nearby home. A couple of days later, when it was safe, Constantindis went to get his uncle. He found the Greek immigrant standing with his cane looking at the destruction. The young ones didn't know him, he said or else they wouldn't have burned him out.

TAPE: (XX SECONDS)

IC: He just shrugged his shoulders. He didn't even have insurance. He didn't believe in insurance. He was tough. He figured all the money that he saved over the years, it just came out even. The only thing he was sad about was the city gave him so little for his property. But otherwise, it was just finished. He was able to take that. But what he was sad about was the phenomena, the social phenomena surrounding the destruction of his place and Baltimore.

As evening approached on Sunday, the east side began to calm. Now it was time for the West Side to erupt.

For the first time since the Civil War, there were federal troops in Baltimore. President Lyndon Johnson gave the order at 6:14 and shortly later, the 82nd Corps Airborne Infantry from Andrews Air Force Base came down Park Heights Avenue with fixed bayonets.

Most were only a few years older than the teenagers playing hit and run maneuvers with them. But it wasn't a game. There were reports of gunfire between snipers and troops.

At 8:30, Governor Spiro Agnew appeared on television announcing new curfew hours. By now, the city jail was overflowing with people caught looting and thousands who'd been rounded up for violating the curfew.

Things were bad but not everyone and certainly not all black Baltimoreans were affected in the same way.

TAPE: (3 SECONDS)

IC: my world wasn't interfered with the emphasis was on being safe.

Peggy Johnson was a nurse at Johns Hopkins Hospital. Driving in to work from the middle class neighborhood of Evanston Village, she saw no signs of the troubles.

TAPE: (18 SECONDS)

IC: They made a corridor I could leave my house and go down invisible line at Bentalou.

But the invisible line of cordoned off streets couldn't protect Peggy Johnson's son from coming home from elementary school to tell her about a puzzling question a white teacher had asked him. (:08)

TAPE: (12SECONDS)

IC: My son was He said the teacher asked him if we were rioting

Peggy Johnson told her son, we don't do that kind of thing. And she marched down to the school to give the principle and the teacher a piece of her mind.

AMBI:

A world away from Edmondson Village, Melvin Williams was just getting up at his mother's house in the 1400 block of West Madison Street.

TAPE: (15 SECONDS)

IC: Early in the morning. I looked out the window and saw army vehicles and said, damn .always.

It was Major George Gelsten in charge of the National Guard, Box Harris, the city's highest ranking black police official, and a childhood friend of Melvin's, Clarence Mitchell, Jr. of the NAACP.

TAPE: (20 SECONDS)

IC: They said, we want to talk to you..I said always We think you can assist us in bringing some kind of peace and closure we think you can stop people from tearing things up. I said, Me? They said yeah. So I said, let's go. Let's go

AMBI: CAR SOUND/'TURN RIGHT

The men drove to West Mosher Street near Pennsylvania Avenue and got out.

TAPE: (37 SECONDS)

IC: They said we want you to put on this bullet proof vest and this bullhorn and I said give me the bullhorn how you think I'm gonna put on a bulletproof vest and you not give it to me the rest of the year. That just don't make no sense.

Melvin climbed up on some boxes and addressed the crowd of about 300 to 400 people.

TAPE: (100 SECONDS)

IC: I've been told to tell you two things. There's gonna be a curfew at nine . The second is if you go across If you cross Howard and Eutaw, they gonna kill you wholesale, you have come for things that belong to the establishment. You come into white America's property. You've gone into white people's property. We have allowed you to take

American citizens

Whether it was Melvin's words the sight of federal troops with rifles and bayonets, the angry warnings of Governor Agnew on television or just exhaustion by Monday, the looting and the fires began to wane. By Wednesday, at two o'clock, Mayor Tommy D'Alesandro was at Memorial Stadium and threw out the first ball to open the baseball season. The city of Baltimore was back in business. At least some parts of it were.

Six people were dead, shot by police bullets or burned to death in buildings that were torched. 700 people were injured. Hundreds had police records for curfew violations that would take years to expunge. Property damage amounted to some ten million dollars.

Several weeks after the riots, Frank Knott, began to compile data for his family's insurance business and saw a strange pattern emerge:

TAPE: (XX SECONDS)

IC: What I thought was random, turned out to be not so random. We found three categories of buildings in the top three of the dry cleaner in the neighborhood was number one. Number two was the liquor stores. Number three, corner grocery stores.

Why these stores and not others? The reasons were rooted in the everyday life of the neighborhoods.

TAPE: (47 SECONDS)

IC: The dry cleaner had a lay away plan you didn't get your laundry back..liquor stores, check cashing taking 20- and 30-percent of a check and corner grocery stores had layaway plans and a bag of potato chips might end up costing you 30 cents.

AMBI:

The pattern of burning and looting had followed a route of racial insult to blacks in inner city Baltimore. Still, few people back then would have guessed that the marks would still be visible 40 years later.

(STANDUP - describe scene) The riots began around here at Monument and Gay Streets one of several vital business centers that burned and were never rebuilt.

The 68 riots, the Fire Last Time changed the landscape of Baltimore. They would make one man's political fortune and put a halt to another's ambitions. And they would forever change the way black and white Baltimoreans viewed themselves and their city. I'm Sunni Khalid, for WYPR.

Our series, "'68: The Fire Last Time," was made possible in part by a grant from the Maryland Council on the Humanities. Tomorrow, Spiro Agnew rides the riots all the way to Washington and tracing the long-term effects of the riot on Baltimore City.

