**Turbulent times: A Canadian perspective on the Detroit riot**

The following article is a summary of a book by author Zach LaChance, titled *Turning Points: A Canadian perspective on the Detroit riot*.

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 Clarmount 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.

It was a morbid fascination: a mixture of horror and excitement and disbelief. And yet, 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 perception of Detroit as a prime example of our subtle form of Canadian racism.

Many Americans 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.

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 ducked into store fronts 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 helped 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, and smoked cigarettes in closets to avoid suspicion. 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 for “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 him train in the field of fingerprint technology. 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 firefighters 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 firemen with food, cigars and a silver speaking trumpet that became a symbol of our mutual support and respect.

By the end of the month 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 flames. One firefighter said, it was like working in no-man’s-land in a war zone where anarchy reigned.

There were 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 badly crushed by 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 First World War, was given back to Windsor firefighters by a grateful city of Detroit. The exchange took place in a symbolic ceremony at the Canadian/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 by a Canadian perspective.* The book was written by local author and CBC announce/repoter Herb Colling.


Why 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.