

BLACK IN A WHITE CITY: RACISM AND SEGREGATION IN MILWAUKEE  
1960-1970

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History 489  
April 22, 2009

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To: Duane Stein, Rich Mertes, and Ralph Hoefs, for helping me develop my passion for English and History, and for teaching me that no matter what, learning never stops.

## Acknowledgements

I feel that it is necessary to acknowledge a certain group that really acted as the catalyst for my writing this paper. Many years ago I was involved with the Milwaukee Ulster Project, an international peace program between select cities in the United States and Northern Ireland. This past summer I had the great opportunity to work with this program again as an advisor and mentor. It was through my experiences with the Milwaukee Ulster Project, many of which dealt with race and understanding individuals of other ethnicities; that led me to write this paper. Special thanks must be given to Kelly O'Keefe Boettcher, the Discovery Team, Emily Brown, Seamus Regan, Nicole Williams, Kevin Totton, and of course, the 32 teens that helped to make the Milwaukee Ulster Project what it is. You helped me to see, learn about, and understand, the racial issues in Milwaukee today. Thank you.

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the racial tensions between a dominating white city council, overbearing police force, and African American inhabitants living in poverty in Milwaukee's black ghettos during the Civil Rights period. While racism itself would continue well past the sixties this paper focuses on the racial tensions in Milwaukee during this time period. Racism and anti-black sentiments were very prevalent in Milwaukee during the sixties, and though said tensions have diminished since the Civil Rights Era, Milwaukee is still considered the most racially segregated city in America according to recently published Census Bureau reports. The paper looks at ways in which white politicians in Milwaukee used their power to disenfranchise African Americans from benefits, rights, and quality housing during the sixties. Additionally, the paper takes into account the failure of the housing market in Milwaukee in the late sixties, leading to the formation of slums and ghettos in Milwaukee. The purpose of this paper is to give the reader an understanding as to why there was so much racism in Milwaukee during the sixties, how far Milwaukee has come since then, and the reasons behind Milwaukee's still being considered the most racially segregated city in the United States of America.

## Introduction

Samuel and Stella Davis were African Americans from Tennessee who, following World War Two, went north hoping to find work. In Milwaukee Sam found work as a laborer at the Seaman (later American Motors) body plant on Richards Street, and Stella obtained a position as a maid. The Davises were among the first African Americans on their block. They were in the shock wave of an explosion that remade the demographic face of Milwaukee's central city and replaced an older European culture with one rooted in Africa and shaped by the harsh experience of the rural South. The transformation of the city was every bit as rapid as the revolution occurring on the urban fringe. In 1960, three years after the Davises moved to Twenty-Second Street, blacks made up just 8.2 percent of the surrounding census tract's population. By 1970 their population had risen to 82.4 percent. Stella Davis remained at 2021 N. Twenty-Second Street for forty years. During her long reign as the matriarch of the block, Stella witnessed dramatic change, all of it for the worse. Although she and a handful of neighbors took meticulous care of their properties, blight ultimately claimed nearly a third of the homes on the street. As the houses came down, many because they were no longer fit to live in, poverty rates went up; and unemployment and underemployment became distressingly familiar problems. Crime rates rose at the same time; wire mesh eventually hid the white curtains on Stella's windows. The process of decay was well under way by the late 1960's. In the charged social climate of the decade, conditions in the North Side ghetto generated a portent mixture of unfocused frustration and self-righteous anger. Milwaukee's white community was unwilling to see realized the changes that the black community was

working for. The city that so many African Americans had come to in the hopes of finding better jobs and treatment was quickly discovered to be a place filled with racist attitude and principles. As noted by Milwaukee historian John Gurda in his book *The Making of Milwaukee*: “By the end of 1967 the image of being a city of “equality” was fading fast, replaced by a growing awareness that Milwaukee had all the problems as well as the attractions that typified life in big city America.<sup>1</sup>” African Americans would face a new struggle in Milwaukee, a struggle that many in the black community thought they had already overcome: equality. As racial tensions mounted, blacks and whites both realized that if something wasn’t done to change the socially charged atmosphere developing in Milwaukee in the sixties, the result could be disastrous.

When thinking of the many great cities of the United States, Milwaukee rarely comes to mind. Lacking the size that makes cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles so well known to so many, Milwaukee has remained somewhat aloof in its existence just to the north of Chicago. However, questions remain about Milwaukee during this time period, how was it that a city full of so many Germans and other primarily white ethnic groups, could come to have such a large population of African Americans as early as the nineteen sixties? As noted scholar Joe William Trotter asks in his book, *Black Milwaukee The Making of an Industrial Proletariat*: What was the cause behind a population increase in African Americans second only to that of cities such as Chicago and Detroit<sup>2</sup> during the period 1915 to 1945? How did this early increase in African American individuals impact these northern cities and Milwaukee in particular as

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<sup>1</sup> John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999), 320.

<sup>2</sup> Joe William Trotter, Jr. *Black Milwaukee, The Making of an Industrial Proletariat* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press), 44.

the city approached the sixties? Milwaukee was, and in many respects still is, a very industrious city, filled with hardworking people, prior to the nineteen thirties however, the majority of those hardworking individuals were white.

The transformation that occurred in this city over the next thirty to thirty five years was one that happened to many other Northern cities, cities like Detroit, Chicago, and others. This transformation was the Great Migration that marked a turning point in America's social history as African Americans, the majority of whom lived in the South, began to make their way out of the Southern states and into the Northern part of the country. The reasons for this migration were many, there was still great hostility toward blacks in the South, this hostility continued to increase as history neared the Civil Rights Era, leading many blacks to look for a new life in the North, some even before the outbreak of World War One.<sup>3</sup> The majority came in the hope that they might find better employment in the Northern states, and with better employment, perhaps better wages than the pittance that many blacks were earning in the South. Trotter points out the great economical advantage that blacks could find by moving to a Northern city like Milwaukee:

Compared to Southern conditions, Afro-Americans improved their economic position in Milwaukee. Most of them entered industrial jobs where wages ranged from 30.5 cents to 64 cents an hour and from \$3.67 to \$4.79 per day. This contrasted sharply with conditions in the South where, even in urban industrial centers such as Birmingham, unskilled workers earned a maximum of \$2.50 for a nine hour day. Southern farm hands made even less, usually 75 cents to \$1.00 per day.<sup>4</sup>

Still, some came just to be closer to other friends and family that had moved to the North already. This "Great Migration," as it has come to be known had a huge impact on the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 47.

Northern cities where blacks decided to settle down after moving, and Milwaukee was no exception.

Southern blacks were fortunate in that there were many jobs to be had in these industrial cities of the North, the migration; which occurred primarily before, during, and after World War Two,<sup>5</sup> found many blacks working to help with the war effort. As more and more blacks were finding employment, many more flooded the cities to find work for themselves to improve their own existence and that of their families. Milwaukee found itself inundated with African Americans as many had heard of the numerous jobs available at the time, and wished to secure a job for themselves. At first many blacks were relegated to menial tasks such as janitorial work and hard physical labor, labor that few others were willing to do but the blacks were more than willing to take up.<sup>6</sup> Often the earliest black migrants to Milwaukee found themselves working in strenuous, dangerous jobs that did not pay very well. As Paul Geib notes in his essay on Black migration; “These early black migrants to Milwaukee found employment in difficult, low paying, and hazardous jobs in four main industrial groups: iron and steel, slaughtering and meatpacking, tanneries, and building and construction.”<sup>7</sup>

It is important to understand that blacks lacked the skills needed to perform these industrial jobs in these northern cities. This, combined with the stereotypical belief of many whites that blacks were incapable of performing complex work, ensured that many blacks remained in very low level, labor intensive jobs, with few exceptions. However, as the war in Europe began to wind towards its conclusion, blacks found themselves

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Geib, “From Mississippi to Milwaukee: A Case Study of the Southern Black Migration to Milwaukee, 1940-1970,” *The Journal of Negro History* 83 (Autumn, 1998): 231.

