ONE YEAR AGO

Next Thursday Is First Anniversary of Harlem Upheaval

March 19 Outbreak Is Seen as Influence During Past Year

By T. R. POSTON.

ONE YEAR AGO Thursday a 16-year-old youth walked into the S. H. Kress store on 125th street and attempted to steal a 10-cent pocket knife. Had Lino Rivera accomplished this act undetected it is possible that this story might never have been written.

It is possible also that five persons, now dead, would still be living; that $500,000 worth of Harlem property would not have been destroyed, and that New York City would still have regarded Harlem as an interesting Negro Mecca of night clubs, house rent parties, shuffling tap-dancers and mammy singers.

On the other hand, it is equally possible that more people might have died, that more property might have been destroyed, and that stolid New Yorkers might have been shocked even more by the events which followed reports that Lino Rivera had been beaten to death and his body hidden in the basement of the 125th street store.

For serious students of the March 19 outbreak insist that no "riot" occurred. Rather, they say, it was an economic upheaval, a spontaneous outburst, a smouldering resentment which burst into flame when a spark was applied to the powder barrel of exploitation and discrimination which characterized the daily existence of a large sector of the community's 204,000 Negro residents. And any spark, even more trivial than the exaggerated Rivera incident, might have caused a similar outbreak.

This opinion was supported by the Mayor's Commission, thirteen prominent Negro and white citizens appointed to probe the upheaval while hundreds of reserve policemen still made Harlem an armed camp. The commission held open hearings at Heights Court — heated, boisterous hearings in which an indignant public participated.

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AND WHEN the smoke of bitter charges and recriminations had cleared away the Mayor's Commission and all New York City knew what thousands of disillusioned and exploited Harlemites had known and resented for decades — what was in the minds of hundreds of usually law-abiding citizens of the community when they stormed through the streets of Harlem on the night of March 19—what one of their number epitomized at the corner of 128th street and Seventh avenue when he seized a brick, aimed it at a large plate glass window and yelled: "This is for Scottsboro!"

The probing body found out that Harlem, instead of being a Negro Mecca, was really a metropolitan concentration camp with colored citizens hemmed into a restricted area and exploited by unscrupulous landlords and employers; that similar discrimination and segregation extended to every quarter of their daily existence—in their schools, home relief bureaus, in their relations with the city, state and federal government, in their fruitless search for jobs.

The commission found out that Negro citizens had been subjected to a minor reign of terror by the police, that their civil rights had been ruthlessly violated, that unarmed suspects had been beaten, killed by men sworn to uphold the law. It was testified that politically, socially, economically, the Negro's existence here was so circumscribed that an upheaval, outburst, explosion of some sort was practically inevitable.

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THE FINDINGS of the commission were given widespread publicity. New York City, the state, the country took on a new "Harlem consciousness." And progressive leaders of the community expressed the hope that something beneficial — a Negro New Deal perhaps—might emerge from the chaos and confusion which was Harlem on the night of March 19.

DESTRUCTION was the idea in the minds of those who took part in the economic upheaval in Harlem last March 19, and the picture above shows how thorough was the havoc wreaked upon one 125th street merchant. In the insert is Lino Rivera, whose theft of a cheap knife was the spark which set off the tinder box.

Mayor's Commission Revealed Forces Behind "Riot"

Were their hopes justified? Who can say?

Surely many subsequent developments in the community were influenced in part, if not wholly, by the events of that hectic outburst.

The housing situation, for instance. Hardly had the echoes of the upheaval died on the streets of Harlem than Governor Lehman presented his 13-point housing program to the Legislature—a program designed to protect the rights of tenants against unscrupulous landlords and to abolish the firetraps and hovels which had claimed so many lives in this and other communities.

The Assembly sought to temporize on this legislation, but finally, faced with a proposed rent strike of 5,000 Negro tenants sponsored by the Consolidated Tenants' League, the two houses passed and the governor signed several of the important measures. These included the much-disputed multiple dwellings law which calls for the immediate demolition or renovation of thousands of New York City firetraps.

