SUMMER OF FIRE

In July 1967, whites and blacks rioted in the streets of Cambridge, Md. Buildings were torched

and flamed through the night, shedding light on a city that hated itself By Howard Schneider

Summer, hot and slow and soggy on Maryland's Eastern Shore, in the mid-1960s. I am floating on an inner tube, skimming the surface of a back-yard pool and waiting for a bullet. A few blocks away, crowds of whites and blacks, armed, angry, follow each other through the streets in an ugly dance. They throw bricks and bottles, fire guns and curse each other.

Children may not grasp the details of adult conflict, but they do absorb the atmosphere, and on those days nearly three decades ago, I knew something was wrong. My home town, Cambridge, had become a battle zone, as if the shore's constant struggle between land and water—what is above the surface and what is always just beneath it—had come to control the town's civic life as well as its geography. The old boundaries weren't holding. Blacks called it a fight for equality. The police

With fires still smoldering behind them, National Guardsmen patrol Cambridge's black neighborhood in July 1967. The worst of the rioting was triggered when police opened fire during a disturbance after an inflammatory speech by civil rights activist H. Rap Brown.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB BURCHETTE

Children may not grasp the details of adult conflict, but they

and white leaders called it a riot.

What I knew was simple. It involved lots of men and shouting and shooting, and the shooting part fixed itself in my mind. I imagined a bullet tracing a cartoon path from the black neighborhood a mile away, zigzagging up Oakley Street toward my house, over a fence and around the garden to puncture my inner tube and set it whirling like a loose balloon. Isolated under the summer sun from adult reality, I listened for the pistol shot, and drifted through a war.

Gloria Richardson, a leader of the 1960s campaign to desegregate local public facilities, delivers a statement to the press.

For years that memory has nagged. Was I four? Seven? The racial turmoil in Cambridge lasted for years, and it never occurred to me to sort out the issues of black and white from my childhood because blacks in that town, though roughly a third of the population, were virtually invisible to a middle-class white kid. What did the conflict mean? And why Cambridge, a two-bit town on the Eastern Shore that marked its years by the run of the striped bass and an annual muskrat-skinning contest? Race riots in the '60s were one of the few things that put that port city of 13,000, snug on the banks of the broad-shouldered Choptank River, on the map: The yearlong stay there by the Maryland National Guard, from 1963 to 1964, was one of the longest domestic operations ever by a Guard unit. H. Rap Brown's July 1967 speech to the town, which ended in fires and rioting, is often the only reference point for strangers. To some historians, what happened there marked a turning point between prayerful civil rights organizing in the South and the confrontations to come in Watts, Detroit and elsewhere. In the wake of the riots in South-Central Los Angeles, it seemed that the violence of my childhood might be worth a second look 25 years later.

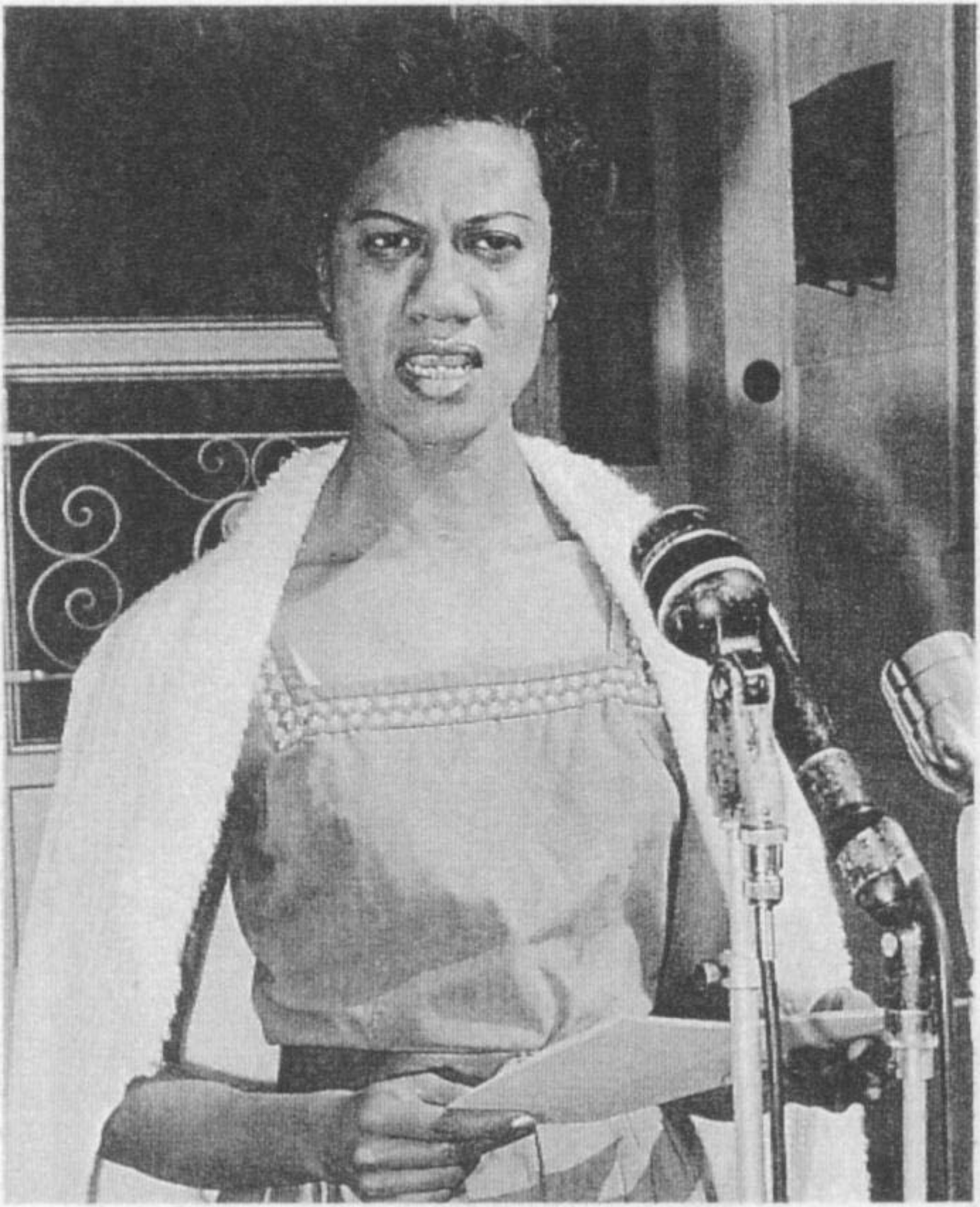
PHYSICALLY ISOLATED UNTIL THE OPENING OF THE CHESAPEAKE Bay Bridge in 1952, the Eastern Shore never took kindly to outsiders even when they crossed the water to spend money, let alone when they tried to change a sheltered world. The attitude seemed to harden the farther down the flood plain they went, from the farms of the upper Eastern Shore counties, down across the Choptank into Dorchester, Somerset and the heart of Maryland's mini-Confederacy. The marsh can take over down there, making roads impassable in heavy rain and contributing to the sense of exile.

