

Pennsylvania mayor arraigned for 1969 racist murder

Paul Scherrer
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York, Pennsylvania mayor and former police officer Charlie Robertson has been ordered to stand trial along with eight other white men for the murder of a black woman during race riots that hit the town for five days in 1969.

Lillie Belle Allen, a 27-year-old mother of two from Aiken, South Carolina, was gunned down when the car she was riding in along with her parents, sister and brother-in-law was ambushed on July 21, 1969. Robertson is accused of inciting white youth gang members to attack blacks and providing them with ammunition.

On July 23, all nine defendants were arraigned before Pennsylvania Common Pleas Judge John Uhler. Three of the defendants—Rick Knouse, Clarence Lutzinger and Gregory Neff—have all entered plea agreements and have agreed to testify for the prosecution in exchange for lesser charges.

Uhler also delayed ruling on several motions by Robertson's attorneys for dismissal of all charges against him. The lawyers argued that Robertson should be freed because his actions did not contribute to the death of Ms. Allen and that the shooters were acting in self-defense when they shot her.

An examination of evidence and testimony given during the preliminary hearing held from June 26 to July 2, along with materials obtained by local newspapers, sheds additional light on Robertson's role and that of other local, state and federal law enforcement officials. It shows how they incited white racist youth gangs to attack blacks, provided them with the means to do it and then protected them after the fact.

Ms. Allen was killed during the fourth day of rioting that broke out in the industrial town of 50,000, 100 miles west of Philadelphia. The rioting began July 17,

1969, after 17-year-old Taka Nii Sweeney, a black youth, was shot while being questioned by the police for violating a curfew. Like uprisings in many other Northern cities at the time, the rioting in York had deeper roots in systematic police brutality, unemployment and poor housing.

Ms. Allen was visiting her younger sister Hattie Dickson. The family had gone fishing that day and was on their way to a nearby store to buy groceries for the evening meal when the car was attacked. Dickson was driving when she spotted a man aiming a gun at her. She attempted to turn around, but the car got stuck.

Ms. Allen, who was sitting in the back seat, attempted to move into the driver's seat and move the car. Holding her hands above her head and shouting "don't shoot," she was nearly cut in half by a shotgun blast as she stepped out of the car. Although the badly wounded woman screamed for help, family members were prevented by a barrage of shooting from pulling her back into the car.

The day before the murder of Ms. Allen, Charlie Robertson, a 35-year-old York police officer at the time, attended a meeting of several white youth gangs. During the meeting he urged the youths to take action to defend their neighborhood because the police could not. He repeatedly shouted: "white power."

On the same day, Robertson reportedly told a smaller group of youth: "If I weren't a cop, I'd be leading commando raids against the niggers in black neighborhoods." In addition he gave one of the teenage gang members, Rick Knouse, 16 years old at the time, a box of ammunition and told him to "kill as many niggers" as he could.

"He was real jubilant, trying to pump us up," said Knouse. Robertson "was saying stuff like, 'We'd be with you if we could. You have to do it on your own.'"

It was like we'd been given a license to kill ... by the police. That's what it felt like," Knouse said.

Robertson also gave the youths a white handkerchief and told them to use it as a signal, and to fire upon any car that did not have one flying from it.

Nor was Robertson simply a rogue officer acting alone. At every point leading up to the murder of Ms. Allen, city or state police or both were directly involved in provoking violent attacks against African Americans. Following her death, local and state police, along with the US Justice Department and the FBI, blocked any prosecution in the case and shielded those involved.

A former gang member, Fred Flickinger, testified that there were "four or five" other officers, in addition to Robertson, at the meeting of gangs where Robertson incited the youths. Rick Knouse also testified that other officers were present when Robertson gave him the ammunition and told him to kill as many blacks as he could.

It was well known throughout the city that gangs were arming themselves on Newberry Street, the location of the ambush. On the morning of the shooting, the local newspaper reported that the city's fire chief had specifically warned the fire department about three possible "hot areas" where firefighters were to take extra precautions. One of them was Newberry Street.

During the day, gang members were walking around the street with rifles, handguns, machetes and making Molotov cocktails. Robert Stoner testified that he called city police Capt. Charles McCaffrey "two times, maybe three" about what he was seeing. "I told him it was a scary situation," Stoner said.

Why didn't police disarm the youths or at the very least block off the street so that someone could not accidentally go up it? According to an FBI memo, obtained recently by the *York Daily Record* through a Freedom of Information Act request, the street was supposed to be barricaded. In addition, there were 15 to 20 law enforcement officers stationed at the corner to prevent people from going up the street.

Hattie Dickson testified that when she turned the corner onto Newberry Street there was no barricade and two police officers were standing there talking and laughing.

"I saw one [police barricade] over where they were

standing," Dickson testified. "There were two men in uniform. They didn't signal us not to turn up the street." Later, under cross-examination from a different attorney, Dickson added: "As we were sitting there, there were two men on the sidewalk talking, laughing and looking at us."

After allowing the carload of blacks to drive into an ambush, the police failed to come to Ms. Allen's aid as she lay dying. Although they were just one block away, police officers did not respond for 20 minutes, while gunfire continued. When the police finally arrived, gang members did not run or hide their weapons and were seen talking with Robertson and other police.

The York city police had collected the names of all the youth who were there that night and several days later collected 11 guns after searching three homes along Newberry Street. They filed no reports on the case, leaving it up to the state police. In turn, state troopers, who also had the names of the gang members involved, closed their investigation within three months without making any arrests.

The US Justice Department opened an investigation after Lillie Belle Allen's family told the FBI that they believed police were involved in her murder. The FBI investigation was closed four months later, with officials saying they found no evidence of either police involvement or civil rights violations.

Norman Hendricks, a former special agent in York at the time who was providing daily reports to then President Nixon on the riots, said he did not investigate the Allen shooting and as far as he knew, no agents from Philadelphia or any other area investigated the case.



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