

Race Riot At East St Louis - 1917

(from material by John Cobb and Elliott Rudwick)

http://www.eslarp.uiuc.edu/ibex/archive/nunes/esl%20history/race_riot.htm

America was built on the premise of optimism where human progress, combined with scientific advances and expansion, meant a better life for future generations. Unfortunately, there have been numerous instances where we have grievously fallen short of this credo. July 2, 1998 marked the 81st anniversary of the race riot that took place in East St. Louis back in 1917. What follows is a summary of information gleaned from Elliott Rudwick, John Cobb, the *Journal* and the *Post-Dispatch*.

Race relations have been a blot on our nation's history for a very long time. Slavery was introduced to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 and it took a Civil War to rid the nation of that infamous "peculiar institution." Despite adding civil rights amendments to the Constitution, Lynch Law, the KKK and Jim Crowism conspired to relegate African-Americans to a second class status for more than a hundred years after the war.

It is necessary to examine the historical context to understand why the East St. Louis riot happened. According to Allen Grimshaw's hoary monograph on race riots, there were eighteen major interracial disturbances in America between 1915 and 1919. Due to the creation of job opportunities from the outbreak of war in Europe, Negroes for the first time in history migrated north en masse from Dixie, looking for economic opportunity. Following on the heels of this exodus, they organized to challenge the concept of white supremacy and the established order. The result was bloody conflict.

Whites had not yet learned to accept Negroes as part of the urban landscape and resented this "invasion." East St. Louis at the time was known as the "Pittsburgh of the West" and was particularly appealing to those looking for work because of its booming economy and reputation for good-paying jobs.

Segregation was the established order of the day. Negroes were treated in separate wards of the two city hospitals and were tended by black physicians. At the plants and packing houses, they had their own washrooms, worked in segregated labor gangs and ate in an isolated section of the dining halls. Their presence in the city was confined to a ghetto in the south end of town.

As long as the Negroes constituted a small minority, they were not perceived as a threat. Race problems were for the South. But their numbers tripled between 1900 and 1914, and grew exponentially as war in Europe fueled the engines of industry in the United States.

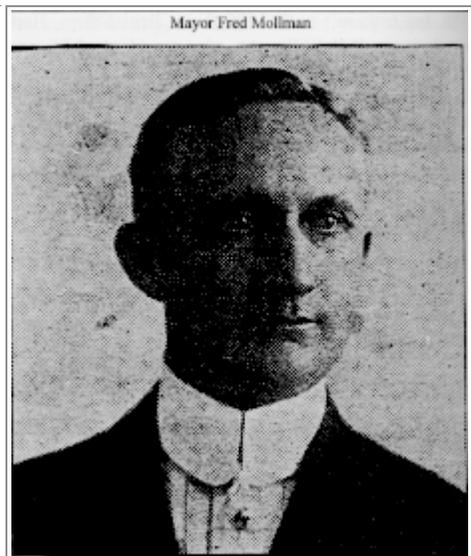
Local elections in 1916 were a harbinger of things to come. Democrats eked out a narrow victory over Republicans by hurling the charge that the Republicans were engaging in a secret plot. The G.O.P. allegedly was trying to insure their majority by colonizing East St. Louis with Negroes, most of whom would remain loyal to the party of Lincoln that gave them their freedom.

The situation was exacerbated when labor-management problems worsened.

At Aluminum Ore, the largest processor of bauxite in the world, some 1906 workers had recently formed a union which the company refused to recognize. Over at the packing houses in National

City, 37 union organizers were fired after an attempt to gain recognition. Corporate managers decided to import Negroes from the South in order to limit the future demands of white workers. Management at Swift Packing admitted two reasons for hiring about 40 Negroes at the plant. Race differences among employees decreased the possibility of unionization, and Negroes did not object to performing the low-paying, dirty, unpleasant tasks involved in fertilizer making and hog killing. The message was clear: if whites were unwilling to work under the proscribed rules and wages, Negroes could be brought in to take their place. The stage was set for an explosive situation.

