

Race, Economics and Education in the the Motor City

by

Ralph J Massey

The world seems fascinated by the decline of the U.S...and especially Detroit, Michigan...at least for those who want to see modern urban ruins.

In this connection the events of 1967 bring back personal memories. In July 1967 the author was a 38-year old father of a family with seven children living in a suburb of Detroit and without a near-by relative to lend a hand in the home.

However, there was a "Florence Nightingale", Mrs. Johnny Brookins, a 58-year old Afro-American who commuted daily to our home in a Buick Riviera. Her husband was an auto worker; they had no children and lived a good life in Detroit.

She became the "perfect relative" to our family. But because of the horrific events of that July, we temporarily lost contact with her; and three-months later we left Metropolitan Detroit...moving to northern Wisconsin.

A Bit of History

To understand the Detroit tragedy one needs to start at the beginning of the 20th century. Detroit had a population of 286,000 in 1900...that was before the Model T Ford and mass production.

In the first 50 years of the century (1900-1950) it grew to 1.9 million when it became the nation's fourth largest and most prosperous manufacturing city, the home of the Big-Three auto manufacturers. During World War II they helped save the world producing B-24 bombers, tanks, trucks, Rolls-Royce aircraft engines etc.

But in the next fifty years (1950-2000)

Detroit's population dropped 49% and **in the decade (2000-2010)** 25%...it is now 714,000.



"Rome has ruins, Athens has ruins. But Detroit's are taller — and more extensive."

"The most prosperous city in the nation was brought to its knees. It had endless miles of owner-occupied bungalows that were the respectable legacy of five-decades of auto

industry prosperity. Today it does have a new glistening down-town but that center is surrounded by what appears to be a post-apocalyptic nightmare of ruined buildings and empty space.”

To explain why this happened one should start with a central figure...

Coleman A Young

Coleman Young was a bright Afro-American who was born in Alabama in 1918 and migrated with his family in 1923 to Detroit. The family settled in “Black Bottom”...one of two segregated Afro-American neighborhoods that fostered a distinct ethnic identity. Coleman Young learned the facts of life in the deep south; and he acquired the rhythm and language of the street in the Bottom. He became a life-long radical who wanted to become **The Man** who helped his constituents get what every other American could expect under the Constitution.

Early in his life he associated with radicals. In 1936 a violent response to a racial slur by a security guard at Ford’s River Rouge plant led to his discharge and even made him *persona non grata* with the UAW leadership; and he was a civil rights activist during World War II...making him a “person of interest” to Congressional investigators and the FBI.

He was confrontational and used the “notoriously provocative rhetoric” of the street...principally the “F” word. He made sure that everyone knew that he was the “MFIC”, where “M” meant “Mother” and “IC” ...“In Charge”.

As one of the first Black Michigan State Senators he labored tirelessly for his constituents in the Bottom and “Paradise”, the other Black ghetto. As the first Black mayor, he forcefully pursued more equitable law enforcement and job creation in that order.



WILLIAM LIVINGTONE HOUSE: Constructed in 1893 in the once elegant Brush Park neighborhood and was demolished in 2010.

Race & Economics

Throughout its history immigrants came in waves...first from Eastern Europe and then the American South...drawn by the promise of this rapidly growing metropolis. Yes...the city was prosperous; and Afro-American home ownership became widespread starting in the early sixties. This is evident in the ability of the Brookins family to move into a home of their dreams.

But...the city also had a long history of segregation, discrimination and police brutality that suddenly boiled to the surface.

It started on July 1967 with an early Sunday arrest of 82 Afro-Americans at an unlicensed club where the patrons were celebrating two Vietnam War veterans. It lasted three days and resulted in 43 deaths, 467 injured, over 7,000 arrests and more than 2,000 buildings burned. An estimated 10,000 participated and 100,000 gathered to watch.

Subsequently there was "Devil's Night", a more violent form of annual Halloween mischief-making. It started in 1970 and became an annual event. The destruction reached a peak in 1984; but was greatly diminished thereafter by a civic counter-attack called "Angels Night".