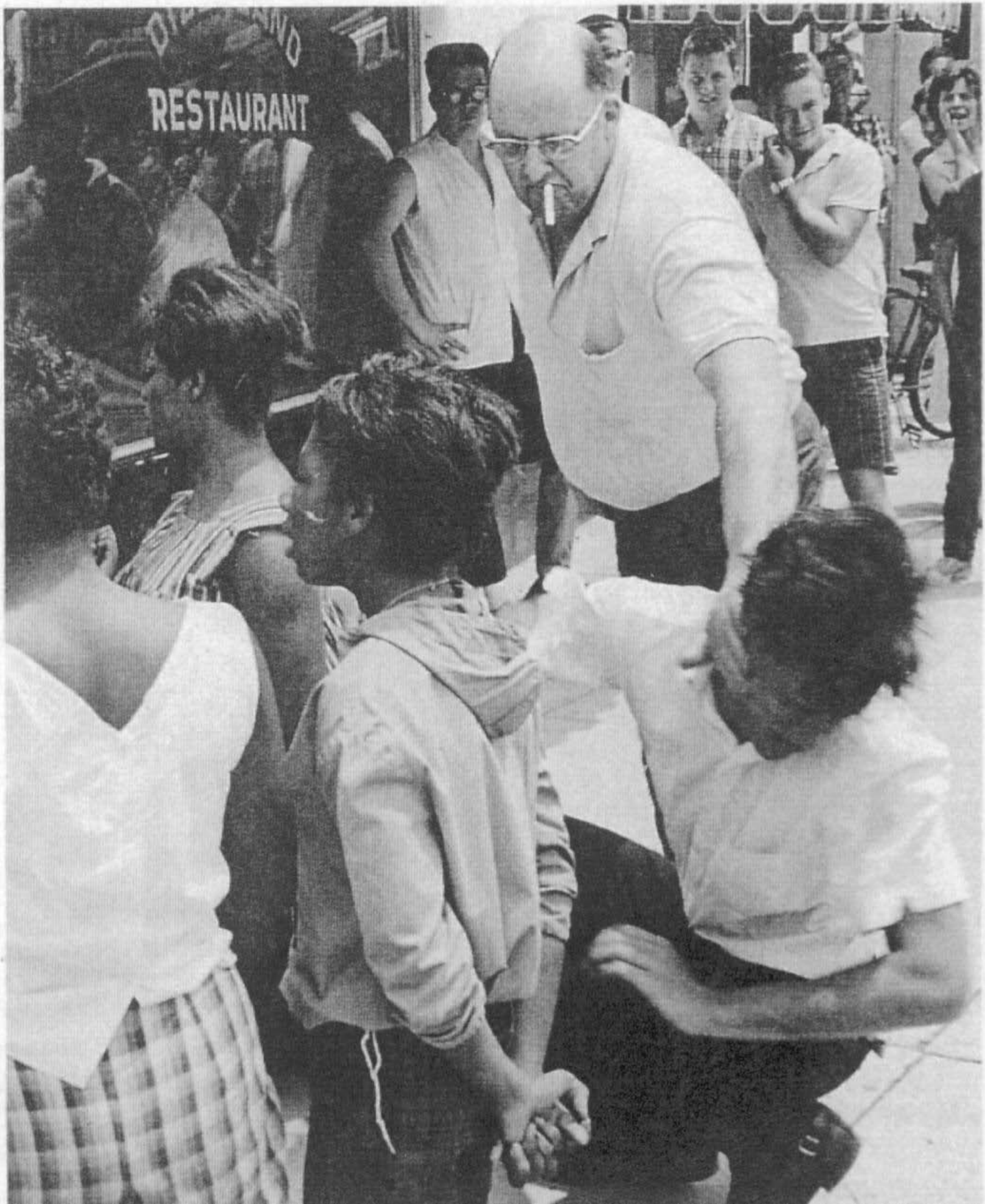
The Shore's economy was based on farming and fishing, and gave rise to a culture oriented more toward the American South than toward the rest of Maryland. A sort of state within a state, it sided with the South in the Civil War, and, through its disproportionate political influence in early Maryland government, frequently got exempted from laws that local legislators did not like. The place had a strong outlaw streak as well, from the "oyster pirates" who strapped cannons to the decks of their fishing boats, to a tradition of gambling and low-level public corruption.

