

Turbulent times: A Canadian perspective on the Detroit riot

The following article is a summary of author and CBC radio personality Herb Colling's new book, *Turning Point - The Detroit Riot of 1967 from a Canadian Perspective*.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Detroit riot, a turbulent time in America's history. It all started on Sunday, July 23, 1967. It was one of the worst riots in the U.S., as an all-white police force raided a blind pig that was frequented by Blacks on Clairmount Street. Eighty-two people were on their way to jail when a crowd gathered and the riot broke out. After six days of fire and rage, 43 people had died. Arson and looting took their toll on the city.

That, in a nutshell, is what the Detroit riot is all about. It's a story that has been well documented. But, the story that hasn't been told, until now, is how people from Essex County reacted to the riot: how they were caught in it, how they volunteered to help when it was needed most, how the riot affected Windsor and area, and how our attitudes toward Detroit changed.

Turning Points - The Detroit Riot of 1967 from a

Canadian Perspective is a book about the Detroit riot. It details those issues in an appropriate way, since Windsor is close to Detroit: the largest Canadian city opposite the largest American city on the longest undefended international border in the world.

Windsor is connected to Detroit by a railway tunnel, a vehicular tunnel, the Ambassador Bridge, and by its psyche. We work and play in Detroit, just as many Americans work and play in Windsor. Even Windsor's radio station - CKLW, known as the Big Eight - beamed its signal across the border and was actually more American than Canadian. That's why Windsorites watched in shock as Detroit burned in 1967.

When the border was restricted, Canadians lined the waterfront on the Canadian side. With the safety of the river between them, they sat in lawn chairs or on the hoods of their cars in a silent vigil. They listened to the sound of gunfire and sirens, and



watched the fires and tracer bullets streak across the night sky. They pointed to each new outbreak, as if they were watching a sporting event, or as if they had front-row seats at the theatre.

It was a morbid fascination: a mixture of horror and excitement and disbelief. And yet, as always, there was a smugness, the relief, and suppressed happiness that Canadians were safe and separated by the Detroit River. That contrast of peace and turmoil helped us realize the distinction, the difference, of what it meant to be Canadian: the difference in our gun laws, our racial and slave histories, our psyches. That is the recurring, developing, and underlying theme of

Turning Points.

As the riot progressed, hotel rooms and marinas on the Canadian side filled up with Americans who fled their own country. Bewildered by the riot, and what it meant for their city, some decided to live in Canada permanently, fed up with racism and poverty in Detroit.

Many American Blacks came over to stay at the Belle River Surf Club just outside Windsor. Joe Louis, the famous boxer, ran the place, as a blacks-only resort, a reaction to the whites-only bars in Detroit. This influx of American Blacks provided an interesting insight into the riot, and our perceptions of racism in Canada. A local gas station attendant was so frustrated by directing Blacks to the Surf Club on the shores of Lake St. Clair that he eventually sent them off into the county in the wrong direction. It was a prime example of our subtle form of Canadian racism.

Many Canadians were caught in the riot. They were in Detroit at their favourite bar or at a friend's house. In some cases, they were stuck there until they could be taken out in armed convoys. Pedestrians as looters streamed by, or bullets whizzed overhead.

Several Canadian teachers and nurses talked their way over the border to go to their jobs in Detroit. They provided essential services, and hoped that their presence would calm things down. In one case, a Canadian teacher's students

saw her to her car at night to make sure that nothing happened to her. Canadian nurses at the hospital crawled past the windows, or smoked cigarettes in closets to avoid snipers. Eating their lunch on the roof one day, the staff watched as a helicopter hovered overhead and warned them to, "clear the

roof or we'll shoot." Emergency rooms were already full of shooting victims.

Several Canadians received citations for bravery, and for the performance of their duty above-and-beyond the call. Bernice Carlan, a Canadian technologist with the American Red Cross, was awarded a citation for collecting extra amounts of much-needed blood. Windsor police constable Bill Jackson was awarded a citation - the only one of its kind given to a Canadian - for his work fingerprinting cadavers in the morgue and identifying shooting victims.

Jackson provided an extra pair of hands to the Detroit police because they helped train him in the field of fingerprint technology. He volunteered in his off-hours, after working a full-shift for the Windsor police. His efforts allowed overworked Detroit cops to catch some shut-eye at their desks as they worked 'round-the-clock.

Almost 100 Windsor firefighters went over to help the beleaguered Detroit firemen who were forced to battle hundreds of fires blazing out of control. It was in repayment of a 118-year-old debt because, in 1849, Detroit firefighters came to Windsor by ferry to help stop a fire that threatened to destroy the whole of our downtown business district. The town was so grateful that it provided the tired and grimy firefighters with food, cigars and a silver

speaking trumpet that became a symbol of our mutual support and respect.

To repay the debt, in 1967, Windsor firefighters spent eight 8-hour shifts in Detroit in combination with their regular duties on the Canadian side of the border. They battled over 200 fires with three firefighters suffering minor injuries. They also miraculously escaped a falling wall that threatened to engulf one of the fire trucks in flame. As one firefighter said, it was like working in no-man's land in a war zone where anarchy reigned.

Windsor fire chief Harold Coxon was on-scene when Detroit fireman John Ashby was electrocuted. He came in contact with a high-voltage wire. His skull was so hot it seared to his metal helmet. Coxon provided artificial respiration until the young firefighter could be transferred to hospital. When Ashby died a week later, Coxon attended the funeral to say a quiet farewell.

For Coxon's heroic efforts, a Detroit fire station was named in his honour, and the silver trumpet, which dates back to the conflagration of 1849, was given back to Windsor firefighters by a grateful city of Detroit. The exchange took place in a symbolic ceremony at the Canada/U.S. border in the middle of the Ambassador Bridge.

Those are the types of stories chronicled in *Turning Points, The Detroit Riot of 1967 from a Canadian Perspective*. The book was written by local author and CBC announcer/reporter Herb Colling. It's available at some local book stores, and from the author at a new internet site: www.herbcolling.com.

For many Canadians, who lived through the riot, the perception of Detroit has changed. The book explores what happened, what changed, how it changed, and why, for people on both sides of the border.



On the weekend of Jan. 26, the Cottam Scouts competed at the 44th annual Owen Sound Winter Campout. About 500 people attended from as far away as Columbus, Ohio. For the second year running, the Cottam Scouts successfully defended the Overall Best Campers Award, as well as winning the Best Rescue Sled and Orienteering awards. Pictured front row, left to right: Corey Meloche, Vince Taylor, Tyler Plant, Mitchell Demers, Michael Zuiderveen, Andrew Fodor. Back row: Scouter Dave Shuttleworth, Connor MacDonald, Shawn Phaneuf, Scouter in training Simon Azzopardi and Scouter Emmanuel Azzopardi. Absent: Zach LaChance, Alex Boer. Great work Scouts!

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