At the height of the importation crisis, Mayor Mollman and the police charged newly-arrived migrants with responsibility for the perceived crime wave. Pawn shops and gun dealers soon did a booming business in the arms trade. It was a common belief among whites that the first thing Negroes did when they arrived in the city was to buy a gun. Rumors began to circulate that the gun-toting Negroes were plotting a race war. The city became a ticking time bomb.



A letter to the editor of the *East St. Louis Mail* illustrates prevailing white attitudes: "It is a noticeable fact that whenever revolvers form part of a display of a store window they at once attract attention from passing Negroes. The glitter of polished chrome metal revolver possesses a fascination for the colored sport that is hard to resist, and he has been known to make a series of small deposits with the dealer to obtain the coveted weapon. Our pawnbrokers can tell you that more pistols are pawned by colored men than by any other class. Their idea is that the gun serves the double purpose of defending them against their dreaded foe 'de wite man' and as a meal ticket when they get hungry. Negro gun toters are fanatical on the subject of self-protection and are constantly confiding to each other what they intend to do to the first 'bad man' who disturbs their peace. The way to stop about half of this mortal and terrifying practice is to penalize the sale of guns, especially to 'cullud folks.' "

Actually, in the East St. Louis frontierland of 1917, whites also beat a well-worn path to the pawnshops where window displays urged. "Buy a gun for Protection." Despite an arms embargo that was imposed against Negroes, some managed to smuggle weapons into the city. According to the *St. Louis Argus*, a colored newspaper, light skinned men shuttled back and forth carrying guns across the river. Since these people were light enough to pass for white they were not searched.

A rumor circulated among whites that the Negroes in the city were planning a massacre on the 4th of July. It was probably just hearsay, but the very thought of such an occurrence struck fear in of whites and set the stage for subsequent events. There was a preliminary riot on May 28th after a large crowd of union delegates had met with the Mayor and the City Council. As the group was leaving City Hall. they heard a rumor that a Negro had just shot a white man during a robbery.

When the story was passed along it was embellished to the point where one white woman had been insulted and two others shot.

"Take the guns away from the Negroes," the mob shouted as they marched to the downtown intersection of Broadway and Collinsville Avenue. No one was killed in the attacks but a number of Negroes were severely beaten.

In the days to follow, there were numerous instances where Negroes were attacked by white mobs for no other reason than racial hatred. On July 1st a Ford car driven by whites fired shots into Negro homes near 17th and Market. There was a similar incident along 10th and Bond. Later, the police received a report that armed Negroes were on the rampage. A police car was dispatched to 10th and Bond and met more than 200 Negroes, many of them armed, who without a word of warning opened fire. Samuel Coppedge, one of the detectives was killed instantly and the other, Frank Wadley, died the following day.



A newspaper account of the attack inflamed passions. This action was prima facie evidence East St. Louisans needed to prove that Negroes were mobilizing for a massacre. On the morning of July 2nd, there was a protest meeting at the Labor Temple at 4th and Collinsville Avenue. Various speakers told the audience to start arming themselves. After the meeting, the group marched in military fashion toward Broadway. Mayor Mollman knew that the police wouldn't cooperate in trying to control the mobs, but during the previous night he had telephoned the National Guard headquarters in Springfield and mistakenly believed that six militia companies would arrive that next day. The mob began attacking and shooting every Negro they encountered with little regard for age or sex. Streetcars were stopped and Negroes were pulled off. Although the assaulting groups contained only about 25 people, they were encouraged by large crowds that had gathered on the streets. Near 3rd and Broadway, white prostitutes from the notorious "Valley" got into the act and battered fleeing colored women.