Isolationism became a habit that still hasn't died. In the '60s, when Maryland passed a public accommodations law, Eastern Shore legislators got their counties excluded. In the '70s, Dorchester County school officials were still resisting desegregation, falling back on a flimsy claim that the schools were integrated because black children could apply to transfer to the white facilities if they wished. It wasn't until the '80s—years behind the Deep South—that voting rights changes finally brought single-member districts and black representation to the Dorchester County Council and proportionate black representation to the

While protesters kneel in prayer in front of the Dizzyland Restaurant in early July 1963, owner Robert Fehsenfeld slaps a young demonstrator in an unsuccessful effort to stop the protest.

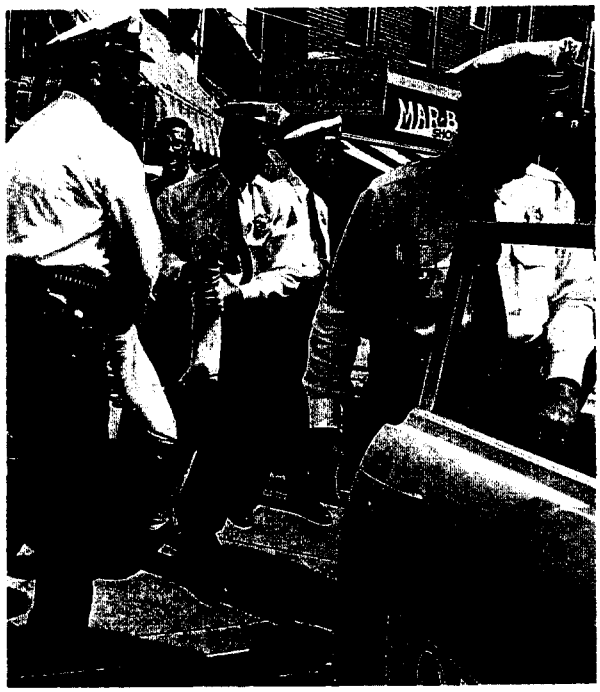
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ASSOCIATED PRESS




RESTAURANT

city council. Change has always been slow here, painfully slow. As late as 1986, the Justice Department filed race discrimination charges against the Cambridge volunteer fire department, a social-civic club that many felt had remained a root of poor race relations since the '60s.

The fire department's clock tower is the main landmark for visitors to Cambridge, which sits at the southern edge of the Frederick C. Malkus Bridge, named after the current state senator who was one of the staunchest anti-integrationists of the time. Up from the fire house, High Street, paved with brown brick, runs from the downtown to the municipal wharf, where oyster boats unload in the winter, and an occasional deep-water freighter can be seen docked on the other side of Cambridge Creek. Neighborhoods near the river get drenched in the smell of low-tide funk and seaweed in the summer heat.



Cambridge police break up a sit-in at a segregated lunch counter and drag out an 18-year-old participant as the protest movement builds during the summer of 1963.

There is essentially one downtown street—the aptly named Race Street, which separated the black neighborhood from the rest of the town. When I was growing up, race relations were part of the local vocabulary mostly in a negative sense; segregation was the principle of social organization. This single fact was the underpinning of my childhood puzzlement, but one that I never fully appreciated even as I witnessed the daily turmoil of the public schools once they were finally integrated in the 1970s. If the rednecks and "poor white trash" shunned the blacks and fought them, then middle-class families like mine generally avoided the issue—except, perhaps, for taking absurd precautions like stocking food in the basement in case, as my father worried, civil authority were ever to break down completely.

Bayonets and gas masks ready, National Guardsmen await a planned July 1963 march by blacks protesting earlier arrests of local demonstrators.

The separation was thorough. Blacks in the balcony of the theater. Blacks in their own restaurants. Blacks in their own schools. No blacks in the swimming pool. No blacks in the bowling alley. No blacks in our consciousness. Friends? Until entering college in the mid-1970s, the only notable social contact I had with an African American was drinking beer with a kid named Keith during our break from kitchen jobs at the local Roy Rogers restaurant.

Blacks in Cambridge had been voting for a century, but they had little to show for it, save token representation on the city council and school board. There were efforts to organize politically in the 1950s, but there was little progress on bread-and-butter issues like jobs, recreation and education. Conditions deteriorated further in the late '50s with the closing of the town's major employer, the Phillips food-packing plant. As a result, the stage was set for the fight in Cambridge to shift to the new plane of economic conflict. The implications for the town's leaders—who also owned the stores and the tenement housing—were a lot more costly than buying a few new ballot boxes.

