

1919-1924

RED SUMMER

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I CAME OF AGE ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF CHICAGO IN THE WAKE of the 1968 urban rebellions. Too young to remember the mass destruction, violence, and tensions of the actual rebellions, I knew only that the South and West Sides of the city did not have the same prosperous look and opportunities as downtown Chicago and the North Side. The sharp racial division between white, Black, Asian, and Hispanic neighborhoods within the city was normal to me.

The magnet high school I attended was located on the other side of the city, so every day I commuted for an hour and a half each way through various Black neighborhoods on the South Side, crossed through the racially diverse downtown area, then over to another Black section on the Near West Side. Public transportation ran with varying efficiency depending on the part of the city in which I traveled. Boarded-up buildings, vacant lots, concentrated high-rise public housing units, fast-food places, barbershops, nail salons, bars, liquor stores, factories, and steel mills were prevalent in Black neighborhoods. The racial concentration also produced many Black-owned companies such as Soft Sheen, Johnson Publishing Company, Parker House Sausage, Army & Lou's Soul Food Restaurant, *The Chicago Defender*, and Seaway Bank. The racial concentration was similar to what my great-grandmother, Ida B. Wells, saw as a Chicago resident all those years ago.

As I navigated the city, I knew there were certain neighborhoods to avoid, such as Bridgeport, Marquette Park, Humboldt Park, and

Canaryville, because of the racist hostility demonstrated by the white people who lived there. Stories of Black people being beaten with bats, bricks, or other weapons, if they were unfortunate enough to end up in that part of town, were well known. I also remember hearing stories of Black people having bricks thrown through their windows or experiencing bombings or other forms of harassment when they tried to cross the deeply entrenched racial line and move into certain predominantly white neighborhoods.

Little did I know that the divide, hostility, and violence were a continuum of the issues that caused the 1919 Race Riot, in which thirty-eight people—twenty-three Black and fifteen white—were killed and over five hundred were injured. The tension had been fueled by a combination of several factors that included job opportunities, housing availability, and the dynamics of World War I. Chicago was among many cities that experienced riots, which gave the summer of 1919 the nickname “Red Summer.”

During the Great Migration, the population of Black people in Chicago increased by 148 percent, while the area of the city that welcomed them remained the same. White people did everything they could to keep Black people separate. Restrictive covenants were enforced and redlining was in full force to confine Black people to a small thirty-block section of the city known as the Black Belt.

Near the Black Belt was a neighborhood dominated by white Irish and Lithuanian immigrants who mostly worked in the stockyards. Their attempts to unionize, plus a shortage of workers due to World War I, induced the stockyard owners to bring in Black migrants to work, undercutting the employment of white men. Resentment and tension rose between the two groups.

In addition, Black soldiers returned from World War I, where they had fought for democracy overseas only to be met with resentment and violence once they got home. The sight of their uniforms created ire among racist white people. Trained to fight, the Black veterans were not willing to accept second-class citizenship.

Racial tension gradually increased, and on July 27, 1919, it boiled over into a full-blown white invasion of Black neighborhoods. The violence mostly took place on the South Side, near the stockyards,

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which was inhabited by working-class white immigrants, and in the Black Belt area. In the aftermath, at the beginning of 1920, a deep level of suspicion between Black Americans and white immigrants remained.

City and state leaders and officials decided to "study" the problem. The Chicago Commission on Race Relations was formed and was led by Black sociologist Charles S. Johnson. After two and a half years, a 651-page report titled *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* was produced, which included findings of systemic racism along with almost five dozen recommendations on how to solve some of the problems. To this day, the city has yet to implement most of them.

Over one hundred years after the riot, Chicago boasts a diverse population that is almost equally—30 percent each—white, Black, and Hispanic, and about 5 percent Asian. Over 30 percent of residents speak a language other than English. However, there remains extreme housing segregation as a remnant of official redlining and restrictive covenants that were enacted in the early 1920s, the "white flight" that took place in the 1950s and '60s, and public policies that concentrated racialized poverty and underinvestment in predominantly Black neighborhoods.

During Mayor Richard J. Daley's reign over the city from 1955 to 1976, high-rise public housing units were built in Black neighborhoods, creating a high concentration of racialized poverty. During Mayor Michael Bilandic's term, there was benign neglect of the Black sections of town, which was demonstrated during the 1979 blizzard: the streets in the downtown area were cleaned, while the Black neighborhoods remained buried in snow. The next mayor, Jane Byrne, campaigned on the promise of equal snow removal for all neighborhoods. When Harold Washington was elected in 1983 as the first Black mayor, he was met with a virulent group of aldermen nicknamed the "Vrdolyak 29" who did everything in their power to block his initiatives.

Twenty years later, when Mayor Richard M. Daley, the son of the earlier Mayor Daley, dismantled high-rise public housing units, residents faced many barriers to moving into predominantly white areas

of the city. The reality of the resulting “mixed-income housing” was that poor Black people moved into lower- or middle-class Black neighborhoods. The idea of Black Chicagoans sharing in educational, economic, and housing opportunity was hard fought against, as was evident in the early 2010s, when Mayor Rahm Emanuel closed more than fifty schools and several mental health clinics in predominantly Black neighborhoods on the South and West Sides. That decision, combined with the uneven distribution of tax incremental financing (TIF) money, led to significant investment in downtown and the North Side and contributed to the underdevelopment of the South and West Sides. These developments represented a continuum of policies that negatively affect Black people, who still live in highly segregated neighborhoods.

After the 1919 Chicago Race Riot, the city responded by implementing and maintaining policies that kept racial segregation in place. One hundred years later the city is considered “global,” boasts gleaming tall buildings, and is home to many multinational corporations. Its residents also have a thirty-year discrepancy in life expectancy, depending on the neighborhood in which they reside. Racial disparities are evident in education, employment, income, home ownership, property values, crime, relationship with the police, access to healthcare and healthy food—all related to racially segregated neighborhoods.

For decades Chicago has worked to overcome deeply entrenched racial separation and divisions that have been part of the fabric and makeup of the city. The 2019 election of Mayor Lori Lightfoot—the first African American and openly lesbian woman to hold the position—could be a step toward the progress the city needs. The fact that Lightfoot is a North Sider married to a white woman challenges some of the racial and geographic divides. And the fact that she won all fifty wards during the election suggests that residents in every part of the city were ready for a change. In the twenty-first century, Chicago might finally live up to the promises and expectations outlined by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations in the aftermath of the 1919 Race Riot.

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