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Fear of the Mob

BY MIKE SMITH

FEAR AS IT IS generally thought of is not a primary concern of a photographer. He should be afraid, and sometimes he is, but not at the moment of greatest danger. Fear comes later, when all is quiet and he reflects on what might have happened and did not, when he thinks of the others who were less fortunate, those who did not get out when the going got rough but stayed on to become whipping boys for the frustrations of a mob.

I was working on an assignment for PAGEANT in Harlem when the rioting and violence broke out. I arrived on the scene at 8 P.M., about two hours after the first signs of trouble at the funeral services for 15-year-old James Powell, the Negro boy who had been killed by an off-duty police lieutenant the preceding Thursday. The air was tense, fraught with danger. The streets were littered with bricks, broken bottles, beer and soda-pop cans. Dozens of steel-helmeted policemen lined Lenox Avenue, Seventh Avenue, and 125th Street. Everywhere men moved cautiously, silently. Infrequently we could see a carload of reporters slowly advancing between roadblocks and cops. Few newsmen were on foot as I was.

Then the first shots rang out. They sounded, from a distance, like so many little ladyfinger firecrackers, and about that frequent. I thought someone had thrown a string of these little firecrackers at some cop as a prank. As I walked closer, I could see the flashes of fire from pistols.

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I began shooting pictures frantically. I was curious to see what the police were firing at. They were all aiming at a rooftop, but I could see nothing. Then another bottle struck the street with a shattering sound. As one man, the cops turned and let loose a barrage of bullets. I speculated that they must be shooting blanks. Surely, I thought, no such indiscriminate use of live ammunition would be allowed. But I learned every round carried a bullet.

A Molotov cocktail was thrown from a rooftop and lodged in a tree. Four cops pulled their pistols, took careful aim, and felled a Negro who was fleeing. I was shocked by the actions of the cops. They appeared to be ruthless and unfair.

A rain of bottles began after the Negro was shot. (Two men had been shot, but I did not find out about the second one until later.) One bottle struck the pavement a scant three feet from where I was standing.

Incidents became fewer as the hours dragged on. By daybreak all was quiet. Now when a bottle was thrown, 20 or 30 police cars would answer the call. From this I knew that all was over. The cops were getting bored when it reached the point that they all were answering every call.

The next day, Monday, I went up to Harlem a little earlier. This time I cruised around in a car instead of walking. The atmosphere was as tense as before, but many of the police had been pulled back to their stations. The guard was not as heavy as before.

After riding around for more than an hour, I decided to park the car and light out on foot. I had walked less than a block when I heard chanting and shouting from two blocks away. Soon I saw a tremendous mob of Negroes moving down the street, chanting, "We want justice!" They were well-organized. They saw me and chanted in my direction, waving their placards and signs for the camera. Then they moved on. I ran to the car to give chase.

I caught up with them about two blocks farther on. I pulled the car into a bus stop and leaped out. My feet touched the pavement at the same instant as a barrage of bottles aimed at me. I ran toward the near-

est wall, occupied by a Negro couple. They moved on, flinging over their shoulders, "We won't stand under the same awning with no god-damned white trash!"

The car was only 20 feet away but across a wide stretch of sidewalk. Two blocks away on either side of me were the police—too far to see or hear me. From the direction of the mob I could hear shots being fired over their heads and nightsticks beating on the pavement, the police signal to break it up. All I could think of was what a cop had told me the night before: "I want to make sure what you're wearing so when we find your body, if we ever do, we'll know who you were." He had said it quite matter-of-factly, and at this point I didn't doubt for a minute that what he had said might come true.

Finally I made a dash for the car. A few more bottles clattered to the sidewalk but none near enough to matter. I got the engine started and

began to drive back toward the police lines.I had not gone more than a block when I heard an oath followed by a rain of bottles, this time from street level. One struck the door on my side. A second one hit the back door window, barely six inches from my head, cracking the glass. Several fragments came through my partially open window but did not touch me.

I think I was more afraid at that moment than I was on any of the other racial stories I had covered—Oxford, Birmingham, Montgomery, Jackson. This Harlem business was hatred, pure and simple. There was no cause, such as equality, merely hatred. I would have given anything for several cops with guns, and I was in complete sympathy with any and all tactics that they could have or

would have used if this riot had not broken up that evening.

Now, after reading about Rochester and carefully weighing these northern racial outbursts, I am undecided. I don't know whose side I am on. Because of the nature of the trouble in Harlem—bottles thrown from rooftops—fire hoses such as were used in Birmingham were impractical. Perhaps live ammunition was unwarranted, but I'm not sure of that. Two men died here in New York. But then one died in Oxford, and the law enforcement agencies did not shoot. Where can the line be drawn between when to shoot and when not to shoot?

For those who are not wary, New York is a very dangerous place. Tourists lose thousands of wallets, purses, rings, watches. Innocent women are attacked almost nightly. Gangs often terrorize subways, and looting and robbery are commonplace. Yet to work with a New York City cop for a night or two is an experience in the problems of law enforcement. Nowhere else are the police so tough yet so lenient. When a cop says move, he means move. Yet a traffic violator may get away scot-free if he shows the proper respect to the officer. Corrupt, yes, maybe. Efficient, definitely. I was amazed at the variety of people they must deal with. I was shocked at the seemingly brutal treatment of some, the kindness to others, the aloofness to still others. But I was impressed with the efficiency of the police organization.

Knowing they are the pride of New York, I feel safer. But I still live in New Jersey. ■ ■

MIKE SMITH

A free-lance photographer whose assignments have taken him all over the United States, Central America, and the Caribbean, Mike Smith took the remarkable pictures on the preceding pages. PAGEANT asked him to write down his recollections of what he felt as he covered the outbreak of the Harlem violence. Reared in Alabama, Smith is 23.