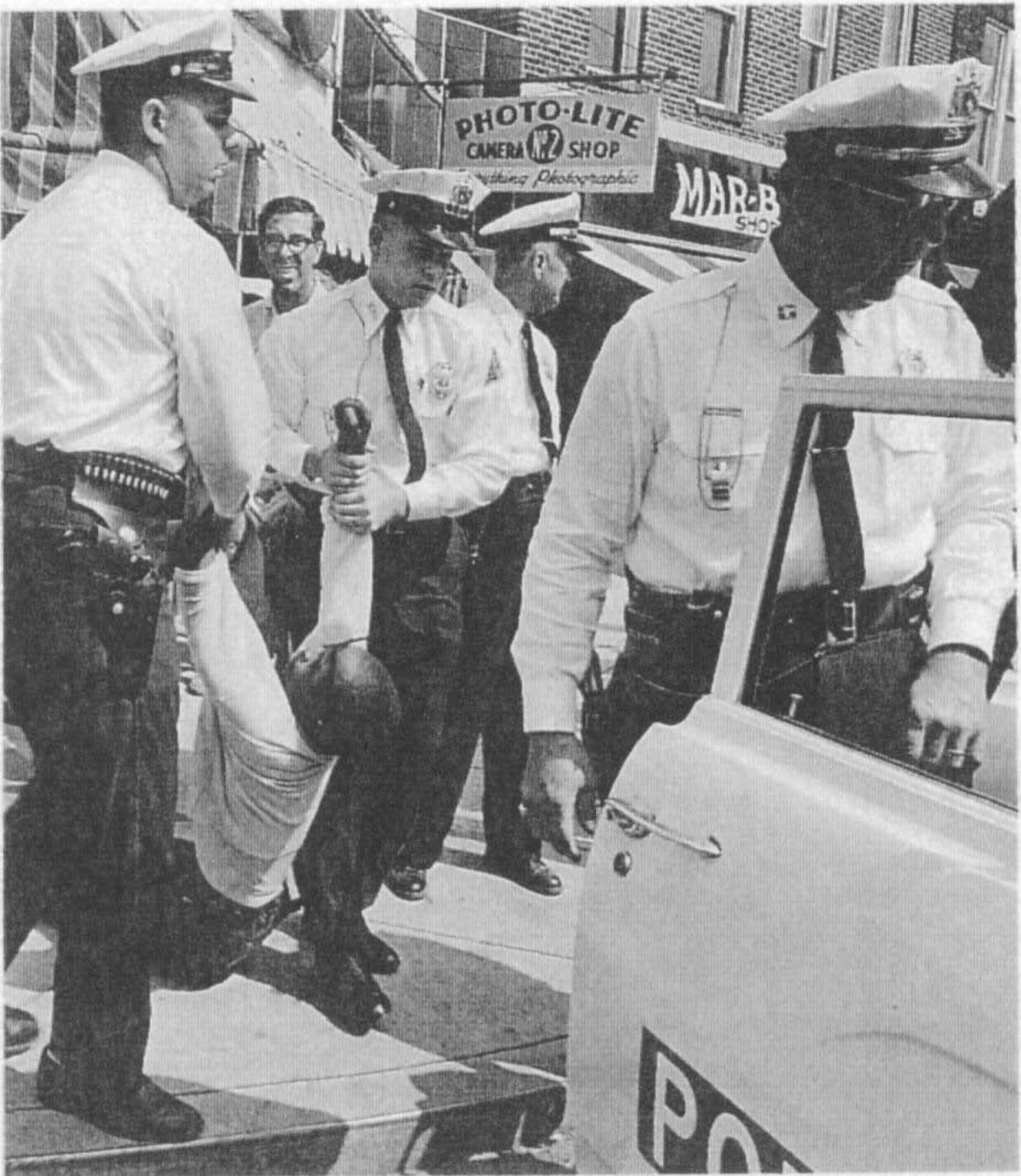
THE ISSUE WAS JOINED IN 1962, WHEN FREEDOM RIDERS AND local blacks began challenging the segregation of restaurants and other public facilities throughout the Eastern Shore. As the lunch-counter movement spread in the '60s, it was considered a plus mark for the Shore that Salisbury and Easton, two of the larger and more affluent communities, dropped the barriers with relative ease, and restaurants and theaters began opening doors. The low point, on the other hand, was Cambridge, where local leaders ignored the inevitable, and instead fixated on the Pennsylvania and New York license tags of the cars the Freedom Riders drove into town. From then on, the protest movement was branded the work of outsiders.

"We have the only outside agitators on the Eastern Shore," school superintendent James G. Busick wrote in a letter to then-Gov. J. Millard Tawes, now in the files of the Maryland State Archives. "They have exploited many children and caused them to have very little respect for the law or any of our institutions, including the home, school, and the State." Ironically, Busick's snail-pace desegregation plan was one of the main draws for such interlopers as the U.S. Justice Department, which as late as the 1970s had to threaten a lawsuit to force more than token desegregation. At the time, however, Busick and other leaders only perceived the threat, not their role in igniting it.

A year passed. The sit-ins aimed primarily at restaurants persisted. A report in the Cambridge Daily Banner from late May 1963 characterized a "gathering storm": "Last night saw . . . the arrest of nine Negro teen-agers . . . a peaceful mass march by some 100 Negroes on the jail, rock throwing by both whites and Negroes and a melee at the [black] Elks Home."

As with many of the events of that summer, responsibility for what happened next rests largely with a white leadership that,

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ASSOCIATED PRESS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CAMERA SHOP

through confusion, racism or the Shore's own brand of hardheadedness, bumbled its chances for compromise. By May, more attention was focused on the city than many in Cambridge probably realized. Gov. Tawes was monitoring events closely, as was then-U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.

Unfortunately, as the situation grew more complicated—prompting high-level outside attention and demands from the newly formed Cambridge Non-violent Action Committee—the man in the middle, Mayor Calvin W. Mowbray, retreated. Instead of countering militants on either side, setting a tone of tolerance and trying to mediate, he closed the door on Tawes, the press and others. Thus, at a critical time in the city's history, it was left to local businessmen like Robert Davis, who owned a men's clothing store and came from a politically active family, to inform Tawes and Kennedy of what was happening.

Indeed, late in the spring, Kennedy had shown interest in getting involved himself, believing, after meetings with some local merchants, that the city was trying to set its race relations right as part of an industrial recruitment effort. It was slow going, but Davis and others said they could point to progress.

Kennedy never got the chance to help because events moved too fast.

In July 1963, Richardson pushes aside a bayonet as she moves to quiet a Saturday night confrontation between National Guard members and protesters that had gotten out of hand.

