

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE "LONG, HOT, SUMMER"

Mr. Sparrow effected no dramatic change or accomplishment during his first ten months as executive director. He did become aware of the mounting tensions within minority groups and became increasingly fearful of the possibility of civil disturbances whereas almost all other city officials were very complacent and unworried. Five years previously Mr. Alfred Cowles had told the Police Department that there was no concern for mass disturbance in the city but, in the same lecture, recognized the possibility of trouble in the near future.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Cowles, former Executive Director, had informed the members of the City Commission that "the climate in the city is at a high level."<sup>2</sup> Msgr. Popell, Pastor of the Catholic Cathedral Parish, affirmed that the city had no serious racial problem since peaceful, non-violent solutions were being pursued by both public and church groups.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Cowles told the members of the Chamber of Commerce that the local minority situation in housing, employment, and public accommodations was

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Cowles, Police Inservice Training Program, March 20-22, 1962, Doc. File No. 20, "Riot."

<sup>2</sup> "Off. Min.," June 28, 1962.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., June 27, 1963.

generally good but some problems still existed in the field of education.<sup>4</sup>

The local "Black Muslim" group caused only a small ripple of concern. Unofficially, its membership was estimated to be under 20 persons in 1963 and possibly as high as 50 a year later. A house-to-house membership drive late in the summer raised the membership to about 200. Mr. Cowles referred to the Black Muslims as "the most dangerous group in the city" and compared it to the Ku Klux Klan or the Southern White Citizens' Council. He observed, however, that while 200 active members represented less than one percent of the city's Negro population, it was a force large enough to cause trouble. The Commission did not consider the group important enough to warrant taking any action.<sup>5</sup>

The race riots in Los Angeles in the summer of 1965 triggered concern in most American cities. Mr. Cowles informed the City Manager that the local climate was healthy and the existing tensions were not the type which produced race riots. Mr. Alex Barton, WOOD-TV, produced an hour long documentary on the local minority opinions concerning the conditions within the city. The tape-recorded interviews revealed that local Negro citizens believed that conditions similar to those existing in Los Angeles

<sup>4</sup>Alfred Cowles, "Situation Evaluation," Speech given to Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce, Aug. 7, 1963, Doc. File No. 73.

<sup>5</sup>Alfred Cowles, Speech on WOOD-TV, Dec. 13, 1964, Doc. File No. 72.



did exist in Grand Rapids but that the white population was not aware that these conditions were present. The Negroes interviewed expressed complaints against housing, employment, education, inadequate recreational facilities and police brutality. They also observed that there was lack of proper communication with the white population and the lack of responsible Negro leadership within the community.<sup>6</sup>

Commenting on the documentary program, Mr. Cowles admitted the existence of widespread unemployment among the non-white but blamed this condition on the recent migration of unskilled and untrained persons from the deep South. He claimed that unfair employment practices in the local labor market was negligible and denied that the alleged police brutality could be substantiated in a thorough and impartial investigation. He admitted the existence of a definite housing problem and surmised it would continue for the foreseeable future. He believed the documentary served a good purpose since it might alert uninformed elements of the community to the crucial and sensitive nature of race relations but denied the possibility of a local race riot if all citizens renewed their dedication to the cause of human rights and the solutions to the complex problems.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>"The Aftermath--Comments by Grand Rapids' Negro Community on the Los Angeles Riots," Sept. 1965, Complete text of program contained in Doc. File No. 92.

<sup>7</sup>Alfred Cowles, "Comments on WOOD-TV Documentary," Sept. 20, 1965, Doc. File No. 74.

The increase of racial tensions became obvious with the approach of the summer of 1967. The "Mustache Incident" had produced other incidents, such as Mr. Davidson's request for school guards because of increased vandalism of teachers' cars and school property.<sup>8</sup> Mr. Sparrow observed that a riot syndrome was developing within the younger element of the Negro population. He recommended a more aggressive "push for equality on every front, irrespective of what interests are hurt" and expressed fear that without this increased aggressiveness the work of the Human Relations Commission would "be rendered completely ineffective."<sup>9</sup> Other commission members made similar observations and one member was "shocked by the obvious tense hostility" she experienced when addressing a group of young Negroes.<sup>10</sup>

Mr. Paul Phillips, Executive Director of the Urban League, met on July 12, 1967, with members of the Executive Committee of the Commission, the Mayor, City Manager, Chief of Police, and a few ranking officers. Mr. Phillips informed the group that Grand Rapids was included on the "dangerous list" established by the National Office of the Urban League and indicated particular concern in the lack of Negroes in the Police Department and other areas of city administration. Mayor Sonneveldt expressed his

<sup>8</sup>Grand Rapids Press, April 19, 1967, Doc. File No. 20.

<sup>9</sup>Eugene Sparrow, "Address to the Human Relations Conference," Kellogg Center, Michigan State University, June 3, 1967, Doc. File No. 20.