<sup>6</sup> Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Geib, “From Mississippi to Milwaukee,” 234.

moving upwards, albeit slowly, in the industrial cities, and with the better jobs came better wages, and in some Northern cities, there began to emerge the first black middle class.<sup>8</sup>

However, this seemingly upward trend for the blacks was not looked on so favorably by their white counterparts. Though there was decidedly less racial hatred in the North than there was in the South, when northern whites saw the huge numbers of blacks flooding into their cities, they were alarmed. As is again noted by Geib, by the late nineteen forties, “Not everyone was pleased, however, with the late arrival. As their [African Americans] numbers mounted, so did social and economic fears, making the migrants not only the subjects of discrimination in the workplace, but also the objects of study among policy makers. These public officials confused the black arrivals as the cause of general urban decline.”<sup>9</sup>

Many whites assumed that as long as the African American population remained relatively small, the black community would not be problematic and whites would not have to deal with them, however as more blacks came to the city of Milwaukee, racist attitudes became more prevalent. Gurda discusses this in his chapter on early black migration to Milwaukee, “As long as the black community was small enough to be viewed as a curiosity, there was little overt racism in Milwaukee.”<sup>10</sup> However, white concerns increased as blacks began to prove themselves in the workplace; some whites began to fear that perhaps their jobs would be in jeopardy, as blacks were often paid lower wages, leading some whites to fear that blacks would be hired over whites simply because they were paid less, this became the tipping point for many whites. The tipping

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>9</sup> Geib, “From Mississippi to Milwaukee,” 231.

<sup>10</sup> Gurda, *Making of Milwaukee*, 258.

point refers to the point at which whites would no longer tolerate blacks because they felt that blacks were now becoming a threat to their way of life. This led to many whites making it difficult for the large amount of African American men who were beginning to make the transition to factory work. As Trotter has discussed in his book;

For the first time in Milwaukee's history, Afro-Americans, especially black men, moved decisively out of the domestic and personal service sector into factory jobs. But the proletarianization of Milwaukee blacks was not a smooth process. Obstacles erected by the racist attitudes and hiring practices of industrialists and restrictions on black membership in labor unions impeded the transformation.<sup>11</sup>

As with so many racial conflicts throughout time, whites worked to find a way to keep blacks from rising too high in society so as to keep them from reaching a level of equality with whites and white culture.

Whites accomplished this during the 1940's by ensuring that blacks, even those who had better jobs, were kept to the lower classes.<sup>12</sup> Housing was often strictly monitored, and blacks were often not allowed to live in many areas of the city because whites did not want them there. Those few neighborhoods where blacks were allowed to live began to notice that whites all around them seemed to be leaving and moving away, in an effect called "white flight." Much of this had to do with misconstrued prejudices of the whites against the blacks. In an encompassing 1965 study undertaken by Bisbing Business Research, a sociological and research firm based in Milwaukee, it was discovered that; "The connotation placed on 'prejudice and segregation' by the white people is that the Negroes cause trouble and have a bad attitude and as white people, they, therefore dislike living in negro neighborhoods."<sup>13</sup> White society was convinced

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<sup>11</sup> Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 38.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>13</sup> Leonard Bisbing, *Attitude Study of Negroes and Whites in Milwaukee*, Bisbing Business Research, 24 November 1965, 28.

that with the arrival of blacks came an automatic increase in crime and violence which led to many whites leaving the inner city of Milwaukee.

Additionally, by the early 1950's it had become apparent that steps were being taken to ensure that blacks were kept in separate schools, producing a "de-facto" school segregation in Milwaukee, leading many to believe that there was in fact a racist attitude towards blacks by local community leaders. These steps included such things as teaching African American children in separate all black classrooms, making the African American children eat lunch and have recess at different times than white children so that the two groups would meet as seldom as possible.<sup>14</sup> Added to this problem was the fact that in 1965 Harold Breier was made Chief of Police in Milwaukee. This man had overtly racist views towards blacks and ran his police force accordingly; blacks began to see an increase in racial profiling, black arrests, and extreme police brutality against African Americans. These measures were just the beginning of the discrimination that blacks were forced to deal with yet, as more and more blacks moved into the city, combined with overtly racist police force, racial tensions escalated, leading to an increase in whites trying to distance themselves from blacks.

By the mid nineteen fifties, Milwaukee had many blacks, over 22,000,<sup>15</sup> and along with them came many of the racial issues that were making headlines, most notably, equal opportunities in jobs, housing, and schooling. However, with the end of World War Two, many soldiers had returned to America to continue their lives, often jobs were given to these returning soldiers in preference to blacks. As more jobs were given to returning white soldiers, the job market to began to dry up, leading to an increase

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<sup>14</sup> Gurda, *Making of Milwaukee*, 382.

<sup>15</sup> Gurda, *Making of Milwaukee*, 361.

in unemployment for blacks everywhere, including those in Milwaukee. As America approached the sixties the major racial issues facing the city of Milwaukee continued to multiply, finally in nineteen sixty-seven, things reached a breaking point, climaxing in the riots of that summer, in which four people were killed and the city of Milwaukee was put under a twenty-four hour curfew.<sup>16</sup>

Milwaukee has changed dramatically since that point in time, but the memories of that period linger in the minds of many Milwaukeeans, especially those in the black community of Milwaukee. The fact remains that this city, the largest in Wisconsin, with the largest black population anywhere in the state,<sup>17</sup> was at one time a very discriminatory place, where blacks were barely tolerated, and often experienced racial violence and hatred from whites, who saw the blacks as a threat to their way of life.

The aim of this essay is to impress upon the reader the effect that the massive increase in the black population had on Milwaukee during the time period of 1960-1970; the way in which the white culture of Milwaukee reacted; and the impact this had on many of the racial issues in Milwaukee. Of additional importance, is the impact that these events have had on Milwaukee today, and how they factor into the statistic that Milwaukee is considered the most racially segregated city in the United States of America as of 2000.<sup>18</sup>

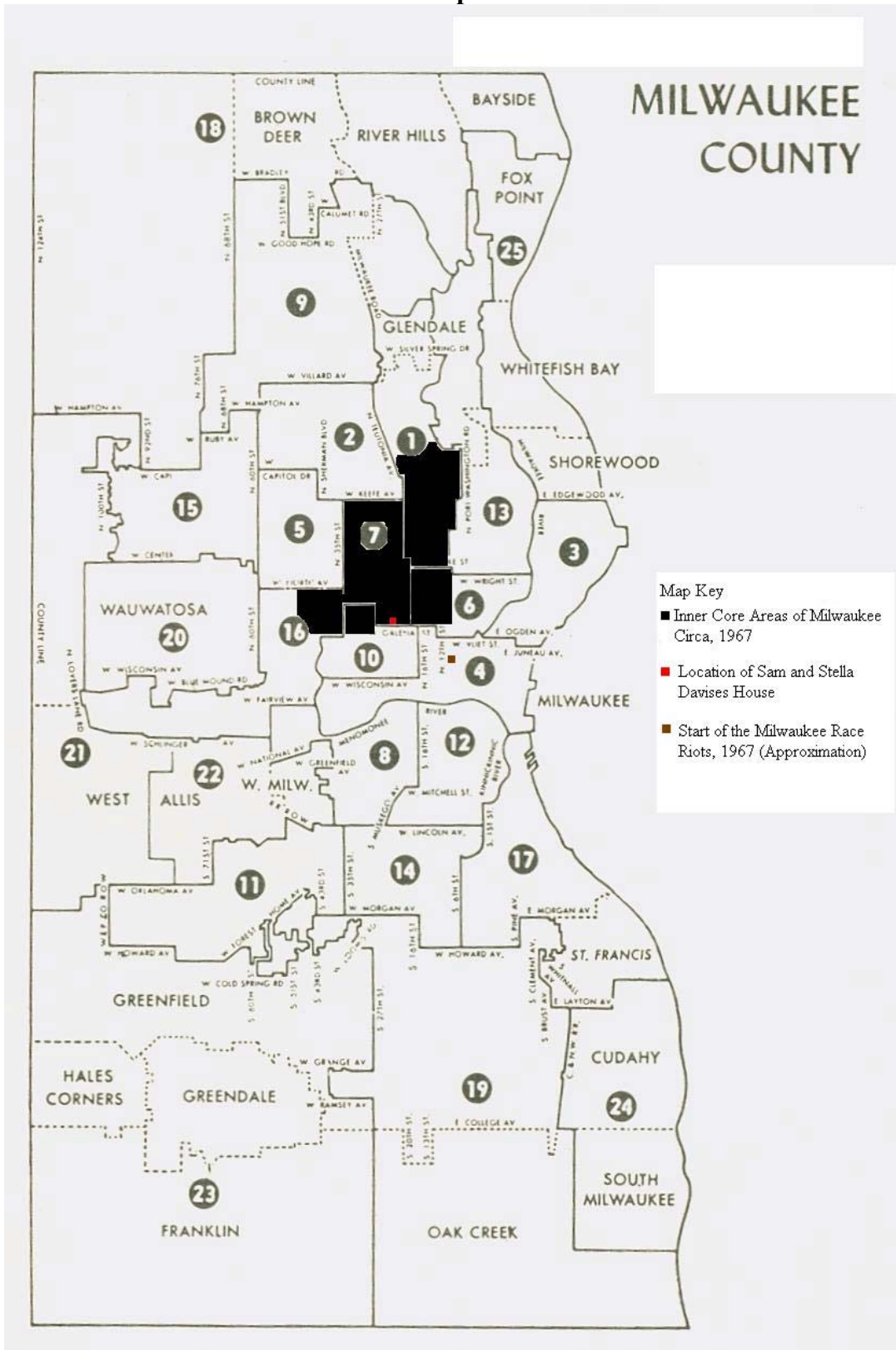
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<sup>16</sup> Helen Weber, *Summer Mockery: Civil Arrest Study #336* (Milwaukee: Aestas Press, 1986), 21.

