

# Omaha, 1968— the watched pot begins to boil

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Omaha is plain, broad-shouldered, traditional. In many ways it lags carefully behind the avant-garde ways of the cities on either coast. But like every large city in America, Omaha is on the verge of being splintered by racial strife. Nebraskan editors and photographers spent several days moving through the city, from the near north side to city hall and back, gathering the moods, impressions, and predictions of the men who will decide the city's future.

by Jack Todd  
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Omaha

As the polarization of the races continues, it would appear that a seasonal division is taking place. Winter is becoming whitey's time, and the long hot summers are becoming the exclusive property of the American Negro.

Sandwiched between the white man's winter and the black man's summer is the restless interlude of spring. While residents of such major trouble spots as Detroit were still buying guns and muttering about the summer ahead, Omaha rocked with the season's first outbreak of major racial violence. The watched pot had begun to boil.

The master chef who whipped up this disturbance was ex-Governor George Wallace of Alabama. On Sunday, March 3, Wallace stepped off his plane at Eppley Airport and told reporters, "People are going to be surprised tomorrow night."

Wallace should win the Pulitzer Prize for understatement. By the time his little surprise had run its course, it had resulted in one death, 19 injuries, nine arrests and more than 65 incidents of vandalism.

George Wallace was not only the spark that set off this disturbance. He was also the embodiment of what the President's Riot Commission termed the underlying cause of all last summer's riots: white racism. Perhaps the second great cause of the Omaha riots was the equal and opposite reaction to the first: black racism. As Mayor L. V. Sorenson of Omaha indicated, black racism was perhaps the one glaring omission of the Riot Commission's report. In the social make-up of Omaha, black racism has not been omitted.

When Wallace came to Omaha, black and white racism met head-on. This time it was merely a skirmish in a much larger war, but it was sufficient to indicate some of the failures of the alphabet soup of anti-poverty agencies that have sprung up in the past decade to combat racial tension in the city. After the disturbances had dwindled to an uneasy peace the afternoon of Wednesday, March 5, leaders on both sides began a major reassessment of their policies, past and present. Their conclusions are as different as the factions they represent.

**"I try to tell them they're taking from the hands of the poor what little power they have. But they don't hear. They don't hear." — Father John O. McCaslin on the transfer of the Greater Omaha Community Action (GOCA) agency to city control.**

Father John McCaslin of the Holy Family Church in Omaha is moderately tall, thin, and handsome. He is white. On the night of the Wallace convention he wore a Black Power sweatshirt and accompanied the protestors to the Civic Auditorium. The youths with McCaslin became increasingly vehement in their protests until they and the Wallace supporters clashed in a chair-throwing, head-crunching melee. Neither McCaslin nor Rev. Robert Burns of Creighton University took part in nor encouraged the violence. Both priests were charged with disrupting a public meeting.

McCaslin is one of the few whites who is accepted on the near north side. As the most outspoken advocate of Negro political power, he is a continual thorn in the side of city hall.

At present McCaslin has two crusades underway against the city. One is to prevent the takeover of GOCA by city administrators. GOCA is an Office of Economic Opportunity project, and is being taken over by the city in compliance with a federal order. The congressional Green amendment requires that city administrators take over these agencies in order to "give the poor a greater active part in the administration of their program."

Someone forgot to ask the poor what they wanted before the Green amendment was passed, says Father McCaslin. GOCA has had a long uphill battle in gaining the confidence of the poor since it came to Omaha. GOCA, the March riot notwithstanding, has finally begun to relate to ghetto residents in the estimation of many of Omaha's leaders.

Father McCaslin believes all that will come to an end if the city takes over. For a variety of reasons, the city administrators have come to be regarded among the Negro poor as the number one enemy. McCaslin and other militant leaders have attempted to encourage this. Their rationale is that the spirit of the Negro has been so badly kicked around by 300 years of white domination that some enemy must be designated, and some "gut issue" picked to give the ghetto poor a rallying point.

One such issue is the location of the Sanitation Department's garbage trucks. The trucks are now quartered in the residential area of the near north side. Before the mayor asked the company to move the trucks, McCaslin pinpointed this as a typical problem, a typical point at which the people — "MY people," he calls them —

can be rallied.

"We'll move those trucks if we have to chain ourselves to the gates so they can't get in," McCaslin said. Apparently, someone believed him.

**"Omaha lags in black nationalism by four or five years. Before blacks can deal on equal terms with the white society they must have . . . black power." — Father McCaslin.**

The "Black Power" sign stencilled on Father McCaslin's sweatshirt the night of the Wallace convention obviously meant something very different than it means to most Americans.

