



CHAPTER 5

The Powderkeg

"Black power . . . is a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for black people to begin to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations and to support those organizations."

— Stokely Carmichael [Kwame Toure]
and Charles Vernon Hamilton

A new wave of migration occurred in Kansas City during the 1950s. In the mid- to late-years of the decade, an influx of educationally disadvantaged black families moved up from the rural South. As these new arrivals settled into the African-American neighborhoods, they fueled another major expansion which pushed further into the southwestern part of the city. This particular expansion caused one of the most rapid neighborhood turnovers — white to black — in the nation.

In 1956, Kansas City, covering an area of slightly more than 300 square miles, had a population of 480,000. Blacks made up 61,000 of that number. This

was an increase of 33 percent from the 1940 census.

In Santa Fe Place, the population mix also changed. By 1955, blacks were in the majority, living on every street in the neighborhood. Of the 471 single residences in Santa Fe Place in 1956, 65 were white. Whites with children had moved to areas of the city where their children could attend white schools.

Fifty percent of the whites in Santa Fe at mid-century were more than 60 years old and had lived in the neighborhood for more than 20 years. Almost 40 percent were professional or skilled workers. Half had attended university or a professional school. A third were retired.

By contrast, only seven percent of the blacks were over the age of 60. The overwhelming majority — 75 percent — of blacks had lived in Santa Fe Place for five years or less. Forty-four percent were professional or skilled workers, and 75 percent had university or professional school backgrounds.

Jewel Freeman's surveys showed that the median age of Santa Fe blacks in 1956 was 46. The reason was obvious. Houses and rent in Santa Fe Place were expensive. Most young couples simply could not afford Santa Fe. The lifestyle of the neighborhood required the income of more established families.

Certainly, after the D. A. Holmes fire, resentment and fears on both sides had taken a toll. But Freeman found, in the mid-1950's, that a fairly peaceful — at least conciliatory — co-existence had evolved.

A young black man living in Santa Fe Place at the time described his white neighbors. "They are elderly. I always clean off their snow and see about things for them. They, too, have been nice to us. When my wife was pregnant, they kept an eye on her. The lady next door had all my phone numbers at work, to call me if anything happened while I was at work. We have a fine time together now."

Another black resident told about his white neighbors during a time when his basement was flooded. "He helped me to unstop my sewer and waded in the water to show me exactly how to fix it." However, while individual neighbors were beginning to create positive relationships, larger forces of destruction were at work.

Unfortunately, the death of covenants had created the emergence of a more destructive and sinister discriminatory practice: displacement zoning. Several racially-motivated techniques were used. One was "gentrification," a fancy name for the practice of renovating a blighted area until it was too expensive for poor people to remain living there.

Another displacement method called for the total elimination of minority neighborhoods. Using this method, the Federal Inter-State Highway System put into motion plans to evict blacks from their homes. East, north and west — the Interstates entered Kansas City in oddly winding routes which purposefully uprooted one African-American community after another. Already squeezed into overcrowded, deteriorating neighborhoods, black families were trapped. By the 1960s, the percentage of the city's black population living in its largest ghetto had grown from 81 percent to 94 percent.

Santa Fe Place and its residents had faced turbulent times in the past. Early in the century, the construction of the Benton apartment buildings had created a furor among neighbors who had previously signed a covenant prohibiting multi-family dwellings. At mid-century, the challenges of racial integration and the burning of Holmes School had tested and re-tested the will of the residents. But nothing had prepared the neighborhood and its people for what would happen in the 1960s.

Santa Fe, through the 1950s and into the early 1960s, had continued to prosper. It was still home

for some of the city's best known African-American political, business, education and religious leaders. E. P. O'Neal and W. C. Shelton were bank directors. In 1976, E. P. O'Neal was named "Mr. Kansas City" by the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce. Andrew "Skip" Carter, who lived on Victor in 1950, was a radio engineer. He and a friend, Ed Pate, established Kansas City's first black radio station, KPRS. And Reverend John S. Williams of 2810 Benton Boulevard, helped to



When elm blight took the trees from the neighborhood, the Santa Fe Council replaced them with sycamores to keep the streets graciously shaded.

lead the capital campaign for the Martin Luther King Hospital

Well into the 1960s, most of Santa Fe Place was still comprised of single-family homes. On May 21, 1965 ground was broken for an apartment building at 29th and Benton, a real estate investment by John Wyatt, relief pitcher for the Kansas City Athletics. The groundbreaking drew 500 people, including city officials, representatives from the A's, and Charley "O," the mule mascot of the A's. Around the same time, several of Santa Fe's mansions were divided up into low-cost, multi-family rental dwellings. These new housing arrangements made the area more accessible to lower-income families and less attractive to affluent families.

