July: The Glenville Shootout and Urban Rebellion

The city of Cleveland has long been troubled by racism, segregation, and discrimination. There had been race-related rebellions in Cleveland in 1919, 1946, and 1966. They were all sparked by tension over jobs, housing, schools, and political power.

The Great Migration, the mass movement of 1.75 million African Americans from the rural south to the urban north from 1910 through about 1940, doubled the population of African Americans outside the south. Due to industrialization and World War I, black migrants were able to find factory work that paid much more than the agriculture work available to them in the south. The black population in Cleveland between 1950 and 1960 increased by sixty-three percent—from 150,000 to 250,000.

Unfortunately, racism and segregation in the north made it difficult for thousands of African Americans to find decent housing. Real estate practices, including steering and redlining, and meant that black Clevelanders were confined to the east side of Cleveland in the community of Glenville. As whites were moving further east to the suburbs, realtors snapped up housing and subdivided single family dwellings into smaller apartments and rented them to black residents. These properties were seldom maintained, and many of them were substandard.

The housing crisis was made worse by the busing of black students to white schools in order to comply with desegregation orders and the overcrowding of mostly black or all black schools. Anger in the African American community exploded when they found out that even though their children attended these schools, they could not participate in extracurricular activities, including sports.
Like many large northern cities, the ideology of Black Power as opposed to nonviolent direct action became popular. A leader in that movement was Fred Evans. His family had migrated from South Carolina to Cleveland, arriving in 1963. Evans was a decorated veteran of the Korean War. Evans was seriously injured in a building project and was discharged in 1952. He reenlisted two years later, but hit an officer, was court-martialed, and dishonorably discharged.

Evans had episodes of extreme rage that he was unable to control, and in 1960 he was convinced that he saw an Unidentified Flying Object (UFO). He decided to turn to astrology, but when his mentor was hospitalized, Evans pivoted to black nationalism. He changed his first name to Ahmed, joined the Black Nationalists of New Libya, and began dressing in African garb. Evans also opened a bookstore named the Afro Culture Shop which became a meeting place for other black nationalists. Evans predicted that America would suffer an extreme episode of violence on May 9, 1967. The day came and went, but nothing happened.

In July of 1968, several city officials met; they had been contacted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) who relayed to them that Evans and his group were collecting weapons and storing them in Evans’ home. The police were skeptical because the information came from an unreliable informant. They decided to try “roving surveillance” of his home. His home was targeted with manned surveillance a few days later. City officials tried talking with Evans, but it did no good. During the evening of July 23, the shootout began.

It was unclear who shot first, but by the end of the night, seven people had been killed and more than a dozen people were injured. In the early hours of July 24, angry residents began pelting rocks and taunting police. Mayor Louis Stokes, the first black mayor of a large northern city, notified Governor James Rhodes and said he feared a riot would ensue. Rhodes contacted
the Ohio Army National Guard and put them on alert. By midnight, Stokes reported that he could not maintain order and the Guard was activated. By July 27 the rebellion had burned itself out and the Guard was withdrawn. Normal city services to the area were reinstated.

Evans was indicted in August 1968 for the murders of several people, including two reporters. The jury found Evans guilty on all accounts in May 1969; this was based largely on circumstantial evidence. Evans, sentenced to the electric chair, was sent to Lucasville Correctional Facility. Evans appealed his sentence, and while the appeal was pending, the United States Supreme Court placed a moratorium on all death sentences in the country while they tried to determine if they were unconstitutional.

Evans’s sentence was eventually commuted to life in prison. He died of cancer in February 1978.

Further Reading