<sup>10</sup>Ed. Com., "Off. Min.," June 6, 1967.



optimism relative to the progress made in the city's racial climate and denied positively that riots were possible in the city. City Manager Nabers agreed with the Mayor's optimistic attitude, as did the majority of the Executive Committee.<sup>11</sup>

Mr. Reginald Gatling, Director of the Kentfields Rehabilitation program of the Dyer-Ives Foundation, commenting on the Newark, New Jersey, riots, said about Grand Rapids: "There are more militants now than I've ever seen in my life." He added that the young Grand Rapids Negroes were "unsophisticated" when compared to those elsewhere.<sup>12</sup>

When extreme racial violence broke out in Detroit in July, 1967, the Grand Rapids police discovered no indication of local unrest. The Police, City Officials, and citizens in general were taken by surprise when the first violent disorders occurred at approximately 11:00 P.M., July 24, 1967--only twelve days after the Mayor, City Manager, and other public officials had denied positively that riots were possible in the city. The first reported incident involved a group of rock-throwing juveniles on South Division Avenue. The number and severity of the incidents increased throughout most of the night but there was clearly no organization or leadership directing the disturbances. The relative quiet on the morning of July 25th led the city authorities to believe that more destruction would take place later in the day.

<sup>11</sup>Exec. Com., "Off. Min.," July 12, 1967.

<sup>12</sup>Mr. Reginald Gatling, as quoted in the Grand Rapids Press, July 21, 1967.

Several civic leaders, white and Negro, attempted to assess the danger; Negro ministers, teachers, and community leaders talked to groups of youths and encouraged them to avoid any action which might lead to a breakdown of law and order. Mr. Sparrow reported that extreme emotional tension was prevalent and that his blue car, similar in color to police cars, had been the target of rock attacks earlier in the day.

Disturbances began again in the afternoon and increased in number and severity as darkness approached. A few stores were set on fire and looted but many of the home-made fire bombs failed to ignite since few of the youths knew how to construct an effective "Molotov Cocktail." The Mayor and City Commission, meeting in emergency session, called on the Governor to declare a "state of emergency" for the city. The adjacent communities of East Grand Rapids and Wyoming followed suit. Governor George Romney's proclamation prohibited the sale of firearms or intoxicating liquors, including wine and beer, and limited the sale of gas between the hours of six in the evening and six in the morning and to motor vehicles only. It imposed a city-wide curfew on all persons from 10:00 P.M. to 5:30 A.M.

On the first night of the disturbance 17 persons were injured, 54 arrested, property loss estimated at \$8,000, and 11 fires attributed to arson. On the night of July 26th, 44 people were injured and 213 were arrested. The City Coach Lines, Inc., ceased all bus runs at 8:25 P.M. Most of the rioters were young people between the ages of 14 and 24 who were imitating events



taking place simultaneously in Detroit according to the detailed report of Mr. Sparrow and Mr. Gobucki. Police Chief Johnson also stated that few adults were involved as was evidenced by lack of leadership among the rioters. Small groups of 5 or 6 young adults ranged throughout the ghetto throwing rocks through windows, starting fires in vacant homes or, when possible, breaking into and looting the stores along Wealthy, Jefferson, and Division Avenues.

The Sheldon Complex "Task Force" was active during the entire period of disturbance. This group of young, Negro athletes mingled with the people in the streets preventing small, splinter groups from being organized into a single force. At the same time they aided tremendously in keeping the actual damage to a minimum. One Task Force member was wounded when the police mistook him for one of the rioters. All reports made after the riots praised the preventative work of the Task Force.

The Mayor, HRC Staff, and many Negro and white community leaders met with some of the self-appointed leaders of the riot on Wednesday afternoon (July 26th) at the House of Styles barber shop located in the center of the riot area. At this time the training and experience of those individuals who had participated in the SRI program of Police-Community relations paid great dividends. The House of Styles confrontation produced a new Negro Leadership Council (ultimately renamed the Black Unity Council) composed of members of the older, established leaders of the Negro community as well as some of the young militants with whom prior

direct communications had been conspicuously lacking. All members of this new group agreed that their first successful action took place that night; only a few very minor incidents took place because of the combined efforts of the new group, the Task Force, Police, and the positive assurances of Mayor Sonneveldt that the City Commission would listen to the voice of the total Black community rather than the few, "white-selected" leaders of the ghetto. As a result of the quiet evening, Mayor Sonneveldt lifted the curfew on Thursday night and by the end of the week the city returned to nearly normal condition.<sup>13</sup>

The July disturbances did not follow traditional patterns of race riots. In spite of the high ethnic population concentrations, there was little Negro-white confrontation. To be sure, one of the immediate results of the disturbances was the extensive arming by individuals within ethnic groups and much talk about what would happen if "they" invaded "our" area. This ethnic, attitudinal prejudice continued for a considerable length of time but never erupted into physical contact or violence. Blacks did not invade the traditional ethnic areas nor did whites roam in the Negro ghetto. Rather, the disturbances were recognized as part of the social revolution against poverty, housing, education, and unemployment. Since the vast majority of the participants in the disturbances were young people, ranging in age from fourteen to twenty-four, there was no evidence of any specific objective

<sup>13</sup>Eugene Sparrow, "Report on the Disturbances," Doc. File No. 20; See also: Grand Rapids Press, July 26-31, 1967.



or opposition save general dissatisfaction. The older and more established Negroes did not support the uprisings but helped greatly in maintaining law and order. Less than four percent of the Negro population was involved. On the other hand, the majority of the Negro population believed the disturbances served a definite and dramatic purpose insofar as they drew the attention of the white population to the conditions existing within the ghetto. A second major development was that the younger element of the lower, social-economic population had its voice heard by the rest of the community, especially the older and more established Negro population.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Dr. Homer A. Jack, Director, Commission on Religion and Race, Unitarian Universalist Association, Aug. 21, 1967; Michigan Civil Rights Commission: Letter: "Mayors, City Commissions, and Other Heads of Local Government," Sept. 26, 1967, Doc. File No. 20.