

History Comes Alive!

~ Tales From the City Archives ~



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ON THE RADIO

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Unrest in Watts

Photos by Frank Manwarren, Larry Ford and G.E. Lyons, LAFD

One of the most difficult periods in our city's history has a significant anniversary coming up this summer. The violence in south Los Angeles – whether you call it a riot or an uprising – became a turning point in the identity of the then-third largest city in America in 1965. Urban violence had already occurred in New York; Birmingham, Ala.; Philadelphia; and other American cities over the preceding three years. Our turn came Wed., Aug. 11.

Watts is too big a subject for any one historical overview to get right. I will focus instead to create a timeline involving some archival resources and share a recent discovery of images mostly unseen since those six days and nights a half-century ago.

Several sources of information – the 1966 McCone Commission report ordered by Gov. Pat Brown and the LAPD Watts Riot data report – agree on the flashpoint that took place Aug. 11. An African American, Marquette Frye, who lived near the corner of Avalon Boulevard and 116th Street in Watts, was pulled over on the suspicion of driving while intoxicated by a white California Highway Patrol officer. The

ongoing debate. During the violence, LAFD photographers Frank Manwarren, Larry Ford and G.E. Lyons accompanied engine companies to document what was happening. Some images would end up in the department newsletter "The Grapevine." Most would be filed away and almost forgotten until they were discovered in 2014.

Some of the images show burned-out buildings and looted storefronts. Several aerial views are of a Shop-Rite store similar to the one where Fireman Tilson lost his life. We



An LAFD image, heretofore unseen publicly and now in the City Archives, of KJH reporters Andy West and Roger Aldi.



An LAFD image, heretofore unseen publicly and now in the City Archives, shows damage to an LAFD fire engine caused during the Watts unrest in 1965.

have images of an injured Firefighter being treated on the street. There is one photo of two KJH radio reporters – Andy West and Roger Aldi – hunkered down by their mobile unit. The negatives were part of a larger collection ranging from 1940 through 1965. Sadly, most were destroyed before being declared historically significant. Three boxes covering 1964 and 1965 were misplaced and are now stored in the archive vault. The Watts photos are listed as photo assignment #65685 and total more than 200 images that have been unseen for 50 years.

Our City's history continues to be written each and every day and should be documented by everyone. Once in a while, something turns up that brings a fresh perspective or fills in a gap in our collective memory. Riot or unrest, Watts still matters. I have no doubt that there will be continued rediscoveries from those troubled times in our libraries and museums. Seek them out. Here's a link for a video on the riots: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ty9MLEkSpAc

Get involved! I've mentioned the past of Watts from 1965. The future of Watts – 2015 and beyond – is taking shape at a two-day symposium starting with a Youth Day on Friday, Aug. 14, and a more general audience on Saturday, Aug. 15. Events both days are taking place at Charles Drew University of Medicine and Science at 1731 E. 120th St.

You can expect the movers and shakers – from the U.S. Congress, County Supervisors, Mayor's office, City Council and local leaders to discuss everything – from public safety, education, political conditions to arts and science in Watts – in a series of panel discussions that should be part of Watts' future history. This is a history lesson you and your family can take part in. Google "Watts Revolt: 50 Years Later Symposium" for more information.



An LAFD image, heretofore unseen publicly and now in the City Archives, of an injured LAFD Firefighter.

stop occurred in front of the family home where his mother became involved as Marquette was being arrested. The CHP officer called for backup.

As more of the neighborhood residents got involved, rumors started spreading that the responding officers were abusing bystanders. The LAPD had a reputation of suppressing minorities generally and civil rights efforts specifically at this time. Another source of information, a Los Angeles Fire Department centennial history, also mentioned that a power vacuum existed in Los Angeles. Mayor Sam Yorty was out of town, Chief of Police William H. Parker was home sick, and the Chief Engineer of the LAFD, Don Hibbard, was on vacation. The power vacuum extended further to Sacramento as Gov. Pat Brown was on vacation in Greece. So deputy Police Chief Harold Sullivan, Deputy Fire Chief Raymond Hill and Acting Gov. Glenn Anderson were being baptized by fire during that hot and humid mid-August.

During the first two days from Aug. 11, the violence was limited to a dozen or so small fires created by Molotov cocktails, according to the LAFD. By 9:50 p.m. Aug. 12, a response to several burning cars at Imperial Highway and Avalon Boulevard prompted rocks being thrown and some gunfire aimed at firefighters. The LAPD statistics recorded 10 people arrested on Aug. 11, 42 arrests on Aug. 12 and a staggering 531 arrests on Friday, Aug. 13.

A plan to provide California National Guard troops had been in place for more than a year before Watts. Chief Parker and Gov. Brown didn't want the same kind of chaos in L.A. that had come to Rochester, N.Y., Newark and Philadelphia. A local National Guard army in Long Beach was fully staffed that week in preparation for scheduled exercises in Santa Barbara County. Because of confusion over protocols between the City and Acting Gov. Anderson, it wasn't until late Friday that the 1,300 members of the Third Brigade were ordered to the streets of Watts.

The official LAPD statistics ending Aug. 20 recorded that riot arrests totaled 2,932 people – 2,747 of them African Americans. African-American men aged 18 – 22 were the largest group of arrestees at 714. The LAFD recorded 261 buildings – mostly retail businesses including supermarkets, liquor, furniture and clothing stores – had been destroyed. Damage estimates were in excess of \$45 million. 34 people died, including Firefighter Warren E. Tilson, when a wall collapsed at the Shop-Rite market at 120th Street and Central Avenue.

Watts is too big a topic to describe fairly and accurately. But I do have something different to contribute to the

Updates

- The April installment of "History Comes Alive!" mentioned an upcoming Supreme Court decision on *Patel vs. Los Angeles*, a question of whether LAPD had the right to search hotel registers without a warrant. That decision went against the City in a 5-4 ruling that affects not only LA but most cities in the nation with a similar policy.
- The July issue featured a short history of Parker Center. John Fisher emailed me with the following comments:

"You mentioned that the Golden State Freeway hadn't been completed yet. That's true, but the Golden State Freeway has always begun at the East Los Angeles interchange. The freeway near Disneyland was the old Santa Ana Freeway, then designated US 101 and now as Interstate 5. When Disneyland opened in July 1955, US 101 was a divided highway with a few traffic signals – or an expressway, according to old maps and photos. However, it was in the process of being converted to a full freeway on the same alignment by the construction of grade separations and ramps. One could get to Disneyland by taking the expressway.

"There is no mention of LAPD's headquarters on the second floor of City Hall in the late 1940s. An old-timer told me the Police resided there. Also, the 1950 film noir classic, *DOA*, with Edmond O'Brien, shows the police headquarters on that floor. Are you able to confirm that they resided there before occupying the PAB?"

"My recollection is that I don't think Chief Parker ever lobbied to have the building named after him. Because he died suddenly of a heart attack while still Chief, the shock of his death led to the sentiment to name the building after him."

I agree with John on his first point. On point two, I should have mentioned that the Police Chief had his office in City Hall on the second floor, and that included the Detective Bureau and other administrative functions. That was an oversight on my part. John is also correct on the third point.

Keep sending the emails, folks.