Many of the whites who lived in Santa Fe Place had remained because they had businesses in the area. As these whites retired, the businesses either shut down or relocated. One by one, other businesses began to follow the migration to the suburbs. Frequently, the commercial buildings were abandoned. For the most part, no new businesses replaced the old. These were the infant days of the big shopping malls. Consequently, the thriving commercial community along Prospect and 31st began to fade.

More sinister things also began to happen. Crime, especially prostitution and drugs, became serious.

Santa Fe Place wasn't alone. All these changes were happening throughout the center city and in center cities nationwide. Many of Kansas City's historic neighborhoods were experiencing the

demographic changes. Overall, the city's population was decreasing as more and more young people moved to the suburbs. Incidents of crime increased as neighborhood stores throughout the inner city vanished.

Perhaps, given time, Santa Fe Place could have solved its problems. Considering its long history of self-sufficiency, Santa Fe residents would probably have found a way to work out the challenges brought about by suburban migration. But unforeseen forces beyond the residents' control were already at work.

The bitter disputes over the nation's involvement in the Vietnam War had seriously divided the country by the late 1960s. Equally divisive were the domestic upheavals ignited by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. People who lived through this era often describe the national atmosphere as a powderkeg.

In Kansas City, on the night of April 6, 1968 that metaphor became fact.

Enraged by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., African-Americans in cities across the country took to the streets. Neighborhoods became war zones. Worst hit were those inner city commercial areas with white-owned businesses located near black neighborhoods. In Kansas City, the focal point for that attack was the commercial district near Linwood and Prospect. Buildings were torched. The National Guard was activated and tanks rolled through the area as looting and fighting spread.

Rosemary Lowe, a long-time resident and leader

of Santa Fe Council, remembers that night. "You could see the flames rising up over the roofs. There was a wall of fire. We were afraid. You couldn't tell what was burning — streets, houses, buildings — you didn't know. You asked yourself, 'When will it reach us?' I prayed that we'd be safe. But I said, 'Thank you, God, for giving me this house and if You decide to take it away, so be it.'"

Another resident, Harold Johnson, who was out of town that night, recalled that his home was saved from the torch when a friend painted the words "soul brother" across the front of his house. Other Santa Fe residents remember that the sky was filled with burning embers. They blew like an



The riot of 1968 brought fire, soldiers and tanks to the Santa Fe neighborhood.

invasion of fire-flies across the night sky.

White-owned businesses took the brunt of the mob's violence. By the time the madness ended, two apartment buildings, three houses and most of the businesses along 31st Street and on Linwood near Prospect were smoldering ruins.

After the riots, what had begun as a social and commercial migration to the suburbs became a massive exodus. Flight from areas nearest the riots — areas as seared and stark as a battlefield — was especially intense. Many of the businesses around Santa Fe Place were destroyed in the riots. And the

owners of the ones that remained decided the area was a far too volatile marketplace. The steady, wholesale retreat of the business community would prove to be the most destructive blow to Santa Fe Place.

The 1960s were Santa Fe Place's most violent times. But even the rage which precipitated the riots and the prolonged destruction which followed did not extinguish the neighborhood's resolve. As the city reeled from the riots, forces were already in place to ensure that Santa Fe would rise up — literally — from the ashes.



CHAPTER 6

A United Stand

*"You're either part of the solution
or part of the problem."*

— Eldridge Cleaver
Speech, San Francisco, 1968

Santa Fe Place wasn't alone. The turbulent 1960s significantly changed the make-up of the entire black community in eastern Kansas City.

But even with the changes, Santa Fe Place firmly maintained its identity — its sense of neighborhood. The civil rights struggles of Dr. Miller's day and, later, the civil rights battles of the 1960s only strengthened the resolve of Santa Fe residences to endure and to overcome.

Early on, Santa Fe Place residents had learned that the single most powerful tool to combating adversity was organization. Unite to survive. Unite to stay strong.

Nobody understood the value of this formula better than Willard C. Shelton, a Santa Fe Place resident. In 1970, he had a brainstorm: why not

unite all the street clubs within the Santa Fe neighborhood? Individually, each club, guided by by-laws and overseen by elected officials, was a powerful force within its limited area. But Mr. Shelton envisioned a united force which could attain even greater accomplishments than a divided force.

One day in the early 1970s he invited all the club presidents to his house on Victor to tell them his proposal. From that meeting, the Santa Fe Area Coalition, later called Santa Fe Council, was born. On June 9, 1979, the Council adopted official by-laws. On July 29, 1986, the State of Missouri granted the Santa Fe Council registration as a not-for-profit corporation.

Mr. Shelton served as the Santa Fe Council's first president. Through his tireless efforts, Santa Fe Place was able to secure new curbs and gutters,