

Pennsylvanian mayor indicted for murder of black woman during civil rights era

Paul Scherrer
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The mayor of the small industrial town of York, Pennsylvania was arrested May 18 for the murder of a young black woman during riots which erupted in the city's minority neighborhoods in the summer of 1969. Mayor Charlie Robertson—who was a police officer at the time—has been charged with inciting white gang members to carry out violence against blacks, and providing the ammunition used for the murder of Lillie Belle Allen, a 27-year-old mother of two.

Ms. Allen was killed when racist thugs ambushed the car she was riding in on the evening of July 21, 1969. The mayor—who was also indicted for giving at least one gang member a 30-06 rifle—has been charged along with seven other men, most of whom were teenagers at the time and members of white street gangs.

Mayor Robertson was arrested only three days after winning the Democratic mayoral primary in York, a city of 41,000, 85 miles west of Philadelphia. He was freed after posting a \$50,000 bond.

The facts of this case provide graphic illustration of the way in which government and police officials collaborated with racist thugs during the civil rights era, not only in the South but in the North as well. The details of the murder of Ms. Allen reveal the methods the police used to stoke up racial hatred and attack and provoke African Americans. While the facts of this case are unique, the relations between the police, political officials and racists were similar throughout the country in this period.

On July 17, 1969 a riot broke out in York that lasted 11 days. In addition to local police, the state police and National Guard, equipped with five tanks and three armored cars, were used to suppress the upheaval. More than 100 residents were arrested, nearly 50 injured, and 3 people were killed. It was the second riot in York in two years.

The uprising was sparked by the shooting of a 17-year-old black youth, Taka Ni Sweeney, who was being questioned by police, along with another youth, for violating a curfew imposed by the authorities. It was initially believed that the police had shot Sweeney, but Robert Messersmith would later be convicted of the shooting. Messersmith, along with his brother Arthur, have now both been arrested and charged in the death of Ms. Allen.

In response to the murder of the unarmed black teenager, street fighting broke out in the city's predominately minority neighborhoods. The anger was largely directed at the police and lasted until 4 a.m. the next morning. The following day, July 18, a bullet pierced an armored car, hitting police officer Henry Schaad. He would die of his wounds on August 1.

The 1969 riots were one of a series of disturbances that erupted in urban ghettos across the country during the 1960s prompted by police brutality, poor housing, unemployment, poverty and low wages. Anger over the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968, combined with the growing opposition to the Vietnam War and the struggle of workers to defend their living standards, produced widespread discontent in America.

While immediately triggered by the shooting of a young black man, the uprising in York had its roots in these same conditions. The official unemployment rate among blacks was three times that of whites and wages for those working were substantially lower. Blacks were forced to live in the worst housing. Just a year before the riots the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission conducted a study of social conditions in York. During the inspection of one house, Mayor John Snyder fell through a rotted floor. Despite these conditions, Snyder opposed any improvements, saying he would not cave in to outside pressure. The mayor echoed the racist sentiments rife throughout the political establishment in this period, up to his death referring to black people as “darkies.”

One of the most hated abuses by York police was the use of attack dogs. The police canine unit, set up in 1962 and expanded in 1968, was used almost exclusively against blacks. A report of the Human Relations Commission found that the canine unit was used to instill fear and create “an increasingly employable means of inflicting physical injury ... by racist police.”

On July 20, 1969, a meeting took place in a park between two gangs of white youth, who had been previously violently opposed to each other. Whether a truce was called by the gangs or instigated by the police is not revealed in the indictments, but it is clear that the police were at the meeting, enflaming racial hatred.

According to witnesses, Robertson was there and urged those

present “to take any weapons that they had to Newberry Street,” the area which the gangs controlled and the location where Ms. Allen was subsequently ambushed. In the course of the meeting, Robertson reportedly screamed “white power” at least 25 times. One witness testified to the Grand Jury that far from trying to calm the group down, Robertson was “doing the exact opposite.”

According to the indictment, after the meeting, Robertson told a smaller group of six to eight youths that “if I weren't a cop, I would be leading commando raids against niggers in the black neighborhoods.” Later that day, gang members began making plans to conduct such raids. On the night of July 20 and early the next morning, firebombs were thrown at a house in the black neighborhood.

Rick Knouse, one of the men charged along with Robertson in the murder of Ms. Allen, testified to a Grand Jury that on July 21, 1969, Robertson gave him ammunition and told him to “kill as many niggers as you can.” Knouse used the ammunition that night when he and other members of the gang ambushed Ms. Allen's car.

Before the shooting, gang members were seen walking up and down the street displaying their weapons. They set up a special signal to alert members whether whites or blacks were in approaching cars. The police made no attempt to disarm or disband the youths.

Ms. Allen, a resident of Aiken, South Carolina, had come to York along with her two children, younger sister and parents on July 20. The family was on its way to Brooklyn, New York, where Ms. Allen and her two children planned to move, but stopped over in York to visit Ms. Allen's other sister, Hattie. In the evening five adults, including Ms. Allen, drove to a grocery store to buy food for dinner.

On the way to the store, Ms. Allen's sister turned up Newberry Street. Police claimed she ran their roadblock, but Hattie testified there was none. When she turned the corner, she said, she saw two police officers laughing and smiling. It has yet to be determined if the police removed the barricades in order to lure black motorists into an ambush.

Further up the street Hattie saw someone pointing a gun at the car and cried, “Oh, Lord, he's getting ready to shoot us.” She started to turn the car around but got stuck on a railroad track. The car was hit by one shot and then by a barrage of bullets from gunmen in nearby windows, railroad cars and on rooftops. The car's windows were shattered and bullets hit the seats inside, with most shots concentrated on the rear passenger side, near the gas tank.

When the shooting stopped, Ms. Allen, who was in the back seat, told her sister that she thought she could get the car started and drive to safety. Witnesses testified that when she got out of the car—with her hands raised and shouting, “don't shoot”—she was hit with a second barrage of gunfire and fell to the ground. The gunfire continued when family members opened the car doors to pull her in.

Only two blocks away at the time, Robertson was the first police officer to arrive on the scene. He testified that he did not go there until he heard the shooting stop, although he was protected inside of one of the city's three armored cars. According to eyewitnesses, Robertson got out of his car, walked up the street, and shouted, “don't shoot! It's me, Charlie!”

As more police arrived, the gang members made no attempt to leave or hide their weapons. Instead they continued to walk around holding their shotguns and rifles, and Robertson was seen talking with many of them. The police made no effort to administer first aid to Ms. Allen, and instead threw her into the back of a paddy wagon and took her to York Hospital, where she died a short time later. The other four adults in the car were told by police to keep their heads down, not to look around and leave the area.

Robertson's racist views and his activities on the night of Ms. Allen's murder were well known among police and in official circles in York. This didn't prove to be a liability as he rose through the ranks of the city's police department and Democratic Party politics. Robertson would go on to retire from the police force after working 28 years, and then serve on the city's school board before being elected mayor in 1993.

Robertson's role in the events of July 1969 became public in 1999, after local newspapers ran reports on the thirtieth anniversary of the riot. Following these revelations, one of the white gang members committed suicide and left behind two tapes—one for his parents and another for authorities—which incriminated the mayor and others.

Since his indictment a number of local and regional politicians have come to Robertson's defense. Pennsylvania's Republican Governor Tom Ridge said he would not call for Robertson's resignation and local Democratic officials stated they would not replace him as their candidate the November election. Such comments underscore the disdain for democratic rights which has become ever more widespread in both big business parties.



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