

The Chicago Riot, from the Chicago Defender, August 2, Page 1 (1919)

During the summer of 1919 major race riots broke out all over the country. The riot in Chicago, which lasted for four days, left thirty-eight people dead and hundreds injured and/or homeless. Racial tensions had been building throughout World War I as southern blacks moved north, especially to cities like Chicago, searching for jobs and an opportunity for better lives. As black soldiers returned from the war to face continuing discrimination and white soldiers returned to displace war workers, housing and job shortages fueled public struggles that resulted in racial violence. The bloody riots of 1919 helped fuel a growing awareness of the depth of racial strife in the United States as well as a new determination on the part of many African Americans to increase their efforts to gain racial equality. Other headlines for August 2 included "Riot Sweeps Chicago"; "Gun Battles and Fighting in Streets Keep the City in an Uproar"; "4,000 Troops in Armory Ready to Patrol City"; and "Scores are Killed."

Note: The Chicago Defender was one of the most influential African American newspapers at the time this article was written.

The refusal of Policeman Daniel Callahan (white) . . . to arrest George Stuber (white) . . . last Sunday afternoon after the latter had knocked Eugene Williams, age 13 . . . from a raft as he was floating down Lake Michigan at Twenty-ninth street, fanned into action one of the worst race riots in the history of Illinois. Officer Callahan, it is charged, not only refused to make an arrest, but kept expert swimmers from reaching Williams. The news of Callahan's negligence reached the bathers at the Twenty-sixth street beach and a mob of fifty men marched to Twenty-ninth street to avenge the death of the boy. The patrolman's action so enraged the bathers that they pounced upon Callahan and commenced to pommel him. Callahan was chased to a drug store, where he summoned help. . . .

The whites on the beach took the policeman's part and a battle royal was waging in a few minutes. . . .

The news of Williams' death spread like wildfire, and about 8 o'clock Sunday night the whole South Side was in an uproar. Trolleys were pulled from the street cars in the vicinity of Thirty-fifth and State streets, and every white face was taken from the cars and severely beaten. Martin Webb (white) . . . had his head pommelled to a jelly when he fell in the hands of the rioters. Automobiles were stopped and the occupants taken out and beaten with sticks. All the autos were damaged beyond repair and left in the middle of the streets. Webb was carried to a hospital, where he died later in the night.

To quell the riot Sunday night 500 patrolmen invaded the district and remained until the early morning hours. At 12 o'clock midnight the rioters murdered a white peddler. . . .

Sunday night only proved a starter to the real fracas. Two colored men on their way to work at the stock yards were killed by the whites 6 o'clock Monday morning. . . . Pistols were flashed and men made threats to invade the stock yards district where the whites were attacking every black face that would show up. Stores were closed and motion picture houses nailed up their doors. All women and children retired from the streets,

leaving the mob to work at free will. . . .

Groups of colored men gathered on the streets and discussed the situation and planned the night's attack. The word was passed around to clean the district of the whites for revenge. As the fever of race antagonism gained ground more fuel was added to the flame when workers from the stock yards came with stories of horrible attacks made by the whites upon colored women. These stories so enraged the crowd that they defied all policemen and beat white men up upon their appearance. . . .

The situation reached such a point that circulars pleading for order were distributed in the streets. The policemen had matters under control until 6 o'clock. . . . News flooded the South Side district that the whites on Wentworth avenue were collecting to invade State street. Over 500 policemen, mounted and on foot, were stationed at 31st street and 35th street. At the corner of 35th and State streets several colored men exhibited hand grenades preparing for the attack. An order was given to the police to shoot to kill any person who endeavored to start a disturbance, white or black. . . .

When night set in every store, poolroom, ice cream stand, and all business catering to the public was ordered closed. No crowds gathered on corners. Everything was seemingly quiet until 9:15 o'clock. A crowd of automobiles loaded with white men wheeled around the corner at 26th and State streets carrying army rifles and an unlimited supply of ammunition. Speeding down the street at the rate of fifty miles an hour the occupants of these machines fired right and left. The autos slowed down at 37th street on State to fire into a crowd. The motorcycle cops picked up the trail at 35th street and closed in on the white rioters. . . . The car stopped at 39th street; three of the occupants of the car were dead and two others were seriously wounded.

Five minutes after this another car swung right in behind the first fatal car and started firing right and left. The policemen at 35th street, being warned of this attack, swung the patrol wagons across the street and blocked the path of the death car. A fusillade of shots greeted the autoists. Four were killed. Another death car followed this one. The streets were clear and the police were ready to stop the rioters. . . . The officers turned their automatics on this car and killed three.

Several of the wounded were spirited to Provident hospital for treatment. When the colored men heard of this they made for the hospital and threatened to batter the doors to get the whites. It was here that Detective Sergeant Middleton was shot. His wound was not serious. The trouble between the races has been brewing for months. Assaults in parks on colored men and the trouble at the beaches kindled the fire. . . .

Document Analysis

How would you categorize the description of the riot? Is it balanced reporting, or does it reflect a particular bias?

Chicago's riot was only one of about twenty-five that took place during the summer of 1919. Where do you think the others occurred? Conduct an Internet search on

“Red Summer,” and see if you’re right.
The last paragraph asserts that “trouble between the races has been brewing for months.”
Why were the reasons for this “trouble”? What steps, if any, could the city have taken to
avoid the violence that broke out?