<sup>17</sup> U.S Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, "County Level Overview: African Americans living in Wisconsin, 2000 Census" 8. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2000) <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/> (accessed on March 16, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

# Map 1



Map of Milwaukee and its surrounding area, including the Inner Core, circa 1967

Source: Wisconsin Historical Society

## **They Came From the South**

Black migration is a phenomenon that has been studied extensively by social historians and historians of African American history alike. As I have mentioned, the impact on the Northern cities where these people eventually came to reside was profound. Many historians have felt that the African Americans who were fleeing the South, the majority of them in search of better jobs, were ill suited to the environment they were about to enter. Additionally, some of these historians felt that the overall impact of these people on the cities in which they moved to was negative. Social scientists Robert Weaver, Kenneth Clark, and E. Franklin Frazier, note “The negative impact in those northern communities where blacks were moving to was often significant. They depicted the black ‘peasant,’ fleeing the South, as ill prepared for northern life, and inflaming racial tensions.”<sup>19</sup> It was this very concept that eventually led to an explosion of racial problems in Milwaukee. Not only was the southern African American not prepared for the shift in culture that existed in the North, it strained racial relations in a city that had been predominantly white since its founding.

To understand the race issue in Milwaukee we must go back to the beginning of the “Great Migration” to get an idea of what was causing this large social shift in the African American population at this time. As I have already mentioned, this migration began as early as the nineteen twenties, some arguing even earlier,<sup>20</sup> with blacks realizing that the potential for better jobs and wages existed to the North. However, the migration, which originally started slowly, began to pick up speed, and by the end of World War

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<sup>19</sup> Geib, “From Mississippi to Milwaukee,” 229.

<sup>20</sup> Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 8.

Two, the “Great Migration” was well under way. While this may have been the case; there were major problems that had yet to be fully realized, specifically the fact that the majority of blacks in the South had been field workers and farm hands, working primarily in agriculture. This makes sense because the South remained an area that was still very involved with the agricultural market at this time period,<sup>21</sup> therefore much work was available in that area. This was a problem because many of the blacks that were migrating had little, if any experience working a job in an industrial setting, and many of the jobs in the Northern cities required such experience. Modern scholars of the migration, such as Nicholas Lemann, who’s book *The Promised Land* states that “The group [African Americans] were uneducated and unskilled, a people unprepared to adjust to a post-World War Two urban, industrial environment.”<sup>22</sup> Lemann argues that blacks initially had trouble adapting their culture and way of life to that of the Northern city, this was certainly not helped by the fact that as more and more blacks entered Northern cities, white society began to turn against them.

However, to get a better understanding of why blacks were migrating from the South in such numbers it is imperative that we look at the reasons why they were leaving the South so rapidly. Many scholars have argued that the main pull for blacks to move was due to the job opportunities that were available to them in the North; however, it is highly unlikely that this is the only reason why they left. While there certainly were better jobs to be had in the North, there was also the culture of the South to take into consideration. Throughout the entire period of the “Great Migration,” which I argue began in 1920, racial prejudice and hatred was still very prevalent in the South. Though

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<sup>21</sup> Geib, “From Mississippi to Milwaukee,” 230.

<sup>22</sup> Nicolas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 1992), 56.

the Civil War and slavery had ended fifty-five years earlier, most Southern as well as Northern whites felt that they were fundamentally superior to blacks. The Civil Rights Movement had yet to become a powerful force, resulting in many blacks living in an extremely segregated “Jim Crow” South. There is no question that many blacks, in the hopes of escaping an oppressive and hateful culture and society, moved to the North in hopes of equality, unfortunately, there was little more tolerance for them in the North than there was in the South. As Gurda points out, “For many African Americans newly arrived from the South, Milwaukee was just as poor and a great deal colder, than what they were used to.”<sup>23</sup> Even though the United States government had passed laws ensuring that there would be equal treatment for all individuals regardless of skin color, whites had found ways around these laws so as to keep the migrating African American a second class citizen.

However, of the Northern cities that blacks flocked to, Milwaukee has been seen in a different light by many scholars. Though the white population in 1940’s Milwaukee was certainly disturbed at the prospect of so many blacks flooding their streets, they were happy to see that the blacks had a great work ethic and were willing to do the jobs that no one else wanted to do. Again, Trotter discusses at length the issue of blacks migrating to Milwaukee, explaining that the black community in Milwaukee did not seem to fit the model of change in other Northern cities at the time. Instead of being negative, he argues that the black immigrants to Milwaukee were a positive impact upon the city:

Milwaukee’s black migrants do not fit into the image of earlier urban scholars as ill-prepared and unsuccessful northern settlers. Oral histories show clearly that these migrants had skills and were successful in the manufacturing sector, and hence after World War Two gained permanent entry in sizable numbers into blue-collar, upwardly mobile occupations and purchased homes; thereby experiencing

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<sup>23</sup> Gurda, *Making of Milwaukee*, 359.

the American dream. Milwaukee's black migrants were not backward southerners but heady pioneers.<sup>24</sup>

Trotter argues that the blacks that came to Milwaukee were able to use the skills that they had to prove that they could be a valuable addition to Milwaukee's workforce. By doing so, these individuals were then able to secure jobs for themselves so they could continue to work when soldiers returned from the war.

However, arguments have been made that Milwaukee should be looked at as a separate event entirely from that of the "Great Migration." The reasons for this vary, however, many scholars have pointed out that records have shown that the large influx of blacks in Milwaukee occurred later than in other Northern cities. The main argument being that, jobs opened up much later in Milwaukee than they did in other Northern cities<sup>25</sup> such as Chicago and Detroit, thus prompting blacks to move to Milwaukee later than they did to other Northern cities. Geib points this out in his essay on black southern migration, "The northern migration of blacks occurred much later in Milwaukee than in other Midwestern manufacturing cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago which experienced their influx during World War One in a period known as the 'Great Migration.' Milwaukee's black population increased so dramatically between 1940 and 1970 that a better term would be 'the late great migration'"<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 46.