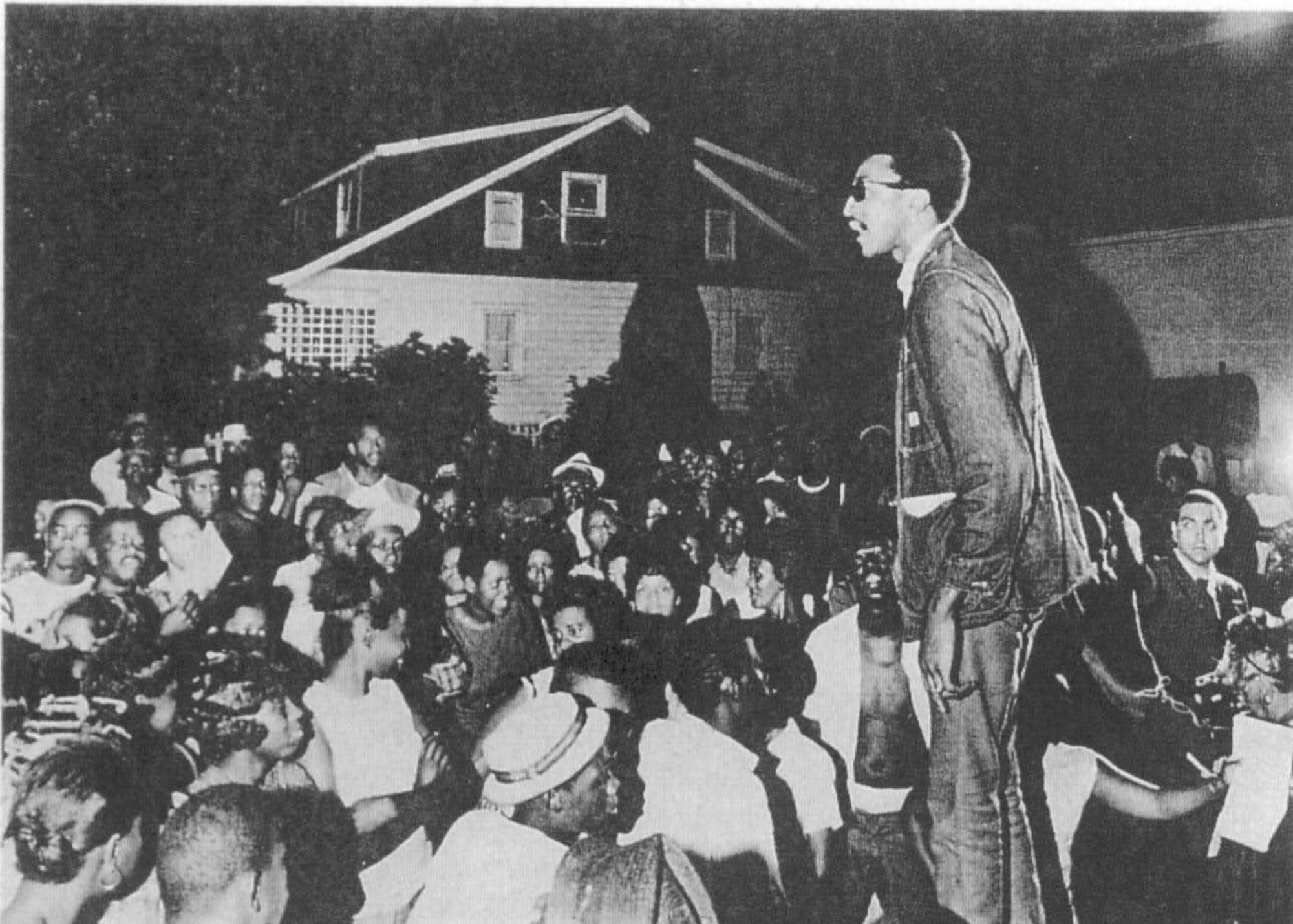
THERE'S AN OLD NEWSPAPER PHOTO FROM THE PROTEST ERA that shows Dwight Cromwell, slender and tall for his age of 15, pacing deliberately in front of a government office. He is dressed like a young executive, a professional serious about his calling—close-cropped hair, dark suit, narrow tie. Nearly 30 years later, Cromwell, a stout and easygoing man in his forties, is standing on Pine Street, shaded from a blazing sun, near the spot where H. Rap Brown—the provocative national head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee—spoke in 1967. Passing motorists wave, slow down and accuse him of shirking work on a Sunday afternoon. Among his neighbors, Cromwell's days as a student firebrand have been long forgotten; they know him as a local radio reporter (covering the local government) and a would-be politician (he recently lost a race for city council).

Pine Street is the heart of the city's black section and remains relatively unchanged since the time of the riots. Along its 10 blocks are well-kept middle-class homes, a smattering of stores and restaurants and, near its end at the edge of town, rows of dilapidated shingled housing.

"The streets are yours. Take them," H. Rap Brown exhorts the crowd on the violent night of July 24, 1967. He would suffer a shotgun wound in the ensuing riot.

The street's dominant feature is an "amphitheater" built on the site of the Pine Street Elementary School, which burned down on the night that Rap Brown spoke. The structure looks more like an abandoned prison than a park. Overgrown with weeds and little used, it is bordered on three sides by concrete blocks, and on its fourth by an imposing brick wall. No plaque marks the property's significance, either as a symbol of segregation or as a reminder of what can happen when civil discussion fails and confrontation becomes a town's currency.

It is useful, in fact, mostly as a parody of urban renewal. The amphitheater was built not as a public gesture, nor to resolve complaints about segregated parks and the lack of recreation facilities, but because bricklaying was one of the job programs offered in the wake of the riots. The would-be masons, Cromwell said, needed practice. From the looks of Pine Street, work has been scarce since then. The newest



buildings are the ones that were replaced right after the fires.

"For a town of this size it was shocking," Cromwell recalls of the conditions that drew him into the civil rights movement. "Cambridge was no different from the South . . . It was just in [the townspeople] that they were not going to change. 'We like things the way they are.' Blacks on one side of town, whites on the other, and everything is hunky-dory. You have restaurants in the 2nd Ward, stay there."

It was on Memorial Day 1963 that Cromwell helped make sure things would change in Cambridge. Outside the segregated bowling alley, five protesters marched with signs. Among them, as usual, were Cromwell and Dinez White, another 15-year-old and a fellow pupil at Mace's Lane High School. The two had been at the front of local protests all that spring, leading the students who at that point were the core activists.

