Remembering The Augusta Civil Rights Riot, 50 Years Later

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Guests: Phil Jones, Henry Allen Green, Grady Abrams, Corey Rogers, Claude Harris, Millard Beckum, Grace Stewart

Body

TONYA MOSLEY: Augusta, Ga., is best known for the Masters Golf Tournament and is the home of James Brown. But 50 years ago, it became synonymous with something else, a civil rights riot. It was quickly forgotten, but the causes and reactions to the uprisings are profoundly similar to what's happening in the U.S. today. Reporter Sea Stachura looks back.

SEA STACHURA: A Black teenager suspiciously dies in a county jail. Law enforcement's explanation doesn't line up with the boy's injuries. People protest in the streets. These events didn't happen last month. They happened in 1970 in Georgia's second largest city. As CBS News reporter Phil Jones explained at the time, that protest became an uprising.

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PHIL JONES: Things just seemed to fall apart last May 11 when Blacks teed off on a 100-block area. And when police moved in to put a stop to it all, bullets whizzed through the air. And when it was all over, six Black men were dead.

SEA STACHURA: For two days, 1,000 Black residents rebelled against the city's systemic oppression. Seven miles of neighborhoods and businesses were ransacked and vandalized. Until then, Augusta's white leaders had proclaimed Black people were happy. Henry Allen Green told a WSB News reporter they had been willfully blind. Green was Augusta College's student body president.

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HENRY ALLEN GREEN: The Black people in Augusta are tired of being told that there is no racial problem here. Whereas our local officials have not seen a problem, now the nation knows that Augusta has a problem.

SEA STACHURA: Census data showed only 20% of Augusta's African American adults had high school diplomas. Residents in several Black neighborhoods had petitioned for sewerage and water for almost 20 years, but it was the death of Charles Oatman that pushed people past their limits.

GRADY ABRAMS: He was a 16-year-old youth here in Augusta who was in jail for killing his niece. He had mental problems.

SEA STACHURA: Grady Abrams was a city councilman at the time. He says Oatman had the intellectual capabilities of a second grader, and he only weighed about 100 pounds. Nonetheless, the judge put him in the county jail without bond. Oatman complained to his family that he was being abused. Six weeks later, police delivered his body to a funeral home. The undertaker called Abrams.

GRADY ABRAMS: He had three long gashes across his back, about a half an inch deep and about a foot long. The back of his skull was busted out. He had cigarette burns all over his body.

SEA STACHURA: Jailers only said that he had fallen off of his bunk after a card game. The news spread fast, and the sheriff responded by promising an investigation. Twelve hours later, he announced its conclusion. Two other juveniles in Oatman's cell had beaten the boy to death. Not many Black Augustans believed that story. The consensus was that jailers had killed Oatman, and outrage turned to violence. If this sounds familiar, Corey Rogers isn't surprised.

COREY ROGERS: We often kick the can down the road. And I think that's one of the issues why every 50 or so years you see this resurgence.

SEA STACHURA: Rogers is the historian at the Lucy Craft Laney Museum of Black History in Augusta.

COREY ROGERS: The notion of integration and civil rights, it's a 150-year story arc. It is not just now. It's not just Rosa Parks. It's not just Dr. King. This started in 1865.

SEA STACHURA: Frustrations build. Rogers says when people can't take it anymore, they look for opportunities for change.

COREY ROGERS: This new generation of activism, these young folks that are out there now - they want to do it their own way, and they are full of energy. And maybe they want to be a little bit more aggressive and in your face. Different generations use different models to exact change.

SEA STACHURA: In the late 1960s and '70s, activists put their faith largely in the militant Black Power movement. The same was true in Augusta at the time of the riot. Young Black leaders rallied at the municipal building. They demanded public officials take responsibility for Oatman's death. Several protesters then tore down the Georgia state flag and set it on fire. A line of 25 police officers stood by and watched it happen. Police and others pushed the crowd back to the primarily Black neighborhoods. Claude Harris was in that crowd. He and his friends saw the riot as an opportunity to show police they wouldn't tolerate racism anymore.

CLAUDE HARRIS: I picked up a garbage can and threw it through the window of a liquor store on the corner of 9th and Laney Walker. I told them - I said, get some courage. Of course, they went, and they got the booze and what have you.

SEA STACHURA: Later in the evening, he and others witnessed a police shooting, and that changed everything for him.

CLAUDE HARRIS: Now, we really don't care if we hurt you or not. We're going to hurt what you love the most - things, things. So let's make this bigger. Let's make the police run crisscross town. And one of the things that one of the young men said was, let's get the Chinese out of our neighborhood.

SEA STACHURA: Protesters set roughly 30 businesses on fire. Almost all of them were white or Chinese-American-owned. Police killed six Black men. Every single one was shot in the back. When the riot was over, Black and white leaders met and discussed the concerns of Black Augustans. A few promises were made for change, but the sentiment of shared responsibility didn't last. Then-Mayor Millard Beckum made that clear to a CBS News reporter. Black Augustans, he said, they were responsible for their own terrible living conditions.

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MILLARD BECKUM: I said I had seen things that were hard for me to believe, that one would have to see it in order to believe it.

PHIL JONES: What is it you don't believe that you saw?

MILLARD BECKUM: That people could allow themselves to live in such filth without actually exerting themselves to some extent to do something about it.

SEA STACHURA: Today, 50 years later, Grace Stewart doesn't believe much has changed since the riot. Stewart's brother was one of the six people killed by police. He was 18, and he died with his hands in the air.

GRACE STEWART: So how many Black families got to continue to lose their life in the state of Georgia for them to say that we got a problem here with the police department?

SEA STACHURA: You can hear that complaint on the streets of Kenosha, Louisville, Minneapolis and many other American cities. For historian Corey Rogers, every new police shooting and killing is a reminder. This problem has not gone away.

COREY ROGERS: Why we keep having these reoccurrences every 50 years - because at some point in the history of America, we didn't want to talk about the issue 70, 80 years ago.

SEA STACHURA: Rogers says Augusta's riot was intentionally ignored by white officials. He says giving it attention would have validated the anguish Black Augustans were enduring. To his mind, just like 50 years ago, it's time to talk about the hard truths.

(SOUNDBITE OF NICK BOX'S "SONO")

SEA STACHURA: For NPR News, I'm Sea Stachura.

TONYA MOSLEY: Sea Stachura hosts the podcast "Shots In The Back: Exhuming The 1970 Augusta Riot."

(SOUNDBITE OF NICK BOX'S "SONO")

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