<sup>25</sup> Geib, "From Mississippi to Milwaukee," 231.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*,

**Table 1**

Black Population Growth in the City of Milwaukee, 1930-1970<sup>27</sup>

<u>Year:</u>	<u>Total Pop:</u>	<u>Black Pop:</u>	<u>% Black Pop:</u>	<u>% Increase in Black Pop:</u>
1930	578,249	7,501	1.29%	236%*
1940	587,472	8,821	1.50%	18%
1950	637,392	21,772	3.40%	147%
1960	741,324	62,458	8.42%	187%
1970	717,372	105,088	14.65%	68%

Table one helps to show this increase, specifically in the decade from 1950 to 1960. However, it should also be noted that this increase was not due entirely to migration, because by the mid nineteen fifties the African American population in Milwaukee had reached a level where more black people were being born in the city than migrating there.<sup>28</sup> Gurda touches on this subject, “Milwaukee’s black population was extraordinarily young, and its fertility rates were correspondingly high. Natural increase exceeded the rate of immigration by 1957, and the population explosion continued.”<sup>29</sup> However, this late shift in the African American population to Milwaukee did not mean that these individuals were ready to live in a culture and climate that was very different from the one they were used to. The major concern of many of the city officials was that the majority of the blacks coming to Milwaukee were used to working on farms or in the fields, not in the industrial sector.<sup>30</sup> At the outset, while jobs were still plentiful, the majority of blacks seemed to be able to adjust; however as more and more African Americans came to the city, and jobs began to disappear, it soon became apparent that some individuals would be able to adapt and others would not.

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\*Please note that this number is indicative of the black population increase from 1920 to 1930.

<sup>27</sup>Geib, “From Mississippi to Milwaukee,” 231.

<sup>28</sup>Gurda, *Making of Milwaukee*, 360.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 363.

<sup>30</sup>Geib, “From Mississippi to Milwaukee,” 231.

By the mid nineteen sixties the situation had reached a breaking point. A study conducted by Milwaukee Mayor Henry Maier's administration in 1963 concluded that "These young men, women, and their children [blacks] did not know how to live successfully in a large northern, urban, industrial city."<sup>31</sup> The issue became even more desperate when the job market began to dry up. As more and more blacks came to Milwaukee, it became harder and harder to find jobs, and many of the blacks; lacking financial means, were forced to live in substandard housing. These communities began to form the ghettos and slums of Milwaukee.

### **A "White" City**

Milwaukee has always had a large population of Germans, Poles, and a scattering of Irish, all of which are white ethnic groups. The city had been this way since its founding, African Americans simply did not live in Milwaukee, those few that did were the extreme minority. However, as the Great Migration continued, and the black population of Milwaukee continued to expand, Milwaukee's white culture began to feel threatened. As mentioned, many blacks came to Milwaukee for the jobs, but, as the jobs began to disappear and many companies began to move out of the city into the suburbs where many blacks could not follow, unemployment began to rise. Mark Edward Braun points out in his study *Social Change and the Empowerment of the Poor*, which addresses poverty representation in the sixties and seventies in Milwaukee;

Besides changing demographics and increased suburbanization, another social force that transformed the inner city was relocation of jobs out of the inner city. As employers moved to the suburbs, employment opportunities fell in the inner

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.,

city, which coincided with more people of color moving into the inner city. For example, between 1960 and 1970, there were 10% fewer jobs available for people looking for work in Milwaukee's central city, while the number of jobs outside the inner city increased by 75%. In 1960, African American men who resided in the inner city were three times more likely to be unemployed compared to those who lived in other parts of the city.<sup>32</sup>

Jobs were on the move, and unfortunately many blacks were too poor to afford to relocate to the suburbs where many of the jobs were moving to. Those that could afford to move were often refused by the white communities who did not want blacks living amongst them. Thus began the downward spiral that led to the development of much of Milwaukee's slums and ghettos. To understand how this came about we must look back to the fifties, where the "ghetto" was first beginning to form on Milwaukee's North side.<sup>33</sup>

Whites had realized by the end of World War Two that there was no way they could prevent blacks from coming to Milwaukee.<sup>34</sup> However, what they could control was where the blacks lived, what type of jobs they had, and the politics that ran everyday life in the city. This quickly developed into a problem for blacks, who like other ethnic groups, tended to live together in communities, and were funneled, to a specific area by whites who held all the political power. As more blacks came to Milwaukee, this location on the North Side quickly expanded, transforming the area into a ghetto. The whites who rented this low-income housing to blacks often cared little for the quality of the housing they were giving these individuals. Gurda describes the poverty that many on the North Side were living in towards the end of the nineteen forties; "More than 67 percent of the city's African Americans lived in homes that were either 'unfit for use' or

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<sup>32</sup> Mark Edward Braun, *Social Change and the Empowerment of the Poor: Poverty Representation in Milwaukee's Community Action Programs, 1964-1972*. (New York: Lexington Books, 2001), 26.

<sup>33</sup> Gurda, *Making of Milwaukee*, 359.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

‘in need of major repair,’ this, compared with 34 percent in Detroit and 36 percent in Buffalo.”<sup>35</sup> Many whites in Milwaukee hoped that by putting all the blacks in one area of the city and in effect, forgetting about them, that they would cease to be a problem. Unfortunately for the city of Milwaukee, as more and more blacks found themselves unemployed, the “black problem” as it had come to be known, quickly became a major issue. Worse yet, the city made a true mockery of the people it was trying to help as it went about trying to fix the problems of the African Americans, many of which, had been caused by white racist views.

Realizing that the African American population of Milwaukee represented close to ten percent of the overall population of the city, over 62,000 by 1960,<sup>36</sup> officials set out to try and fix the ghettos that were beginning to form in areas where blacks were concentrated. The main issue with many of these ghettos was that the houses in these areas were usually unfit to live in, and many whites felt that these areas were also a breeding ground for violence and crime. The problem had been identified as early as the mid thirties, however the city officials did not take action on the issue for nearly three decades. The city of Milwaukee’s Annual Report in 1933 stated that,

Conditions in the Negro district constitute a menace to health, morals, and public welfare which call for immediate remedial action. Poor housing is a most important factor in contagious diseases of children and tuberculosis and a contributing factor to delinquency, crime, and other social irregularities which require tremendous public and private expenditures for care and cure.<sup>37</sup>

While there is no doubt that some of the delay in getting started on fixing the numerous problems of the slums and ghettos of Milwaukee was due in part to the depression, the fact that even long after the depression had ended, the city of Milwaukee had still done

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<sup>35</sup> Gurda, *Making of Milwaukee*, 359.

<sup>36</sup> Gurda, *Making of Milwaukee*, 361.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

nothing to improve the living situations of these people goes to show just how unwilling city officials were to work with the newly forming black community in Milwaukee.



Figure One: *View of some of the slums on the North Side of Milwaukee during the sixties*  
Source: Wisconsin Historical Society

While it is not my intention to dwell on the subject of black housing in Milwaukee, it is important to understand the situation, as for many years it was an informal racist view that kept many blacks from ever getting out of the “ghetto.” As black and white complaints of the terrible living conditions on the North side and inner city began to increase, the mayor finally decided to take action. However, while the mayor may have wanted to change the living conditions for impoverished blacks in the city, others; it seemed, did not. The city’s attempt to help was relatively weak:

Milwaukee’s record in addressing these problems [housing and living conditions for blacks] was abysmal. Despite a favorable referendum vote in 1948 and drawers full of plans, only nine square blocks of residential blight were cleared by the end of 1955-nine blocks in eight years. Public housing fared no better. In

1944 the city's newly established Housing Authority announced plans to replace two blocks of North Side slums with "permanent housing" for war workers. Political infighting delayed construction until the war was over, and Hillside Terrace was finally completed in 1950 as a low-income housing project-the city's first. Progress thereafter was slow. Public housing for military veterans and senior citizens encountered only token opposition, but projects for low income families [of which, many were black] invariably faced an uphill battle.<sup>38</sup>

Modern research has revealed that at the time, no one wanted to accept the fact that the majority of the housing issues facing blacks were in direct correlation with the racist views of the whites. Frank Ziedler, Mayor of Milwaukee from 1948 to 1960,<sup>39</sup> who had set out to rectify many of these problems was surprised at the large amount of resistance low income housing seemed to be getting from other city officials. The mayor quickly realized that the issue wasn't with lack of funds, nor with available space to build new homes, it was due to racism. As he noted in a speech he gave to a labor group in 1957, "To many people, urban renewal means only public housing, and to them public housing means housing for migrant Negro families, so they are against the whole program."<sup>40</sup>

As Milwaukee moved into the nineteen sixties, racism continued to increase as more and more African Americans moved north. With very few, if any, blacks involved politically in Milwaukee, the issues most important to blacks, such as equal housing, schools, and treatment by the police force were often ignored. Though the city did make an effort to create better living spaces for blacks, the fact that many were unable to afford such accommodations made the effort seem minimal. Adding to this frustration was the fact that blacks who could afford to move out of the "ghetto" were often turned away by whites whose housing practices were racist in nature.

