



Myth #3: The 1967 riots were the defining turning point for the decline of city of Detroit.

The '67 riots have become an engrained piece of generational lore, an event present in every Metro-Detroiter's family narrative as an explanation to why their parents or grandparents used to live in the city, and now live in the suburbs. There is no denying that the summer of '67 left a severe and permanent scar on the city of Detroit. However, to use "the riots" as a scapegoat for both the beginning of white flight and the turning point of the city vastly oversimplifies the city's complex and volatile history. Was Detroit building up to become "The Paris of the West" before the '67 riots occurred? Or were the riots an inevitable byproduct of a long history of systemic flaws, poor city planning, and growing racial tension?

I first became aware of this myth when I was attending a public lecture series for a University of Michigan course that regularly meets in Detroit. The panel members, two of whom had actually witnessed the riots, were discussing exactly what happened that summer in 1967 in an attempt to clear up misconceptions. Reverend Dan Alridge, a local activist well known for his peaceful approaches, explained the role of the '67 riots on the family narrative for white Detroit suburbanites. His view was that the racially restricted housing covenants before the riots, horrible loans from fraudulent mortgage companies after the riots, as well as freeway construction, racial tension, etc. were what caused the decline of the city. People

incorrectly attribute the riots as the reason whites left, when really it was all these other factors.

As a suburban Detroiter with white family that had previously lived in the city, the speech resonated with me and I started to think carefully about my own narrative. I had always assumed that my grandparents, Polish immigrants, had moved less than two miles from Detroit's former west side to East Dearborn following the riots. While I'm not sure how I got this idea in my head, I can recall telling this to multiple people in discussions of family histories. I was reminded of this upon hearing the lecture, and decided to calculate. I knew my dad was three when they moved, and that he was born in 1956. This meant that they had moved either in '59 or '60, at least seven years before the riots!

It's not like anyone in my family explicitly lied to me, but I was astonished to learn that I had been unknowingly perpetuating a common myth. Of course some Detroit families as business owners moved as a direct result of the riots, but the point Reverend Alridge was trying to make rang true. Many white families had been leaving Detroit well before the riots. According to Alan Backler (1974) Detroit started to decline in the 1950s with the construction of the freeways (displacing thousands of residents), the dismantling of the streetcar system, and the start of white flight into the suburbs. Between 1950 and 1960, the white population in the city had already dropped by 13.5%

After seeing these statistics and hearing Reverend Alridge's lecture, I was convinced that many Detroiters who lived through the riots and still lived in the city today would share his

views about their false representation of the turning point of the city. However, when I asked life-long residents Dolores Slowinski, Mary Cantu, and Adam Cantu, all three of who had been present for the riots, they confidently responded that yes, the '67 riots was the defining turning point for the city.

It is also possible, however, that different cultures view the riots through a different lens. Mary, Adam, and Dolores are Irish, Mexican, and Polish respectively. Shirley Woodson, who like Dan Alridge is African American and a life-long Detroiter, had a very different response. "Google 'race relations in Detroit in the 1960s', there's your answer right there. Things were starting to move WELL before the riots. There couldn't have been fires in a white community!"

New-comers to a city hold an interesting relationship with events of the past. A large concern for new Detroiters is that they will not engage with or be conscious of Detroit's history. Thankfully, the older generations of Detroiters are taking measures to ensure that doesn't happen. I found it slightly comical when Casey Sullivan, a new resident of Midtown, explained to me what happens to him at the local bookstore. As Casey explains, "Being around the city makes you curious about how we got to where things are now, and this store has tons of interesting books on Detroit history." Everytime Casey enters Source Booksellers, there is an older African American woman who is running the store. Several times now she has given him books about civil rights, telling him it is important for him to read these. Most curious of all, this was the same book store that Shirley Woodson gave as advice for new comers to go to!

Luke Resetar, Casey's room mate and another new resident of Midtown, explained how he viewed the incidents. "After abandoning the city for so long, white people are poking their heads back in like, 'Oh, it's cool now?' Of course blacks are going to be invested in making sure younger whites in the city are aware of the history!"