McCaslin's concept of black power is social, political and economic bargaining power. It is the negro bloc vote, the successful Negro businessman. It is a way of giving boots to the Negro poor so that they can begin pulling themselves up by the bootstraps. It is becoming first the equivalent and then the equal, of the white man.

McCaslin differs with those who say unequivocally that militance is not a means to the ends he seeks. McCaslin cited the example of Father James Groppi's open housing marches in Milwaukee last year as a means of letting off steam and banking the fires to prevent outbreaks such as the one in Detroit.

**"This is the best way I know to call attention to the fires,"** McCaslin said.

The dilemma of those assigned to putting out the fires is almost larger than life.

Walk down North 24th street in Omaha, talk to housewives in project apartments, eat in Negro cafes. The urgency, hopelessness and despair of the Negro boils through surface hostility.

Men stripped of their pride by years of low-paying menial jobs or unemployment look at white intruders carefully, glare for a split second, and turn away.

A white salvation army worker starts to enter a Negro barbershop. One of the barbers springs to bar her way. "We don't want you in here."

Four Negro men stand in an alley, pass a pint of whiskey around until it's empty, and move on down the street laughing.

You lose your individuality on Omaha's near north side. You have nothing to distinguish you but color. You are black or white. It is not comfortable to be white.

But in Omaha there is hope. The symbol for hope appears in a variety of places—the lettering on a recreation center sign, the pictures in innumerable buildings. Justifiably or otherwise, the symbol is John F. Kennedy. In Ernie Chamber's barber shop his picture occupies a place of honor next to that of Malcolm X.

Hope has also translated itself into a variety of action agencies. In the estimation of most of the city's leaders, the most promising of these at present is GOCA's stepchild, the OIC or Opportunities Industrialization Center.

The OIC is staffed with many Negroes who are themselves products of the ghetto, including Barry Goodlett, the Executive Director. The OIC in Omaha has begun a surprisingly well-accepted, concrete program designed to give the Negro precisely the kind of "Black Power" that Father McCaslin seeks.

The dropout rate at the OIC is amazingly low. At present 75% of those who enroll in OIC's clerical training programs graduate, a much higher percentage than any other such job-training programs have been able to maintain.

The reason for OIC's remarkable success is apparently its ability to relate to the Negro. The agency has no ethnic barriers, but it is very successful in developing an active black consciousness among its trainees. Within the next three months OIC leaders hope to expand their program to include training in sheet metal work, machine tool operations, welding, electronics and other fields.

**"To see black people helping black people does more for the ghetto than anything, but when these people see fat-bellied politicians trying to get into the picture when they weren't interested before, it makes people angry. Our people aren't stupid enough to let it happen." — Barry Goodlett**

Goodlett's militancy is reflected by his lieutenants. Clarence Brisco, a mild-mannered, stoop-shouldered counselor, and Wayne Harris, the job placement director of the OIC, organized groups of "interested citizens" to patrol the streets after the Wallace convention to prevent Negro youths from getting into trouble.

The two agree for the most part on the position of the Negro in a white-dominated society, but differ fundamentally on a point that separates many Negroes. Brisco feels that something must be done, and done

quickly, to prevent the further polarization of the races. To Wayne Harris, there is only one way the Negro can survive — in a completely separate society.

"There is only one way to go in the next couple of years," Harris says. "We are at a crossroads. The only survival for the Negro is by separation."

Harris sneers at the attempts of white liberals to help the Negro. "We don't need those 'liberals' out here. Why aren't they up on the west side educating those crackers, telling them what's going on down here?"

The grievances Harris and Brisco express parallel the major problems of the Negro outlined in the President's Riot Commission report. Over and over, the problems of housing discrimination, under or unemployment and police tactics enter the discussion.

Open housing is a very sore spot in Omaha. According to one estimate, only about 80 Negro families live outside the ghetto area on Omaha's near north side. For those who have escaped the ghetto area, the road out has been a difficult one.

Housing discrimination is one of the more subtle forms of discrimination, however, and it is unlikely that housing can ever become a rallying point for a riot. Police practices and the question of police brutality, however, present a very different problem.

The night after the Wallace convention, a crowd of about 50 persons tore off the metal bars protecting the windows of the Crosstown Loan Company at 1819 North 24th Street. The shop owner hired Patrolman James Abbott of the Omaha Police force to protect the shop during his off-duty hours.