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<sup>38</sup> Gurda, *Making of Milwaukee*, 359.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

The combination of poor housing, rising unemployment, and racism led to heightened awareness by blacks that they were being racially discriminated against. With this awareness and the arrival of the Civil Rights Movement in Milwaukee, came the leaders the black community needed to begin the fight for equal treatment. Though some of these leaders came from unexpected places, they were not afraid to take the initiative and fight for the rights that they felt all should be able to enjoy, regardless of skin color. Their voices, quiet at first, rose to the upper echelons of Milwaukee's government, insisting that they be heard and addressed. As Milwaukee moved forward it was forced to deal with these issues, and while the blacks did eventually win equal treatment with whites, the "white city" wasn't going to let its image be "stained" without a fight.

### **Black vs. White**

In 1964, Harold Breier, a man who became a very well known figure in Milwaukee, was made head of the Milwaukee Police Department; he remained in that post for the next twenty years. By 1964, Milwaukee was in trouble as many blacks had begun to complain about the poor treatment of African Americans by a police force that was almost entirely white.<sup>41</sup> With the new chief there was hope that perhaps there would be changes including more minority police officers, less police brutality, and equal treatment of blacks and other minorities. Unfortunately, Harold Breier was the antithesis of these hopes; he ruled the police force with an iron fist and anyone who questioned him often found themselves the subject of a police inquiry. Harold Breier acted as the catalyst

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<sup>41</sup> Ronald H. Snyder, "Chief for Life: Harold Breier and his Era," (Doctoral Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2002), 48.

for the blacks of Milwaukee, his actions against blacks, often heavy handed and extreme, led them to finally take matters into their own hands, in the summer of 1967.<sup>42</sup>

Breier was an enigma, the majority of whites felt that he was a strong and able police chief, whereas blacks were uncertain, hoping for changes in the existing police policy, but knowing that there was little chance this would happen. In his doctoral dissertation Ronald Snyder points out this dichotomy, “Breier enjoyed enormous support in the community, especially among ethnic working class whites, largely concentrated on the city’s south side. His supporters credited him with making Milwaukee the ‘most crime free’ city of its size in the United States.”<sup>43</sup> However, there was opposition as well, as blacks saw an increase in police brutality, especially amongst lower class blacks and in black communities such as the inner core and other black ghetto communities, they began to see Breier as a tyrant. In 1966, one local columnist in the Milwaukee Journal described Breier as, “A racist administrator, a borderline fascist, and the man who contributed more to the segregated reputation of Milwaukee than any other. A ‘virtual autocrat’ who had extraordinary success in resisting all attempts to install any measure of democratic authority over the Milwaukee Police Department.”<sup>44</sup> Of course, Breier’s actions only added more fuel to the fire that was about to erupt in Milwaukee. With whites standing solidly behind Breier, seeing his practices as just, and blacks standing solidly against Breier, seeing his practices as near fascist, any attack made on Breier would cause an outcry in the larger white community. Breier later came to represent “white” Milwaukee, and though it was his job to protect citizens of all colors, Breier

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>44</sup> Kane, Eugene, “Sadly, Breier Never Saw Blacks As ‘Good People,’” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, September 15, 1998.

symbolized the last desperate attempt for the city of Milwaukee to try to maintain its “white” power structure. Unfortunately, blacks were at a disadvantage because they had little political power so the police brutality and racism continued until the blacks decided that they had had enough.

Of major concern to both Mayor Meier and much of the black community was the fact that there were very few minority officers on the Milwaukee police force. One of the reasons why tensions were so high amongst inner city residents was the fact that many of the areas where blacks lived were patrolled by white police, which city officials felt put both officers and citizens at risk. In a landmark study conducted by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in 1968, better known as the “Kerner Commission Report,” suggestions were made on how to deal with African American communities in select cities after race riots erupted across the U.S in the summer of 1967. The report discussed the dangers associated with having an almost all white police force when dealing with ethnic minorities in an urban environment. “For police in a Negro community to be predominantly white can serve as a dangerous irritant; a feeling may develop that the community is not being policed to maintain civil peace but to maintain the status quo.”<sup>45</sup> By 1966 the Mayor had urged that Breier consider looking into adding more minority officers to the police force so as to ease the mounting tensions in the black ghettos. Breier, who had already made a name for himself before the riots of 1967 in Milwaukee, argued that the lack of minority police officers on the force was not due to any lack of effort on the police departments end but due more to mitigating circumstances outside the police community’s control. As Snyder notes, “The chief argued that the

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<sup>45</sup> National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, Kerner Commission Report, *Race Riots in Milwaukee*, 1968, 37.

absence of significant numbers of minority officers resulted from neither departmental culture nor from his own attitudes but because harassment from a small group of clergy and some organizations that besmirched the department's reputation in the minority communities. He charged that allegations of racism within the department 'make it virtually impossible to recruit minorities.'"<sup>46</sup>

Though some minimal efforts were made at the outset of the plan to correct the lack of minority officers, the police force remained overwhelmingly white, which only added to the racial tensions at the time. The fact that the summer after the riots in Milwaukee [1968] saw Milwaukee's Journal report that there were 35 to 40 black policemen out of a police force of 2,000<sup>47</sup> showed that clearly progress was not being made. Reports of police brutality and civil rights violations by the police continued to rise as the city neared the summer of 1967. The black community, having almost no political power at the time, and no black aldermen to represent their community, appeared helpless as Breier tightened his grip on black communities all around Milwaukee.

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<sup>46</sup> Snyder, "Chief for Life," 53.

<sup>47</sup> Editorial, *Milwaukee Journal*, June 13, 1968.



Figure Two: *Harold Breier*  
Source: Wisconsin Historical Society

It appeared that Breier believed that the large African American population was to blame for much of Milwaukee's crime. Viewed as a racist by many minorities, many believe that he engaged in active discrimination in the hiring practices of the police force, this way the police force would remain "white." In his book, *Long Way to Go: Black and White in America*, which focuses extensively on race relations in Milwaukee, Jonathan Coleman mentions that Breier's "antipathy towards toward African Americans was so strong that he could not bring himself to speak to black officers."<sup>48</sup> In an age when civil rights were at the forefront of many social concerns, Breier was holding out against change.

In addition to his racist views, Breier used other documentation to back up his beliefs about rising crime rates in Milwaukee being related to blacks. In 1968 the Ad

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<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Coleman *Long Way to Go: Black and White in America* (New York: Grove/Atlantic Inc, 1998), 57.

Hoc Committee on Police Administration attempted to find a way to correct some of the glaring problems the Milwaukee police force was having with minority communities.

Additional studies were also undertaken to ascertain the actual amount of violence and crime that was being committed by blacks. It was this information that Breier twisted so that he could justify his actions against blacks, the report found that:

According to a July 12, 1968 article in the Journal, the most intensive crime rate in Milwaukee exists in the inner city north, where a large majority of Negroes reside. Although Negro residents constitute only 10% of Milwaukee's population, they contribute 30% of the adult arrests and 41% of the total juvenile arrests in the city. More significantly, four out of every ten Negro residents arrested are under 18 years of age and one third of the total recorded crimes in Milwaukee are committed by youth age 17 and under. Youths between the ages of 13 and 15 lead all other age groups in auto theft and burglary<sup>49</sup>

Breier took this as an indication that African Americans were a leading cause of crime in Milwaukee, though black community leaders pointed out that this view was stereotypical and racist in nature, Breier refused to listen to them.

During this difficult time some leaders finally began to emerge in the black community to help fight back against the growing racism of the Milwaukee police force. Ironically, one of the most well known of these leaders was a white Catholic Priest named Father James Groppi. Groppi appeared as the antithesis of Breier as the racial tensions mounted. Indeed, Groppi became one of Breier's main targets, getting arrested numerous\* times while working for civil rights for blacks.<sup>50</sup> Groppi began by questioning why it was that blacks were so discriminated against by the police and the local government. Unable to find a valid answer, he became actively involved in the

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<sup>49</sup> Ad Hoc Committee on Police Administration, *Statistical data on Negro criminal activity in the Inner Core*, Milwaukee, 2 July, 1968.

