

Police Relations with the African American Community

In a society where racism is not a foreign policy, the idea of the American Dream becomes nearly impossible for anyone outside of the “white” lineage. In Portland, Oregon where segregation, separation, and subservient groups exist, whites could literally plead innocent for murder against a Negro. While legal progress had been achieved by civil rights activists, the idea of discrimination did not fade easily. The relationship between the growing African American community in Northeast Portland and the Portland Police is a prime example of how racism, discrimination, and hatred isolated blacks and whites throughout the United States. While there were countless events which Albina community members were wrongfully accused for crimes that they were not responsible for, the Portland Police consistently and firmly believed that Negroes were to blame. The loathsome relationship between the Albina community and Portland Police was inevitable. However the interactions between the police force and the black population had proven that the Albina community, and all African American communities, had suffered from police brutality causing many minorities to challenge the role of discrimination throughout the American society.

While the root of racism had began long before the Civil Rights Movement, the Albina community had proven that discrimination was evident between blacks and whites through the unjustified brutality that officers publicly displayed against the black community. “During the early 1960s, 45 percent of all Portland arrestees were black, yet blacks made up less than 5 percent of the city’s population”. (Black & Blue). The Portland Police focused on the black community expecting trouble from “hoodlums”. However, what officers neglected to recognize was the issue of the affects their presents had on the youth. On June 30th, 1967, Jefferson High School, a local school in the Albina community, decided to engage with Operation Listen. The

project was meant to invite parents throughout the Portland community to simply listen to students. Operation Listen allowed students to anonymously state their problems whether the topic focused on school, at home life, or their opinions. The purpose of the program was to give parents perspective on the youth culture. During one session of Operation Listen a negro students had stated that, “Cops sometimes gives us a rough time...Generally there’s a negative attitude toward police”. (Oregonian 1). For the first time, parents were aware of the connotation which students felt toward officers. While the expectation was that blacks and whites discriminated against one another, the community had not realized their affects of discrimination until one negro student began to speak out about the situation. As time passed, adults of the Albina community began to worry that the tension between the youth and the police force would result in riots or worse. With the fear of outbreaks, the adults in the Albina community were motivated to decrease the hostility between the police force and their youths by patrolling the area. Adults routinely walked through the neighborhood and encouraged young men and women to better themselves. Essentially, the adults of Albina tried to maintain the peace in their society with Project “Cool It”. (Oregonian 7) Although, hatred with blacks and whites had not changed.

On the second night of riots, on August 1, 1967, the Portland police requested many cops in the Albina area to contain the situation. Officers from different districts were on call, while all of the Portland police force were on duty in Albina. As the night continued, a local reverend, Wendel Wallace, had commented on the situation. He stated, “And I believe all these police cars around are adding to the problem” (Oregonian 2). The negativity which the black community experienced with the police force was not uncommon. In fact, the mindset of blacks in the Albina community felt that officers were consistently in Albina to watch over their actions, in some sense cops were merely in Albina to act as their surveillance. From the perspective of the black

community, law enforcement in Albina only caused more trouble. The denotation that officers were meant to service and protect the people, was not the case in Albina. The African American society knew that hatred controlled the judgement of white cops, hence how several African Americans publicly suffered from the hands of white Portland police officers.

Nonetheless, the presence of white officers was not the only issue that the Albina community faced with the Portland police system. Between October 1974 and March 1975, there were four unjustified murders against four black men. Each of the black males were killed at the hands of a Portland police officer, yet no officers were sent to trial. Although, Rickie Charles Johnson's case caused the loudest outcry from the black community. On March 23rd, 1975, many African Americans gathered in front of the Portland Police Station demanding that the officer at fault for Rickie Charles Johnson's murder be held responsible for his actions. Many students from the Black Student Union at Portland State University and members of the National Association for the Advancement of Color People joined with the Albina community in the protest hoping that the public pressure would create change. (Oregonian 3). Unfortunately, Johnson's case went unjustified and the aggression between African Americans and the Portland police continued. On April 3, 1981, Portland police began to feel the pressure from the whole Portland community. The distrust that the people felt towards their police system gave the Albina community the "upper hand" in the officers' illegal actions. The citizens of Portland began to see that the officers no longer protected the interest of the Portland community, but simply harassed the black families in Albina. With the high amount of pressure that the Police Department had felt from the Portland community, the officers realized that they needed to change the outlook of their reputation. With the "Cops Have Rights Too" parade, officers hoped that the people in Portland would understand that their actions were not meant to harm anyone. In fact, the officers

felt that, “the feelings of the city should not be expressed by small, vocal groups” (Oregonian 4). Needless to say, the performance of the Police Department was still questionable after their parade. Nearly two months later, on June 23, 1981, the Bradsley and Haslacher Inc. organized and funded a survey based on the actions of their Police Department. (Oregonian 8). While the data was based on perspectives, gender, education, location, and many other aspects, the overall importance was that the white perspective began to change. With more awareness of the police brutality displayed on the Albina community, the citizens of Portland could find solutions to ameliorate the problem. Although, the dispute between the African Americans and officers did not disappear overnight.

On November 22, 1985, two officers decided to sell t-shirts with a slogan of “Don’t Choke ‘em, Smoke ‘em” (Oregonian 5). Alluding to the idea that officers should shoot suspects instead of using the carotid artery. The black community was furious and demanded that the officers responsible for Lloyd “Tony” Stevenson’s death be taken to trial. However, the policemen were reassigned and the decision of disciplinary action was underway. While the case took many months to reach a judgment, the African American community would not let another case go unjustified (Oregonian 6). The Portland Police needed to be held accountable for their racial actions, and the Albina community made sure that their actions were under surveillance as cops once did to their community.

In the end, the Portland Police sacrificed their reputation to keep racism alive in their department. Their hatred for blacks consumed their idea of protecting their people. The relationship between the African American community and the Portland Police is evidence that discrimination exist, hence how many blacks were wrongly accused for crimes. Even though the police force and the surrounding community had attempted multiple ways to seemingly get along

with each other and work out their problems, it's going to take patience and years of working to improve to see change. Especially in a society like this when only 5% of the population is black and that 5% are trying to make this a better place for them to live and better place for them to strive! If it wasn't for those people back in the day, society and the people of today might not be where we are now.

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