By this time, Cromwell and White were well-seasoned. They had been arrested several times already for crowding the lobby of the local theater and leading other demonstrations that led to the arrests of dozens at a time. But that day, when they dropped their signs and knelt to pray, as they sometimes did, the two teenagers helped galvanize a generation of blacks in Cambridge.

Police moved in and arrested the protesters, as they often did, but this time, local officials pressed the case against Cromwell and White, holding the two youths in jail and prosecuting them for delinquency in the juvenile courts. Within two weeks they were sentenced to an indefinite stay in reform school. White wrote a call to action from the Cambridge jail: "They think they have you scared because they are sending us away . . . Please fight for freedom and let us know we are not going away in vain." In an instant, what had been a peaceful effort led by students to open public accommodations became a cause the whole black community was ready to fight for. The struggle over who could sit in a restaurant or watch a movie from the ground floor took on a much broader dimension.

VIOLENCE ERUPTED QUICKLY AFTER CROMWELL AND WHITE were sent away on Monday, June 10, and showed no signs of abating during the week that followed. Mobs of blacks and whites, barely held apart by local police, threw bricks and fired shotguns. Twenty blacks were arrested protesting outside the courthouse, and once in jail they wrecked their cells and spit on deputies. Windows were broken in several stores around town, a police car was stoned, and two whites were attacked.

The next day, two white men were shot and three businesses firebombed as groups a hundred strong, black and white, squared off against each other. A businessmen's commission created to mediate the dispute was disbanded.

On Wednesday, a flaming pot of oil was thrown through the window of a white-owned grocery, the garage of a moderate black school board member was destroyed by fire, and a third fire was set at a black-owned bakery.

On Thursday, a crowd of nearly 300 blacks was met by an even larger group of whites at the courthouse. A human chain of police in riot gear kept them apart. After the blacks won the release of 11 protesters arrested earlier in the week, the crowd of whites took up their own chant on behalf of a drunken waterman jailed after trying to charge through the police line. In city hall, the mayor and city council made a plea for more help, asking Tawes to send in the National Guard.

On Friday, June 14, Tawes responded, concluding in an executive order that "the possibility of an increase in . . . acts of violence is imminent . . . The situation now in hand threatens to exceed [local police] resources for preserving the public peace." He dispatched the National Guard to preserve order. The platoon of 500 that arrived that summer would stay on duty—shrinking to as few as 14 members during the winter—for a year. The troops, it turned out, weren't issued live ammo, apparently because the Guard's commander, Gen. George Gelston, feared that his forces were as likely to provoke violence as keep the peace.

But the bayonets were real, and the manpower necessary. Tawes tried to pull the Guard out in July. But within days, the troops were ordered back after a fight between whites and black picketers at the Dizzyland Restaurant led to a night of rioting in which five people were shot. For the next year, the tension ebbed and flowed, the size of the Guard force fluctuating with it. Its encampment was a sea of green tents that spread across the grounds of the junior high school.

My memory of all this is contained in a repeated image of pistol-carrying soldiers pulling up to our house in what seemed to be a brilliant green, overgrown toy Jeep. I remember nothing ominous or scary about the soldiers' visits. In fact, they seemed almost festive. Seeing the tents lined up at the junior high added to the impression, as if the carnival had come to town and pitched camp to stay for a while. It was summer, and this was something new.

I learned later that the visits to my house were tied to my father's mission among some of the troops—supplying beer. He was the original exurban commuter, driving to Baltimore every day to work for the National Brewing Co. He had friends among those activated for duty and would bring home cases for them. The men would sit and talk on the back porch, an ordinary scene in extraordinary times.

There were eventual attempts at mediation that summer: committees started, overtures made and ultimately an agreement signed in Washington and witnessed by Robert Kennedy. The underlying attitude of the town, however, was about to be put to the test. As part of the agreement, Mayor Mowbray and the city council adopted a public accommodations ordinance. When it was petitioned to referendum, they even launched what was for Cambridge and that era a fairly sophisticated media campaign, complete with studies aimed at convincing whites that open accommodations would be good for business. Salisbury did it. Easton did it. Why not Cambridge? But the referendum—overwhelmingly opposed in the city's four white wards—was defeated in October.

Tempers cooled over the winter but flared again in the spring. When a wave of rioting followed an appearance by Alabama Gov. George Wallace, sponsored by the all-white volunteer fire department, Gen. Gelston reflected the city's plight in a letter to Gov. Tawes.

"Every male in this town—black and white—is armed," wrote Gelston. "Our job is to keep them apart. Our biggest problem right now is with the white community . . . The low-class element is just waiting" for a fight.

LOOKING BACK AT THOSE DAYS FROM HER HOME IN NEW YORK City, Gloria Richardson chuckles at the ironies: at the spectacle of a town doing everything it could to resist the demands of outsiders, but instead only piquing the interests of Rap Brown, Bobby Kennedy and squads of federal and American Civil Liberties Union lawyers; at the fact that while Richardson herself—the daughter of a locally prominent family—was at the head of the protest movement, her local credentials hardly seemed to matter to the townsfolk. "They knew better. They must have been in a state of denial," says Richardson, now a contract manager with the New York Department of Aging. "One court trial I went to, they told the judge that I was an outsider. They did not want to believe that their blacks were going to erupt."

A sociology graduate of Howard University, Richardson had returned to Cambridge a few years before the riots, expecting to build a life there. She was the granddaughter of the predominantly black 2nd Ward's longtime city council member, and her father, as the local mortician, continued a family tradition of economic independence—a rarity

continued on page 25

CAMBRIDGE

continued from page 18

among the city's black families at the time. What she felt, however, were only limits, a life stretched before her of menial jobs like her first, assisting a local doctor.