<sup>50</sup> Wisconsin Historical Society *Groppi Protesting Eagles Club*, (July 1966), <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whi/fullRecord.asp?id=53595> (Accessed March 19, 2009)

\*He had been arrested 12 times by 1966.

Civil Rights Movement in Milwaukee, hoping to help other whites relate to what blacks were doing to try to gain equality with whites.



Figure Three: *Father James Groppi*  
Source: Wisconsin Historical Society

As Groppi became further involved with the black community, he began to understand that the greatest threat to the community was the police force. Realizing that law and order are certainly necessary to live in a civilized society, he feared that when the power that was supposed to protect people was used to control them, a line had been crossed. When Breier became chief in 1964 and began policing black communities much more strictly, Groppi compared the police situation to that of a military state, as he mentioned in his writings, “I could write a book on police-community relations in Milwaukee. This militarized occupation army has had no meaningful training on the

plight of the black poor. They do not understand black people. A demonstration line to most policemen is synonymous with a riot.”<sup>51</sup> Groppi urged that the police force try to cut back its racist arrest practices to help ease the rising tide of racial hatred.



Figure Four: *Milwaukee Police engage Youth Council members*  
Source: Wisconsin Historical Society

However, his calls went unheeded and racial conflicts with police continued to be reported at an alarming rate. As Groppi became more of a figurehead for the black community and its fight for civil rights, he became more and more despised by his fellow whites. When his actions became even more radical, some in the church even began to question his methods, wondering if perhaps it was the role of a priest to be involved in such events. As he participated in more civil rights protests and housing marches in the summer of 1966, the summer before the race riots in Milwaukee he, along with many

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<sup>51</sup> James Groppi to Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, June 8, 1966, box 5, folder 6, James Groppi Papers 1956-1978, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison.

blacks, encountered much resistance. He mentions in some of his writings that aside from receiving death threats and copious amounts of hate mail, “I found myself being actually called a fucking white nigger.”<sup>52</sup> White society was clearly adamant against the acceptance of black culture in Milwaukee. In an interview with Groppi conducted before the summer of 1967 by the Wisconsin Educational Television Network, Groppi mentioned something that in hindsight looked quite prosaic, “White apathy and black frustration. I think that Milwaukee’s white power structure is about as apathetic as I have seen in any city in the U.S. This is the chief cause of a riot, and also black frustration in the ghettos is extremely tense. I think the wrong action of a policeman on the wrong night in the wrong neighborhood and we’re going to have a holocaust here in the city of Milwaukee.”<sup>53</sup> And he was right.

### **Milwaukee Race Riots**

Milwaukee had never had a race riot before. Certainly racial tensions were running high, but many believed that it would never come to a riot, let alone a lock down of the city. However that is exactly what happened on a series of nights in the summer of 1967. In a *Journal* article written by noted Milwaukee journalist Frank A. Aukofer dated August 11, 1967, he describes the chaos:

Milwaukee’s riot was like a smoldering fire. It flashed savagely, and was quickly snuffed to a burning ember and then slowly burned out. It caused a state of emergency that affected the entire metropolitan area for nine days, 2 hours and 33 minutes. For all but two of the first 27 hours, it inactivated the city and most of

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<sup>52</sup> James Groppi to Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, May 14, 1968, box 7, folder 3, James Groppi Papers 1956-1978, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Madison.

<sup>53</sup> *Decade of Discontent, 1960-1970*, prod. and dir. Chuck Taylor, 60 min., WMTV Channel 15, 1981, videocassette.

its satellite communities. It left three persons dead from gunfire, more than 100 injured, including 12 policemen, and uncounted numbers of homes and business places damaged.<sup>54</sup>

The city was shocked, how could something like this have happened? Violence in the streets, police officers being shot at; no one could believe that it could have happened in Milwaukee, but it did. The riot was the result of the pent up racial tensions that African American individuals had about their poor treatment by whites, and it sent a message to the city officials about what had to be done about race equality in Milwaukee.

However, Milwaukee was not unprepared for such an event. Due to the civil disturbances that had been occurring throughout the United States that summer, Mayor Henry Maier and Chief Breier had put together a contingency plan to help keep any riot that might occur in Milwaukee under control. It was this plan that was put into effect on July 31<sup>st</sup> in the early morning hours. According to Helen Weber's *Summer Mockery*; "Mayor Maier and city officials had formulated a plan to control any racial disturbance that might occur fifteen months before the disturbance erupted. The plan involved- a swift saturation of police in the stricken area, a stringent curfew, and finally, calling in of the National Guard."<sup>55</sup> Many felt that calling in the National Guard was being heavy handed, however both Maier and Breier agreed that should the local police be unable to control the area when lives and property were at risk, then the Governor would have to call in the Guard.

The majority of the people participating in the riots were African Americans, but nobody was certain what started it. Many, including the city officials of Milwaukee, knew that racial tensions were high and the initial reports were that the riot had been

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<sup>54</sup> Editorial, *Milwaukee Journal*, August 11, 1967.

<sup>55</sup> Helen Weber, *Summer Mockery Civil Arrest Study #336* (Milwaukee: Aestas Press, 1986), 21.

touched off by a shooting near Third Street, close to a popular nightclub. The official report was that it had started when a fire had broken out followed closely by a shoot out, both of which occurred two blocks east of Third Street on West Center Street.<sup>56</sup> This began a chain reaction as police began to rush to the scene of the shooting, as the police arrived they began interfering with other activities going on in the black neighborhood, leading the blacks to get upset at the police. The riot itself was contained within a few blocks and was under control within the next five hours, however, the damage had been done. Though the damage was primarily to local shops and liquor stores, it was reported that three people had already been killed; at least one of them a cop, and over a hundred arrests had been made. This was more than enough for Mayor Maier to call the Governor and ask him to send in the National Guard, leading to a lockdown in the city of Milwaukee that had never been seen before, and has never been seen since.



Figure Five: *An example of the effect that the curfew had on local commuters*  
Source: Wisconsin Historical Society

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 15.

With the coming of the National Guard and the curfew imposed by the city government, the city of Milwaukee became a deserted, eerily quiet place. Since no one was allowed to leave or enter the inner core of the city, the Mayor allowed some local charities to bring food to the elderly who lived in the inner city. A few days later, after the riot had been analyzed by local authorities, it was discovered that the action taken to control the riot was looked at as being very decisive, and the curfew was seen as being very effective in controlling the situation. An article printed in the *Journal* titled “Curfew Here Most Rigid in the United States,” printed just after the riots sums it up:

In a matter of hours on Monday, Milwaukee became a blockaded city containing a sealed off area. It was the most rigid curfew to be imposed by any of the cities involved in this summer’s nationwide out-breaks of rioting. Armed in advance with a riot control plan, Milwaukee officials assessed the situation, declared a state of emergency and called for the National Guard assistance in less than five hours from the time first trouble call came in from the riot area. Milwaukee’s curfew, imposed at 3:40 a.m. by Mayor Maier, closed taverns, liquor stores and gas stations and ordered all persons off the streets – night and day – until further notice, closing all businesses as a result. Road blocks were set up. Only doctors, nurses, newsmen and persons involved in emergency services were allowed to enter the city. Inside the city, the riot torn section of the inner core was completely sealed off.<sup>57</sup>

With the streets deserted and everyone staying indoors Milwaukee turned into a ghost town as the Mayor tried to figure out where to go from here.

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<sup>57</sup> Gene Cunningham, “Curfew Here Most Rigid in the United States,” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 1, 1967, 1.