And on July 2, 1935, three months after that fateful night, Mayor LaGuardia announced that the federal government had appropriated $4,700,000 for the construction of a Harlem low-cost housing project. The effect of this project, now the subject of heated debate in the community, is problematical, but no one will hardly deny that its authorization was influenced somewhat by the events of March 19.

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THEN there is the school situation. For years militant, but widely-separated, groups had attempted to call attention to the disgraceful educational conditions in the community; to the antiquated buildings, the lack of facilities, the discrimination against Negro teachers, the lack of representation on important bodies.

Those conditions still obtain, but

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WRITER REVIEWS RIOT AFTERMATH

Developments Since March 19 Outlined

(Continued from Page Thirteen.)

Harlem is no longer fighting for improvements on widely-separated fronts. A direct product of the revelations of the Mayor's Commission, the Provisional Committee for Better Schools in Harlem is now presenting a united front for changed conditions in the community and will hold its first important conference on March 19 (the anniversary of the outbreak) at St. Martin's Chapel, 230 Lenox avenue.

And already results are in sight. Mayor LaGuardia has approved the construction of two new school buildings in Harlem for 1936—the first in twenty-seven years.

The home relief picture has changed somewhat too. Although the individual budgets of Harlem clients are not believed to have undergone any changes as a result of the upheaval, Negro relief workers have been given more recognition during the past year. Where on the night of March 19 Mrs. Vivian Mason was the only Negro administrative head of a local bureau, two others, Edward Wilson and Henry W. Pope, now occupy similar positions. Mrs. Olive Streator has also been made a case supervisor, the only Negro to hold that position.

In the same line, Victor Suarez, a white administrator often accused of race prejudice, is no longer stationed in Harlem. It is interesting to note also that none of the Harlem E.R.B. precincts was affected by the consolidation program recently announced by Miss Charlotte Carr, executive director. This consolidation will cause many relief workers to lose their jobs.

Politically, too, the community has undergone changes in the last year. The election of Herbert L. Bruce as Democratic leader of the Twenty-first Assembly district and the almost successful attempt to name a Negro leader in the Nineteenth were undoubtedly influenced by the militant race consciousness aroused on March 19.

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THE job situation, however, does not seem to have undergone any appreciable changes. At the commission's hearings it was testified that local merchants, the public utilities, the city, state and federal government all discriminated against Negroes in the matter of employment. The Rev. Adam C. Powell, militant young minister; Norman Thomas, noted Socialist, and other witnesses urged the people of Harlem to indulge in widespread picketing and boycotting as a means of combatting this condition.

Prior to the outbreak a considerable number of Negroes had secured jobs in local stores as a result of a similar campaign. Sporadic picketing was carried on in 125th street subsequent to the upheaval. But in May, 1934, local merchants in that area admitted that 200 persons, Negro and white, had been dropped from the payrolls in Harlem stores. They claimed that the outbreak had driven away 40 per cent of the white clientele, making these dismissals necessary. The situation with the public utilities and other large companies seems to have remained largely unchanged.

It is difficult to gauge the effect of the outbreak on the police situation. Since March 19, 1935, there have been fewer reported cases of police brutality, less indignation over the reputed violation of civil rights. On the other hand, the residents of this community have seen more uniformed police during the past year than at any other period in its history. A Joe Louis fight, or any other demonstration has been attended by displays of police strength seemingly out of proportion to the danger represented.

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ALL in all, however, the community has been definitely influenced by the events of March 19, 1935. The Mayor's Commission agreed that the outbreak was the result of years of oppression suffered by thousands of American citizens in the greatest metropolitan center in the world. What lasting effect this upheaval will have on the future of these citizens can only be determined by their own efforts, in the ensuing years, to rectify the conditions so glaringly exposed one year ago next week.