By 1973 the population became predominantly black; and Coleman A Young became the first black mayor who served five terms...20 years in office. His public statements were often easily misunderstood as was the case with this one in his inaugural address:

"I issue a warning now to all those pushers, to all rip-off artists, to all muggers: It's time to leave Detroit; hit Eight Mile Road!

And I don't give a damn if they are black or white, or if they wear Superfly suits or blue uniforms with silver badges. Hit the road."

While Coleman Young contends that this was directed at all of the unlawful behavior that plagued Detroit, it was the first sentence that is most often quoted by his critics as an invitation to the pushers, muggers and crooks to move to the suburbs.

His critics contend that he "cared more about retribution than about resurrection." Another more telling view is contained in *Hard Stuff*, the Mayor's autobiography.

Regardless of who was mayor "Detroit was headed swiftly and inevitably toward a numerically preponderant, politically dominant, and economically isolated black population, and Coleman Young put the pedal to the process."

This statement is made after recognizing that the Mayor was not an ideologue when it came to job creation. For instance, he induced GM and Chrysler to build two modern auto plants within the city using the power of eminent domain to acquire the necessary real estate. Unfortunately, these two new plants were not sufficient to offset other losses. Also, he allied himself with Henry Ford II to realize the dream of a new glistening city core to attract business, tourists and residents.

But this is not the whole story.

The Big Three/UAW Tango

The auto companies grew over five decades and like many powerful organizations they acquired an "institutional arrogance and nearsightedness". For instance, it took decades for the

industry to respond to the design and value incorporated first in imported German and then Japanese cars.

In addition, the United Auto Workers became the other half of a labor-relations “tango”.

The UAW was formed in 1935 by Walter Reuther within the framework of the new Labor Relations Act, the basis for compulsory trade union membership in private industry,

Walter Reuther was a very powerful leader who focused solely on wages and fringe benefits, “sit-in strikes” and “brilliant negotiating tactics”. He brought a “corporatist mentality” to labour-management relations that was touted as an American response to radical socialism. While he brought true prosperity to his union members, the UAW/ auto company tango produced wage and fringe benefits that could not be sustained in the face of foreign competition...whether such cars were imported “built-up” or assembled in the “right to work” states of the South where union membership was not a condition of employment. Auto jobs and production moved out...producing a diminishing tax base and municipal bankruptcy.

Public Education

And public education suffered a similar fate. When the U.S. Department of Education made its first assessment in 2009, it concluded that -

“There is no jurisdiction of any kind, at any level, at any time, that has ever registered such low numbers...They are barely above what one would expect simply by chance, as if the kids simply guessed at the answers.”

Today public education is managed by Robert C. Bobb, an appointee of the Governor and an Afro-American with 30-years of executive management experience.

He contends that there was a failure of leadership. The Detroit Board of Education knew of the District’s academic, operational and financial shortcomings; but they “derided and dismissed the reports”. And the teachers’ union even helped defeat a private proposal to fund small charter schools. He contends that now it is time for that galvanizing moment where what is left in Detroit “pulls together in a way that it’s never done before”.

Yes...Johnny Brookins died in 1988 and her “adopted” family maintained contact with her to the end.

Yes...Detroit is portrayed as a “City of Ruins” and perhaps it was inevitable...and

The United States sidestepped the ending of slavery at the time of its founding in 1776; the institution was destroyed by the Civil War in 1865; but for 100 years thereafter it did not deal with the residue of racial animosity and hate. But one can conclude that Coleman Young overlooked the end of segregation and the real gains already being realized in Detroit by Afro-Americans.

The economic forces generated by an overly centralized growth of automotive production over 50-years in Detroit was followed by a period of an even more rapid growth in lower cost global production; and Detroit collapsed.

Good leadership may not be able to turn completely such tides of history; but one can argue that a Nelson Mandela instead of a Coleman Young could probably have made a difference.