At about 2:30 Tuesday morning, Abbott saw a Negro youth crawling through a window into a display area of the shop. Abbott ordered the youth to halt. The boy failed to comply. Abbott fired once with his 12-gauge riot gun, killing the boy.

The youth, 16-year-old Howard L. Stevenson, had participated in a summer camping program designed to improve police-community relations. So had Patrolman Abbott.

**"The second (problem) is the justification for the use of deadly force against crimes like looting. There is a question whether bullets are the correct response to offenses of this sort against property. Major General George Gelston (of the National Guard) told the Commission: 'I am not going to order a man killed for stealing a six-pack of beer or a television set.'" — U.S. Riot Commission Report.**

More than 600 Negroes, most of them under 20, crammed the Robinson's Memorial church in Omaha for the funeral of Howard Stevenson. Nearly a hundred more stood outside the church. Grief-stricken young Negroes wavered between bitterness and tears.

Bishop B. T. McDaniel said in performing the services: "This shooting of young people by trigger-happy policemen must stop. Who knows whose son may be next."

Howard Stevenson had dropped out of Technical High School a month before he died. His background had not been heroic, his problems and shortcomings typical of the ghetto youth. To young Negroes on Omaha's near north side, he is now a martyr.

City officials are now faced with a problem in triplicate. First is the garbage truck squabble, which Mayor Sorenson is attempting to solve. Second is the wide-spread resentment among Negro militants over the change in GOCA's administration. The last and most volatile problem involves the death of Stevenson. Militants are dissatisfied with the city's investigation; white groups are unhappy with the mayor for ordering an investigation of the case in the first place.

The office of the man who is ultimately responsible for resolving these problems is quiet, spacious, removed. The sounds of hammering that cut into the interviews at the OIC are absent, as is the old wino who hovered outside Father McCaslin's door.

The chief concern of the man who sits in the mayor's office is that the recent violence in the cities will make communication between the white and Negro communities impossible, eliminating all possibilities of progress.

To prevent a communications gap, Mayor Sorenson said he is seeking to achieve a "meaningful dialogue" between white and Negro leaders.

In many areas it appears that Sorenson and his aides are knocking themselves out to prove the Chamber of Commerce statement: "Omaha Can Do." Sorenson promised that jobs will be found for the 1500 men (50% of them Negro) who will be laid off in June when the Armour Packing plant closes. Sorenson appears genuinely concerned with implementing the Omaha Housing Code and getting the Unicameral to pass an Open Housing law. The obstacles in both areas are considerable.

Sorenson pointed out that many people in the ghetto area want better housing, but will not move from their neighborhood to housing which is available in other areas of the city. "They don't want to leave their old neighborhood," he says, "and you can't blame them."

As long as Negroes remain almost exclusively on the near north side, Omaha will have a ghetto. Apparently the administration faces a long hard fight before a

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photo by Mike Hayman

**"Men who've lost their pride—turn to women, crime, or just alcohol for their salvation." — Father John McCaslin**

sufficient number of Negro families can be moved into other areas of the city to break up the ghetto and erase all the problems which arise from a strict division of neighborhoods. Breaking up a ghetto is a long term project. Summer is less than three months away.

**"The duty of the police . . . is to use legal force to overcome illegal force. Some people in our community . . . under the pretense of attempting to advance civil rights, promote disorder and intolerance for the rights of others. They must share the responsibility for what occurred." — L. K. Smith, Omaha Public Safety Director.**

In 1966, 2,056 guns were registered in Omaha. In 1967, registrations climbed to 3,019. Only guns with a barrel shorter than 16 inches must be registered, so the figures do not include shot-guns, rifles, or anti-tank guns. Even so, the increase is far more than can be explained by population increases.

L. K. Smith is charged with protecting the safety of the Omaha public. Under his administration, the Police Department has undertaken a fairly extensive program to improve police-community relations. The department is involved with a variety of programs, sponsoring softball and basketball leagues, and holding a summer camping program funded through GOCA. Like other leaders, Smith indicated his department is taking a "new look" at their present policies and programs as a result of the Wallace disturbance.

Before existing programs can take effect in the cities, Smith says, there must be a fundamental change in attitudes. Many militant leaders are now attempting to justify the riot that took place early this month, according to Smith.

"The result of this justification is that many impressionable young people involved in the disturbance are led to approve their own acts," Smith said. "There is no question of Wallace's right to come here and hold his convention," Smith added.

In Smith's estimation the police handled the riot very well. "Their job is to restore order," he said. "They discharged their function."