Figure Six: *Milwaukee Mayor Henry Maier, guarded by an undercover police officer during the riots*  
Source: Wisconsin Historical Society

In the months that followed, it was discovered that the riot was not premeditated nor an attempt by the blacks to exert a militaristic force over the city. However there was no question that part of the riot had to do with the frustration that so many blacks had living in the inner city and the discrimination they had experienced all over Milwaukee. The riots had a large impact on the city of Milwaukee, it made fellow residents and members of the city council realize that if steps were not taken to rectify the current racist situation, things would only get worse. After the riot was analyzed by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders a year after the event, it was concluded that much of the riot had been due to the frustration of those in the black community and a

“deterioration in the relationship between police and ghetto residents.”<sup>58</sup> At the executive level the riot only strengthened the relationship between the Mayor and the Chief of Police, though both men realized that changes were needed. While Breier was still unwilling to incorporate minority officers into the police force, he was persuaded to do so by both Mayor Maier and the federal government, who suggested that more minority officers be added to police forces where civil disturbances had broken out to prevent these sorts of events from happening again. Slowly but surely the police force became more integrated, and even though Breier remained the police chief for the next fifteen years, even he couldn’t stop the change. In the end, the Milwaukee riots of 1967 acted as the catalyst for change, it was the breaking point, either the city was going to change or it was going to tear itself apart in the escalating racial conflicts.



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<sup>58</sup> Snyder, “Chief for Life,” 75.

Figure Seven: *Some of the damage from the riots that took place the night before*  
Source: Wisconsin Historical Society

### **A Modern “Grey” City**

Milwaukee has remained one of the major Midwestern cities, though lacking the size of a Chicago or St. Louis; it has its own unique character which draws people to it. Milwaukee today is a busy place, the downtown has been cleaned up and Summerfest draws large crowds every year. However, in the background still linger the memories of the racism that once existed in this city. The memories are brought to the forefront of many of those who lived there when reports published a few years ago showed that Milwaukee is the most racially segregated city in the United States.<sup>59</sup> This statistic tends to shock people, with racism significantly lessened from where it was in the sixties, how can Milwaukee still be racially segregated the way it is? The answer is simple; what we see today are the remains of the discrimination against blacks from nearly fifty years ago.

Racism, though all but destroyed, has not changed the fact that many African Americans have decided to continue to live in the inner city and North side of Milwaukee, where many of the slums and ghettos still exist. Again, this segregation seems to be based geographically as well as racially, the closer one gets to Lake Michigan, the better the housing becomes, and vice versa. However, it is unfair to assume that all individuals who live on the North side are from low-income families or that the majority of the people living in the inner city are criminals, yet these stereotypes remain. Milwaukee today has moved beyond its racist ways of the 1960's, but racism isn't entirely gone. All it takes is for one to drive around on the North side of

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<sup>59</sup> U.S Department of the Census, *City of Milwaukee Population Statistics*, Bureau of the Census. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2007, <http://www.quickfacts.census.gov>

Milwaukee, or just to the west of Maryland St. “Across the River,” and you can see the drastic changes that exist amongst the communities there.

I have titled this section of the essay a modern “Grey City” because Milwaukee has long since shed its image of being white, on the contrary, today African Americans make up over forty percent of the population,<sup>60</sup> making them the single largest racial group in the city. However, while blacks and whites may mix on the streets of Milwaukee, there are still stereotypes that exist, there is still racial profiling occurring, and there are still those who feel that whites are superior. While Milwaukee has made great progress from the Civil Rights Era, integrating its police force, schools, and employing blacks equally with whites, the city still has a long way to go. The fact that a city this far north could be the most racially segregated city in America is a testament that Milwaukee still has work to do when it comes to dealing fairly with blacks. While it may be true that all cities have slums and ghettos, and while it may be true that ethnic minorities prefer to live together in communities within cities, it is important that all minorities, whether they be Black, Mexican, or Native American, be treated fairly and equally by everyone in the places where they live.

As a Caucasian, I look to our history and our interactions with those of other ethnicities and find that our track record isn’t very good. Filled with treachery and lies, it’s no wonder that so many ethnic minorities, blacks especially, distrust white society. Interestingly enough, the 1960’s in Milwaukee is a perfect example of this. Nobody wanted to talk about the fact that many whites in Milwaukee held racist views towards ethnic minorities. Few in the white community felt that it was an issue, blacks just needed to know their place, that was all. What they failed to realize was that these very

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

concepts were entirely racist in nature. Throughout my studies I was amazed at the shocking schism that appeared in white society, between those who were willing to help and those who weren't. People such as Father James Groppi, whom many whites disliked because they felt he was a "nigger lover." In his own words, Groppi mentioned his amazement at the reaction the white community had to his involvement in helping blacks; "On one of our marches I saw a sign held by some white youth that said 'Black Bastards. Go back to Africa.' Later on I saw a coffin with the prayer written on it; 'Father Groppi, Rest in Hell.' I presumed it was a Catholic who wrote it because he called me 'father.' This was the response of the white community."<sup>61</sup> While some might argue that Groppi was outspoken and too public with his actions, he was arrested over twelve times,\* other stories of white hatred towards blacks I could only look at with shock. One such story, from the *Milwaukee Journal*, involving black mothers asking their children's teachers to take their children out of the inner city during the riots caught my eye. Here was an opportunity to show that whites truly did care about blacks and wanted to help them, however the teachers who did decide to help these black children were often frowned upon by their fellow white citizens. "Some of the teachers kept the students at their apartments, in one particular case; some of the other tenants in the teacher's apartment (the teacher is white) building reacted strongly to the children's presence. One woman sputtered angrily to the teacher that there was too much noise and said 'You better get that stuff (the children) out of here.'"<sup>62</sup> Even in white suburbia, people would not tolerate having black children in their apartment complexes, even

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<sup>61</sup> James Groppi, "My Time in the Black Community," *Conversations: Graymoor Ecumenical Institute*, (Autumn, 1973): 11-12.

\*See page 24.

<sup>62</sup> Editorial, *Milwaukee Journal*, August 4 1967.

though there was a riot occurring where the majority of these children lived. The inability of many whites to have any compassion towards blacks is undoubtedly one of the many reasons that helped to create black frustration in Milwaukee.

Though Milwaukee has changed much since these times, there is still all too often a fear of blacks, a stereotype that when they gather together in large numbers it can only mean something bad. The fact is that blacks are just the same as whites, trying to make a living and provide for their families, while some blacks are involved in crime, so are whites. However, all too often the media reports more on black crime than it does on white crime, making it look as though blacks have much more in the way of criminality than do whites. In today's Milwaukee it is imperative that we focus on treating everyone equally, and listen and care about the issues effecting different races, only then can we begin to understand, and work with each other in a fashion that is mutually beneficial to everyone.

## **Conclusion**

Milwaukee has been around a long time, first settled by French fur traders who set up a small trading post where Mitchell Park currently is located, in 1795.<sup>63</sup> The city has a long history, often filled with German tradition it remains one of the most popular cities in the state of Wisconsin. It also remains the city with the highest concentration of African Americans anywhere in Wisconsin, where blacks make up nearly fifty percent of

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<sup>63</sup> Gurda, *Making of Milwaukee*, 12.

the total population.<sup>64</sup> This racial mix helps to create part of Milwaukee's identity, a place where both blacks and whites can live together, a far cry from what the city was like in the fifties and sixties.

However, as this paper has shown, the relationship between blacks and whites has been somewhat rocky. From the early beginnings when southern blacks began moving to northern industrial cities, whites were amazed that people from a southern culture and climate would want to move north. Regardless of the fact that the north offered better jobs and a supposedly less racist environment, whites looked at blacks as a curiosity. Yet that curiosity began to turn into fear when blacks began coming to the north in larger numbers. In time, those fears would turn into outright hatred as whites began to fear that blacks would take their jobs, and if they weren't careful, whites' place in society as well.

Again, these were social constructs set up by white society against blacks. Those African Americans moving to Milwaukee didn't want to take over white jobs, they didn't want to make themselves "better" than whites, they moved there for simple economic and societal reasons. Though the blacks were well aware of this, the whites did not see it as such, they saw the blacks as a threat to their way of life, their culture. What started at first as racist hiring practices to keep blacks from getting the better jobs that existed in Milwaukee, turned into outright racism during the Civil Rights Era.