The organizers who first came to Cambridge had set up shop in the house of Richardson's uncle and were proceeding with a strategy of helping local blacks define their demands while the student group, led by Cromwell and White, organized picket lines and protests. The intensity of the movement flagged when Cromwell and White were sent away; when Richardson's cousin decided to quit as the local head of the effort, Richardson stepped into the breach.

Pictures from the time show her, gaunt and determined, reading off demands during a press conference or heading a march. She was an enigmatic figure, a young woman who held the trust of a large segment of the black population, was on less firm ground with more complacent blacks who disliked her confrontational style, and was reviled among city leaders and whites who saw her as a stooge of national black militants. Her family's economic security was a key to her influence, since it put her beyond one of the more potent forms of racist retaliation.

Despite the presence of other groups and factions in Cambridge, "Gloria"—as she was addressed in letters, telegrams and other documents—was at the forefront, meeting with state and federal officials and announcing to the press whether protesters would continue marching or give negotiations a chance. She was referred to occasionally as the local Joan of Arc; Tawes staffers sometimes mimicked her style, signing letters to each other "Yours in Peace." When Gen. Gelston adopted the controversial tactic—not disclosed until much later—of choreographing daily protests to avoid violence, it was Richardson whom he called to a nearby Talbot County estate to plan the events.

TENSIONS EASED AFTER THE SUMMER OF 1964. A committee appointed by Tawes came up with yet another report and set of recommendations, and the city and black leaders agreed to the findings. Plans moved forward for a public housing project, the hiring of blacks to city jobs, and job training and education programs. The Guard left town, and so did Gloria Richardson, who chose to pursue a career in New York City. For two years, there was a truce—years so uneventful, a later report noted, that some of the gains negotiated began to vanish after white leaders concluded that black grievances had left town with Richardson.

In 1967, however, a new group called the Black Action Federation again began approaching city leaders on issues, such as jobs and education, where progress seemed elusive. They phoned Richardson in New York to help secure a speaker for a rally, someone who could help them organize. They wanted H. Rap Brown, they told her.

Brown arrived in Cambridge near 9 p.m. on July 24, 1967, an hour late, and was greeted by a crowd estimated at around 400. The police force's five black officers had all been deployed to the Pine Street scene, which was teeming with spectators and reporters. Brown hopped atop a car and began speaking. His backdrop was a black Elks club that had burned in an earlier fire, and the dilapidated Pine Street Elementary School.

"Ain't no need in the world for me to come to Cambridge and I see all them stores sitting over there with all them honkies over there owning them," Brown said as he wound into his extemporaneous 45-minute address. "You got to own some of them stores. I don't care if you have to burn them down and run him out. You got to take over them stores. The streets are yours. Take them.

"You make money for him and come home . . . and then he takes it to his community and he lets you live over here amidst your roaches and rats and mosquitoes . . . You see that school over there? . . . You all should have burnt that school a long time ago. You should have burnt it down to the ground, Brother . . ."

The speech ended around 10, and as the crowd broke up, Brown agreed to escort one of his listeners home. He began walking toward Race Street, with about 30 others tagging along. Reports of what happened next vary, but are consistent on one point: The police opened fire, injuring Brown slightly with a shotgun pellet and setting the stage for a night of violence.

Crowds of blacks assembled and dispersed throughout the evening along Pine Street in the heart of the 2nd Ward, setting small fires in the road. An armed group of whites sped through the neighborhood firing shots at random, then came back minutes later for a second run and were greeted with return gunfire. A policeman was shot shortly after midnight, and stores were looted. By 2 a.m., hours after Brown's speech, the Pine Street school was burning, and the fire had spread to several nearby black businesses. As an estimated 1,000 people watched, white firefighters refused to respond to the call—purportedly because they feared being shot at.

The incident elevated Cambridge again to the spotlight as a place of racial division, and helped secure Brown's place as an emblem of '60s radicalism. There were aggressive attempts to arrest and prosecute Brown for inciting a riot, but a report on file among the papers of then-Gov. Spiro T. Agnew laid the blame for the violence that night on the shoulders of the police and local leaders.

"There are no groups within the white community of Cambridge that can be considered as allies of the Negroes," the report concluded. "The churches have been largely indifferent. Local businesses have shown a total lack of interest." The report, unsigned but apparently a version of a federal analysis sent to Agnew's staff, called the Brown incident "a slipshod reenactment of 1963," with the police spoiling for a fight, and helping to instigate it.

I KNEW LITTLE OF ALL THIS AS IT happened, but I felt the aftermath in the daily tension and hallway fights that reigned in the public schools once desegregation became a fact in the early 1970s. It was present in the derisive talk about "the projects," the public housing built to replace the chicken coops and stalls that lined some streets in the 2nd Ward. White children mocked the projects at the same time they were afraid to walk or drive near them. It was present still at the nearby private high school that my parents chose to avoid the disarray of the public system. The bitter talk of classmates, their hostility toward blacks, seemed oddly abstract in that all-white setting. Separated, free from mingling, their calluses hardened.

Cambridge, like much of the Shore historically, is a jumble of contradictions like that. Quaint, depressed. Peaceful, bigoted. Relaxed, oppressive. The one consistent sense is of a place that never reaches its potential and seems saddled with a burdensome knowledge of its limitations. Within the last few years local politicians chased away an "outsider" who had been hired to direct economic development efforts. Cambridge's goal of becoming a tourist and boating haven like neighboring Oxford or St. Michaels has foundered for years on internal squabbles and the town's inability to overcome its image as too marshy, mosquito-ridden and blue-collar to attract investors. It is slow to change, and above all wants change to come only on its terms, not to be dictated from beyond. The result is a city "folding in on itself," in the words of one local attorney, as department stores make way for thrift stores that make way for vacant buildings.