In the March riot, police shared responsibility for restoring order with school administrators. Most of the violence on Tuesday and Wednesday centered around Horace Mann Junior High, and Technical, North and Central High schools. Superintendent Owen A. Knutzen was at Mann Junior High when a rock-throwing, shoving, name-calling match broke out.

Knutzen met reporters a week after the riot in the stately library of the appropriately-named "castle," headquarters of the Omaha school system.

Knutzen is withholding most of what he knows about the disturbances to publish in his own book. He speaks of "mob dynamics" and the unique social position of the press. While he talks, his public relations assistant, Barney Geiger, hops around behind him repeating over and over, "He was there when it happened, he was there when it happened."

**"Your superintendent being constantly in the area of turmoil devoted his efforts to working with members of the staff, students and citizens who were making a constructive effort to establish a normal situation . . . While in these buildings . . . your superintendent was able to observe and gain a complete insight and understanding of the dynamics of mob activity." — public relations release from Owen Knutzen.**

There are many in Omaha who feel that the time is coming when more than an understanding of mob dynamics will be required to maintain a semblance of peace in the city. To some, the efforts of the various agencies cover an area a mile wide and an inch deep. In the process, they fail to dispel the fears and hatreds of people on both sides.

You can drive down North 24th street

a dozen times without noticing the offices of GOCA or the OIC. You see the bars, the endless small groups of Negroes standing or milling around, the boarded-up windows of small shops and drugstores.

At times even the hatred is visible. It hangs in the air or darts like a flash of lightning from black to white, from poor to rich. Nowhere is it more visible, more oppressive, than in the Spencer Street Barber Shop.

The barber shop at Spencer Street rarely goes by that name. Though Ernie Chambers has the third chair in the shop, he has given it his name. The shop is squeezed into a group of buildings on North 24th. You have to look twice to see it. Half of the rather small picture window in front is plywood, where a shotgun blast ripped through shortly after the riot.

Inside the walls are covered with signs, clippings, cartoons and pictures; most of them urging black power or depicting a southern sheriff turning his dogs loose on helpless Negroes.

On the back wall of the shop a picture of John F. Kennedy hangs between portraits of Malcolm X and Floyd Patterson. The barbers are not particularly hostile, but no white man can sit in the shop without being painfully conscious of his color. Chambers is both the most militant and the most well-known Negro in Omaha.

His view of the disturbance at the Wallace convention emphasizes many of the problems of communication that exist between city hall and the militant Negro. The Muslim organ Muhammad Speaks quotes Chambers thus: "They hit any Black person they saw on the main floor," Chambers related, "then hit some nuns and priests who had joined the demonstrators. Then the white men in the audience started hitting young Black men and women with chairs. The TV later showed a Black girl knocked down by a white member of the audience. A nearby cop did nothing."

"If a Black man tried to come to the aid of a Negro woman, he was smashed from all directions until he could help no one. Still the police did nothing. The cops had removed their name plates and badges so they could not be identified."

The interpretation Chambers gives, if not a distortion, is certainly very different from the official view. The difference indicates one of the dangers inherent in any clash between the police and the Negro — the white population gets one interpretation, the Negro another. The result, inevitably, is polarization.

**"Black people of Omaha are reaching the end of their patience. If things don't change here, I fear terrible, far-reaching consequences." — Ernie Chambers**

Peace has at least a temporary reign in Omaha now. Every organization from the Police Department to the OIC is working overtime to head off violence in the future. Even Ernie Chambers is talking to Negro youths in an attempt to dissuade them from violence this summer. But no one is confident that an insurrection can be avoided. The increase in gun sales is very indicative of Omaha's mood — try to prevent it, but be ready to fight if it comes.

Probably the most significant development among the Negro population is what the Riot Commission terms "a climate that tends toward approval of violence." Attitudes of many young Negroes are such that violence in the context of racial strife no longer appears wrong. The same is true of a small but growing segment of the white population.

Omaha has roughly 260,000 people, of which about 42,000 are Negro. Already this year one Negro boy has been killed and city hall has clashed seriously with the ghetto over the administration of GOCA.

Father McCaslin says that Negro extremists, imported from Watts or other big-city ghettos, are now "training" in Omaha for this summer. These militants are unknown to most of the ghetto population at present, McCaslin said. He described their presence in the city as "scary." L. K. Smith denied that any such militants are now in Omaha.

Omaha, however, is not afraid to move. Its leaders are very aware of the situation. The problems are not insurmountable, but the majority of Omaha's leaders agree with OIC Director Barry Goodlett, who concluded his observations of the racial problem by saying, "Professionally, I'm frightened to death."