

Adaptation of: Race riot; Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919, Author: Tuttle, William M.

During the hot month of July 1919, Chicago's leading black newspaper, the Defender, recommended Lake Michigan's 25th Street beach, where there were free towels and lockers and where "every precaution is being taken to safe-guard the interests of the bathers.

For teenage boys, however, such advice was ignored, especially as the temperature on Sunday, July 27, soared into the nineties. Fourteen-year-old John Harris was an energetic teenager, as were his companions that day, four boys named Williams. Charles and Lawrence were brothers, and Paul was unrelated, all lived on Chicago's South Side around 53rd and State, while Eugene Williams lived in another neighborhood, about fifteen blocks to the north. The four lads from farther south in the city had met Eugene at the beach.

The heat was already stifling by early afternoon when the boys hopped onto a produce truck driving north on Wabash Avenue. At 26th Street, the truck slowed down again, this time to cross the streetcar tracks, and the boys jumped off. They walked east and they walked fast, practically jogging the seven blocks to the lake because the territory through which they were passing was the domain of an Irish gang that had attacked them several times before with rocks.

The boys were not headed for the black-patronized 25th Street beach; nor did they intend to try to swim at the white beach at 29th Street. They were going to their own, very private spot, which was located just in between. Tied up there was the raft. The product of several weeks of work by a dozen-and-a-half teenagers, the raft was "a tremendous thing," fully fourteen by nine feet, with a "big chain with a hook on one of the big logs, and we'd put a rope through it and tie it."

Harris and his friends were far from being expert swimmers, but they could hang onto the raft and propel it forward by kicking; and, occasionally, "we could swim under water and dive under water and come up," always making sure, however, that they were within easy distance of the raft. "As long as the raft was there," Harris noted, "we were safe." At about two o'clock, the boys pushed off, angling their raft south toward the post-and toward 29th Street.

Meanwhile, at the 29th Street beach, the fury of racial hatred had just erupted. Defying the unwritten law which designated that beach as exclusively white, several black men and women had strolled to 29th Street determined to enter the water. Curses, threatening gestures, and rocks had frightened the intruders away. Minutes later, however, their numbers reinforced, the blacks reappeared, this time hurling rocks. The white bathers fled. But the blacks' possession of the beach was only temporary; behind a barrage of stones white bathers and numerous sympathizers returned. The battle that ensued was frightening in its violence but it merely anticipated Chicago's long-feared race war. Sparked by the conflict at the beach, all the racial fears and hates of the past months and years in Chicago would explode in bloody warfare.

Innocently unaware of the savage exchange of rocks and angry words at 29th Street, the five boys continued to "swim, kick, dive, and play around." The boys noticed a white man standing on the end of the beach about seventy-five feet from the raft, and he was hurling rocks at them. It was simply "a little game," the boys thought. "We were watching him," said Harris. "He'd take a rock and throw it, and we would duck it-this sort of thing. . . . As long as we could see him, he never could hit us, because after all a guy throwing that far is not a likely shot. And you could see the brick coming. . . ." For several minutes he hurled rocks; and "one fellow would say, 'Look out, here comes one,' and we would duck. It was a game that we would play."

Eugene Williams' head had just bobbed out of the water when one of the other boys diverted his attention. "And just as he turned his head this fellow threw [the rock] and it struck him . . . on the . . . forehead." John Harris could tell that Eugene was injured, for he slid back into the water; not diving, "he just sort of relaxed." Harris dived down to try to help, but Eugene "grabbed my right ankle, and, hell, I got scared. I shook him off." By that time the boys were in about fifteen feet of water. Gasping for breath and panic-stricken, Harris surfaced and "began to shudder," "I shook away from him to come back up, and you could see the blood coming up, and the fellows were all excited.." Groaning something like "oh, my God," the man on the beach then ran toward 29th Street.

"Let's get the lifeguard," shouted Harris as he pushed off from the raft. Dog-paddling and swimming under water, Harris finally reached shore. Then he dashed to the 25th Street beach to tell the head lifeguard, Butch, who "blew a whistle and sent a boat around," But by that time there was nothing that anybody could do. Thirty minutes later, divers recovered Eugene's body.

Also by that time, anger had begun to replace the panic and the awe of the black boys. With the black policeman from 25th Street, they marched to 29th Street and pointed out the man they believed to be the rock thrower to the white policeman on duty, Officer Daniel Callahan. But Callahan would not only not arrest the man; he even refused to permit the black policeman to arrest him. As the policemen argued Harris and his friends ran back to 25th Street and "told the colored people what was happening, and they started running this way," to 29th Street.

The argument at 29th Street raged on. While ignoring the pleads of black citizens to arrest the alleged murderer, Officer Callahan arrested a black man on the complaint of a white. In the meantime, distorted rumors of the drowning and the brawl had assumed exaggerated proportions on the South Side. Whites told each other that a white swimmer had drowned after being struck with a rock thrown by a black. A rumor in the nearby "black belt" was that Officer Callahan had not only caused Williams' death by preventing expert swimmers from rescuing him, but that he had even "held his gun on the colored crowd and permitted white rioters to throw bricks and stones at the colored." Hundreds of angry blacks and whites swarmed to the beach. Volleys of bricks and rocks were exchanged. Then a black man, James Crawford, drew a revolver and fired into a group of policemen, wounding one of them. A black officer returned the fire, fatally injuring Crawford. Suddenly other pistol shots reverberated, The restless onlookers, many of them armed, had their cue. The gunfire had signaled the start of a race war.