The "white" city of Milwaukee failed to see that its biggest flaw was the fact that it was trying to condone racism, especially through its police force. The few feeble efforts of the city to help blacks early on were overshadowed by the police brutality and racist hiring practices that abounded in the city at the time. African Americans were well

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<sup>64</sup> U.S Department of the Census, *City of Milwaukee Population Statistics*, Bureau of the Census. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2007, <http://www.quickfacts.census.gov>

aware of their rights, and they continued to push for them, regardless of what tactics might be used against them to prevent them from getting those rights. It didn't help when even the courts were against blacks, in a report made by a black man who had been beaten by the police; the judge presiding over his case was to reportedly have said, "You 'people.' Try to treat you nice and you act like animals; I don't know what were going to do with 'you people.'"<sup>65</sup> It was individuals like this who forced the black community to take drastic action in the attainment of their rights. However, the African American community did attain their rights, and though the battle in the North for rights may not have been as well noted or heard about as the battle for rights in the South, it was just as important.

From the era of Harold Breier to the modern day, Milwaukee has made a huge transition. That transition was helped by people like Father Groppi, The Milwaukee Youth Council, and many other civil rights institutions. The battle that played out on the streets of Milwaukee forty years ago is a distant memory in the minds of most today, the thought of the city of Milwaukee's streets emptied except for police and reporters seems impossible, yet it happened. Since then Milwaukee has had to focus on other issues, but the issue of race will always remain in a city with such a high concentration of African Americans, it has to, if everyone is to be treated fairly.

However, of note in regards to this subject is some recent scholarship stating that Milwaukee has become the most racially segregated city in the United States only recently, as late as the early 1990's. This is significant because it represents shifting social patterns within Milwaukee itself; perhaps this recent discovery shows that Milwaukee is not as neutral when it comes to race as we have come to believe. Still, the

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<sup>65</sup> Frank Moore to James Groppi, James Groppi Paper, 29 May 1967.

fact that shifting racial pattern within Milwaukee doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing, in the end, as long as people can get along with each other, racial segregation will be a non-issue.

In conclusion, this paper exists to inform the reader of the racist views that once existed, and still exist to an extent today in Milwaukee. While culturally and socially unacceptable to have these views today, there are still those who maintain them. While modern Milwaukee is a city that has integrated African Americans into every level of employment, it is still odd that it remains the most racially segregated city in America. Whites especially, need to realize that when help is asked for, it should be given, but it should not be forced on people. Though Milwaukee still has ghettos and run down communities in the inner city and surrounding areas, these areas have become part of what Milwaukee is today, they have become part of Milwaukee's identity. In a modern day society, it is important to realize that minority communities are quite capable of governing themselves, certainly they have to adhere to the laws of the United States, but when it comes to racial identity, part of that identity comes from being able to associate one's culture into a pre-existing culture. The pre-existing culture must be willing to accept this association, or else conflict is inevitable, and this is exactly what happened in Milwaukee.

Sadly, not all is well in modern day Milwaukee, there are still concerns about racism, and equality. Of recent importance was the announcement that the Black Holocaust Museum, the only one of its kind in America, located right in Milwaukee would be closing its doors after twenty years.<sup>66</sup> This museum chronicled much of the battle for rights that took place in Milwaukee and other major cities throughout the North

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<sup>66</sup> Editorial, *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, July 30, 2008.

and South, and represented the great struggle that African Americans had to face in getting their rights. Its closing will be a sad loss to the memory and history of the struggle for African American civil rights in this city and country.

Before concluding, I feel that it is important that the reader understand the concept of “racially segregated” society versus “racist” society as they are two completely different things. Milwaukee, according to the last two census reports, remains the most “racially segregated” city in the United States, by this it is meant that in an urban area where you have people of mixed races living together in certain areas or communities, Milwaukee has the most noticeable boundaries between different races living in different areas. This is entirely different than a “racist” society which is what existed in Milwaukee in the nineteen sixties and I have discussed at length here in this paper.

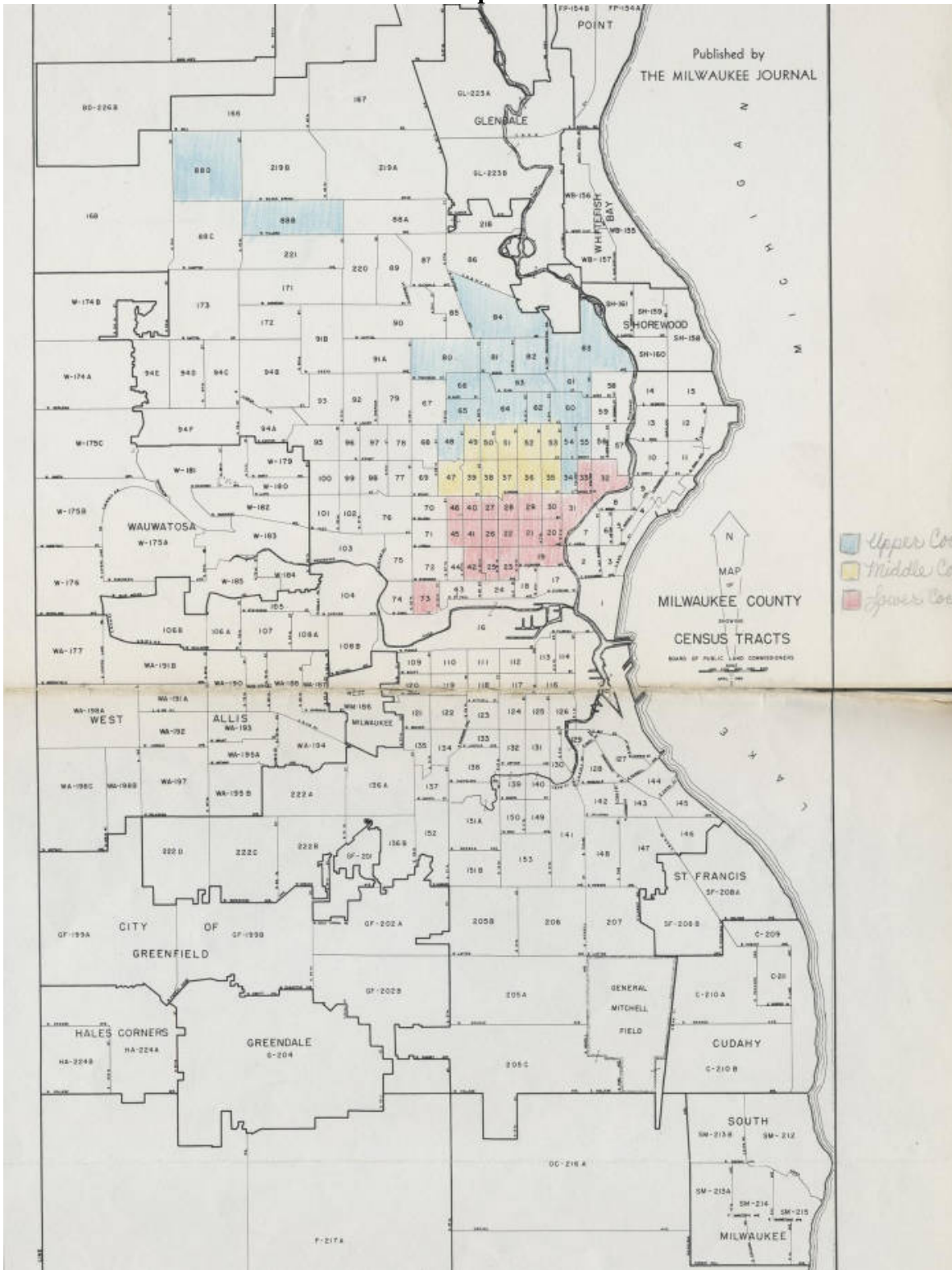


Figure 8: *Modern day Milwaukee*  
Source: Wisconsin Historical Society

Finally, with the election of Barack Obama in November of 2008, this country celebrated the election of its first black President. Many are hopeful that this will usher in a new era of race relations between blacks and whites, one in which both can live together in peace. Though it will be difficult with the long history between both races for us all to get along, hopefully in time, we will finally live in a society where black and white are just colors, and nothing more.

Illustrations

Map 2



Map of the Inner, Middle and Upper Cores of Milwaukee, areas where African Americans are concentrated

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