When Dwight Cromwell got back from his stay in the Maryland Training School for Boys, which had been cut short at four

months because of what his and Dinez White's convictions had unleashed, he discovered that he and White had become folk heroes. To judge from a recent interview, that may have been a high point for him.

After the riots he moved to Wilmington, Del., mostly holding jobs in nursing homes. He returned to Cambridge in the mid-'70s to help care for his mother and has stayed ever since. The radio job came along later and puts him in the role of interpreting the actions of the same institutions that sent him away.

There is a heavy, sagging quality to his voice now, and he sees a circularity in events that has him wondering what the efforts of 30 years ago, as necessary as they seemed, were really about. The town had to be forced to change, Cromwell says, and he does not downplay the positive results. The handful of industries that the city has been able to retain and attract are now open to blacks, and political representation has improved with the addition of a seat on the city council, representation for the first time on the county council and the integration of the fire department and other local institutions. There are signs that the schools are improving as well. Dorchester County now scores in the top half on state basic skills tests, something the segregated system could not claim. Black families have begun moving to the other side of Race Street.

But to what end? Cromwell walks down Pine Street now as an aggrieved elder under the hard glare of kids trading drugs, staring at him from behind sunglasses and using words he did not even know existed as a teenager. He lived in a time when he was lionized by adults for getting arrested, but chastised for drinking a beer. And now he wonders whether the legacy of his efforts was to let the next generation of teenagers swap bags of crack out in the open.

He sits on a bench at the Bethel A.M.E. Church, the center of most of the organizing in the '60s, a weathered scrapbook of press clippings under one elbow. The balcony overhead slants down, knocked out of level, Cromwell says, by the stamping crowds that packed the building 30 years ago. Right now, he says, he needs a nap. A Rodney King vigil has been called for the evening, and there is not much time to try to muster a crowd.

"Times have changed, it's a new world," he says. "Some of the language. I just cringe. They think it makes them look 'bad'. There are hard looks."

He wonders now whether desegregating the schools was a good idea after all, whether the strength of all-black institutions didn't at least provide a source of respect and community pride. He is an-

noyed, as well, that the years come and go with no official acknowledgment by the city of what happened, why it happened and how things could be different. When it comes to commemorating the Cambridge riots, it is still left to the aging crowd at the Bethel A.M.E. Church to make the plans and carry them out.

"We are," Cromwell says, "getting too old for this."

Gloria Richardson's life since the riots could serve as a parable about the city's stagnation, and some of the costs of racism. She returns to Cambridge rarely, only to visit family, which is noteworthy, because before the animosity she felt during the civil rights movement she was ready to make her home there. And she is not alone.

Her children are both professionals—one a banker, the other an analyst for an insurance company—and her granddaughter is in medical school. None feels a close tie to Cambridge, she says. Among her contemporaries, Richardson says, are judges, high-level public servants and others who left and took those skills away from a town that wanted to limit their professional and social opportunities. They don't plan to go back.

"That was one of the other things that drove the movement in the 1960s," she says. "Families were losing their children because whoever could or whoever had relatives in other parts of the country left. Cambridge has lost that talent."

The slow bleed, of money and people, was evident in other ways. After the riots, consumer dollars began to flow out of Cambridge to Easton and Salisbury, where the stores were, and still are, of better quality. We lobbied hard, as kids, for a ride to one of those other cities, to prowl the new Salisbury Mall or walk what seemed to be the livelier streets of Easton. In a town that contributed so much to the local seafood harvest, there was until recently no restaurant to rival the popular crab houses in Oxford and St. Michaels.

And it continues. According to the last census, in the midst of a state population boom that ranged as high as 30 percent in some Eastern Shore counties, Dorchester was one of only two counties in the state to lose residents. The white population stayed relatively stable. The black population declined by 7 percent. A place folding in on itself . . .

All of which only proves that a town can't turn its back on its people and expect to thrive.

"That is why Cambridge is so backwards. It could have been developed as much as the other places on the Shore, but they have always had a circle-the-wagons attitude," Richardson says.

Throughout the archived papers of Govs. Tawes and Agnew—in documents generated by staff, outside observers and Tawes himself (notable since he was an Eastern Shore native)—the conclusion is the same.

From the Governor's Commission on Interracial Problems and Relations: "The basic difficulty in Cambridge is that they believe they are a law unto themselves, and that Dorchester County can be treated as an island apart from Maryland and the U.S."

From Agnew staffer Gilbert Ware: "Not by any stretch of the imagination can anyone say that local officials have done a great deal to insure recovery and progress in Cambridge."

From Tawes: "The National Guard was not dispatched to Cambridge to maintain the status quo, but rather to provide an atmosphere to initiate immediate, fruitful negotiations. I have used my good offices to assist in bringing about a peaceful solution. I am not at all satisfied with the progress."

Robert Davis is among the most optimistic veterans of the riot era. Davis, retired from the clothing business now, thinks the press at the time seriously distorted the Cambridge situation, making the violence appear worse, and the city more hardheaded, than they really were.

Davis was considered a liberal at the time, a leader in the unsuccessful local drive to get the public accommodations law passed at the polls. He also worked behind the scenes trying to integrate the town because, in his work with industrial recruitment, he knew corporations did not want to locate offices in potential racial hot spots. The progress made by the community on its own was real, he said, while the more obvious incidents of violence—the work, he felt, of "some radical whites and some radical blacks" in which there were few actual injuries—came to control perceptions.

At the same time, he looks back and sees that of the 22 businesses he helped to open plants in Cambridge, only seven are left. And he says the community overall remains "poor, sparsely populated and opposed to change" with an "old boy network" of politics that discourages new leadership.

"Racially," he says, the area "is in pretty good shape." But Davis adds that the city is still struggling to overcome its persistent image as a place that shuns progress.

"Gloria said that what happened would affect Cambridge for 20 years, and I laughed," Davis says. "She was wrong. It has affected it for 30 years." ■

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