Carlos Hurd, a reporter for the *Post-Dispatch*, described the fury of these white women. "I saw Negro women begging for mercy and pleading that they had harmed no one, set upon by white women of the baser sort, who laughed and answered the coarse sallies of men as they beat the Negresses' face and breasts with fists, stones and sticks. One of these furies flung herself at a militiaman who was trying to protect a Negress, and wrestled him for his bayoneted gun, while other women attacked the refugee."

Illinois National Guard at Rock High School, called in after the July 2 riot



By afternoon the crowd invaded the area south of Broadway shouting that they planned to avenge the two detectives who were killed. The homes at Third and Brady and Third and Railroad were set on fire. Negroes who attempted to escape the flames were picked off one at a time. Another Negro was lynched from a telephone pole. Encouraged by mobs who shouted, "Burn 'em out." the rioters destroyed over 200 homes. The Illinois National Guard was called to the scene but the militia did not deal firmly with rioters and proved to be largely ineffective.

Violence fed upon itself and in the Black Valley. small gangs lighted torches, joking while waiting for Negroes to flee from the furnaces which had been their homes. When an ambulance arrived to take one man to the hospital, rioters warned. "If you pick up that skunk, we'll kill you too." Another Negro was captured and someone shouted, "We're going to lynch the dog--shooting is too good for him." When more militia and night arrived the rioting slowed down but was not yet over. The square block at Eighth and Broadway was burned to an ash heap.

Flames from fires set by rioters light the evening sky of East St. Louis



Many Negroes owed their lives to the alarm sent by True Light Baptist Church which rang its bell to indicate that rampaging whites were coming. Sympathetic whites hid Negroes in their basements while flames illuminated the night sky. Hundreds of refugees were brought to the city hall auditorium.

At midnight, the South End was bright red. An observer from Signal Hill said that the flames shot so high in the air that they were reflected by Pittsburg Lake which looked like a sheet of fire. The conflagration ultimately did an estimated half million dollars in damage.

The next day, when it had ended, reports in the newspapers said that over 200 people had been killed, but the official count was 39 Negroes and nine whites. (Incredibly, the WPA Guide to Illinois, written during the Depression, listed the

number of Negroes killed at 100.) This figure too may be erroneous because it can be presumed that some of the bodies were never found. On July 4, several mutilated "floaters" were discovered in Cahokia Creek. It was estimated that up to seven thousand Negroes fled to St. Louis, many of which never returned.

In trials that were held afterwards, twelve Negroes (charged with murder) went to prison for the deaths of detectives Samuel Coppedge and Frank Wadley. Nine whites (charged with homicide) were sent to the penitentiary and forty-one whites were found guilty of misdemeanors. Twenty-seven paid small fines and fourteen received short terms in the county jail.

In November a Senate-House congressional committee held four weeks of hearings in East St. Louis and took nearly 5,000 pages of testimony. No indictments or courts martial resulted from the proceedings. The committee prepared a report which was a stinging rebuke of the community's social and business milieu which made the riot possible.

No other riot in American history claimed the lives of more African-Americans than the one that raged in East St. Louis during that hot summer day in 1917. It was a stain on the fabric of the city's character that would take a long time to fade. It probably explains why East St. Louis, after reaching a population of roughly 75,000 in 1920, experienced little demographic growth afterwards. Just as the murder of Elijah Lovejoy, the abolitionist newspaper editor in Alton, stifled growth in that city, a similar dark cloud hung over East St. Louis from the notoriety of the race riot.

Local business leaders were so disgusted by the melee that a number of significant changes were made. The mayoralty system was replaced with a city commission form of government so that the power of the mayor's office would be shared. A youth recreation program was started by the YMCA.



The Chamber of Commerce supported a social welfare program that directly benefited Negroes, and a commitment was made to improve housing for the beleaguered minority. Finally, conditions were improved with the creation of an Urban League which gave blacks a voice in community affairs.

When the issue of integrating the city schools in the late '40s was debated, many opposed the idea and said it would lead to another riot. Waddell Brooks became the first Negro to attend East Side high; there was a boycott by some students, but, to the credit of the city, there was no riot.