

Crime in Bronzeville

As more people poured into Bronzeville/Little Tokyo, the area saw an increase in various crimes.

As early as April 1943, the California Eagle published a front page article that noted an increase in "strong-arm robberies, sluggings for no known reason, and rape attempts on women graveyard shift defense workers."

The minutes from an October 8, 1943 Little Tokyo Committee meeting noted that "there is vice in Little Tokyo" "gambling and the shoeshine parlors (which are fronts for prostitution)."

As crime rose, so did reports of police brutality.

RACIAL TENSION

Racial tension continued to simmer in the months following the June 1943 Zoot Suit riot. Among several racial clashes, a front page article in the October 14, 1943 issue of the California Eagle claimed that African Americans "stormed several stores in the Little Tokyo area Monday, it was reported, after being refused service in one establishment." This was followed by an altercation between an African American and a white L.A. Railway conductor, prompting Mayor Bowron to call for a citywide race unity program.

HIT & RUN

Deaths and injuries from hit and run accidents in the Central Avenue and Bronzeville/Little Tokyo area were higher than in other parts of the city. The biggest cause of pedestrian injuries and fatalities included drunken pedestrians and drivers, jaywalkers, driving against signals and speeding.

Even the handicapped weren't immune. A one-legged man was struck by a hit and run driver in September 1944, at Second and Los Angeles streets. The man suffered injuries to his body and a broken wooden leg. He was a resident of the Alan Hotel, 236 East Second Street, and worked at a shoe shine stand at Third and Main streets.

SHOOTING RAMPAGE

Shooting reports appeared regularly in the California Eagle newspaper. In the Bronzeville/Little Tokyo area, a resident of the Pearl Hotel, 312 East Second Street, went on a shooting spree in June 1944 after getting drunk. He took two shots at his landlady but missed, took a shot at another woman in the hall and missed, but on the third try, he almost severed off the arm of another woman resident of the hotel.

CRIMES OF PASSION

One of the most sensational incidents that captured headlines occurred at the San Mark Hotel, 210 North San Pedro Street, in April 1946. Benny Harris, 40, a steelworker, shot and wounded his girlfriend Bessie Davis, 27, after he found her with another man.

Traffic was tied up for about a mile as police surrounded the hotel and lobbed gas shell launchers into the room where Harris had barricaded himself. However, by the time the police stormed the room, Harris had killed himself.

Another war worker, who lived at 605 Turner Street, fatally shot a hotel night clerk in February 1944 at the same hotel, the San Mark, 210 North San Pedro Street, when the clerk stopped the man from paying a visit to a female friend. The hotel had a policy of not allowing visitors without the person's permission after 10 p.m.

On October 8, 1945, a man was shot-gunned to death at 353 East First Street in connection with a love triangle that involved the shooter, the shooter's wife and the victim.

On Nov. 29, 1945, Laura Long, 28, voted Miss Bronzeville in 1943, fatally stabbed Vivian Smith, 24, with a butcher knife in front of Long's barbecue restaurant, 354 East First Street. The victim had allegedly made unwanted advances towards Long's husband, William.

At a February trial, Long, represented by attorney Walter L. Gordon, Jr., testified that she and her husband first met Smith in Ogden, Utah and that Smith followed them to Seattle and Los Angeles. Long, a resident of 364 1/2 East First Street, was acquitted in a jury trial.

PROSTITUTION

Prostitution in the Bronzeville/Little Tokyo area was common, and they included white customers as well as white prostitutes.

A July 6, 1944 California Eagle article reported that a man was allegedly robbed at knife point by an African American man in a parking lot on the corner of First and Main streets. During the trial, it was revealed that the victim had been robbed by a prostitute, and the accused man, who lived at 103 North Los Angeles Street, had been asked to stand guard.

A Dec. 13, 1945 California Eagle article reported that an African American man, walking in the vicinity of Second and Los Angeles streets, was approached by a white man, seeking a prostitute. The black man, offended by the white man's language, slugged him and knocked the white man down. The black man was arrested for robbery and assault.

A Jan. 24, 1946 California Eagle article reported that two African Americans were freed after being wrongly accused of raping a white woman in September 1945. The white woman, a Boyle Heights resident, had accused the two men of luring her into their car at First and San Pedro streets, driving her out of the city and attacking her. Attorney Walter Gordon Jr. was able to prove that the white woman had voluntarily approached the men and solicited money from them for the purpose of prostitution.

ROBBERY

Robberies also ran rampant in the Bronzeville/Little Tokyo and Central Avenue areas.

Gang members that stalked the Bronzeville/Little Tokyo area got into a free-for-all fight on the corner of First and San Pedro streets on June 6, 1945. The youths were later charged with robbing the victim, but a jury trial acquitted the youths due to insufficient evidence.

An April 5, 1945 California Eagle article reported that a woman, living in a Little Tokyo hotel, robbed a Merchant Marine during a taxi cab ride after the man had become drunk in her hotel room.

On the other side of the spectrum, a World War II veteran allegedly robbed a cab driver on the corner of Third and San Pedro streets on March 10, 1946.

ARSON

Many of the old buildings in the Bronzeville/Little Tokyo area were wooden structures and highly flammable, an invitation for arsonists.

In August 1943, a resident of 802 1/2 East Fifth Street and former manager of a hotel at 525 South Central Avenue had arson charges dismissed against him for lack of a credible witness. The suspect was accused of starting the April 29, 1943, hotel fire, which had almost spread throughout the entire block. A witness testified that the accused threatened to burn the place down after an argument with his wife.

In February 1944, a hotel night clerk at 458 1/2 South Main Street was arrested for setting an estimated 50 fires to former Japanese American hotels in Little Tokyo. He confessed that he targeted the area shortly after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and hoped to burn the Japanese Americans as well as their structures.

POLICE BRUTALITY

Several police brutality cases galvanized the African American community. A Bronzeville/Little Tokyo case involved Calvin Wilkerson, who was beaten by police with a black jack in June 1945, after he was arrested in a mistaken identity case at 754 South Los Angeles Street. Wilkerson, a World War II veteran, ran a business at 33(0?) East First Street in Bronzeville and had gone to Los Angeles Street to purchase merchandise for his business when police officers mistook him for another suspect. At police headquarters, Wilkerson was beaten unconscious. Later, he was taken to the Georgia Street Hospital and released without charges. Churches, civic groups and trade unionists rallied in support of Wilkerson.