Shots in the Back: Exhuming the 1970 Augusta Riot (Episode 2 - A Lay Of The Land In 1970 Augusta)

Host: If you're just joining our show, go back and start by listening to the first episode. Everything will make a lot more sense if you do.

Previously on Shots in the Back.

Kaliyah: This young teen named Charles Oatman. He went to jail. And he was like, suspiciously killed. Like, the police just let it happen.

Claude Harris: Inmates can't do that. They can't have weapons in there. They can't have that many cigarettes — guards did this.

Newscaster: The National Guard was called in, more than 2000 of them.

Henry Green: The Black people in Augusta are tired of being told that there is no racial problem here.

Man: Well, I'm not surprised that it's happened here, I'm surprised that we're not talking about it.

Host: From Jessye Norman School of the Arts and Georgia Public Broadcasting, this is "Shots in the Back: Exhuming the 1970 Augusta Riot." I'm your host, Sea Stachura.

What caused Augusta's 1970 riot? We know that Charles Oatman's violent murder and that law enforcement's apathy sparked it. But even before that death in the county jail, Black Augustans were angry and frustrated. Why?

Unhealthy housing conditions, lack of access to political power, limited employment options, substandard education, police misconduct — these are just a few of the problems Black Augustans were living with.

Malcolm X: The reason we say that housing is such a key problem: when you live in a poor neighborhood, you're living in an area where you have to have poor schools.

Host: This is civil rights leader Malcolm X. He's speaking in 1964.

Malcolm X: When you have poor schools, you have poor teachers. When you have poor teachers, you get a poor education. And when you get a poor education, you — you are destined to be a poor man and a poor woman the rest of your life. Poor education, you can only work on a poor paying job. And that poor paying job enables you to live again in a poor neighborhood. So it's a very vicious cycle.

Host: The cycle Malcolm refers to has been documented and studied for decades. Let's take environmental pollution: a lot of studies have shown that poor people frequently encounter it at a higher rate. And that leads to poorer health. But, since they don't have a lot of access to political power, those problems don't get addressed. And if you're Black American, you're also facing job discrimination, police brutality, lower earnings and those little reminders that you're a lesser than. This stew of stressors isn't unique to one part of the country. It's everywhere. But in every city and town, there is a slightly different recipe.

In today's episode, we're going to talk about the stressors that were particular to Augusta. We'll take it category by category, and we're going to start with housing. Actually in the neighborhood of Hyde Park, Augusta.

Sea, with students: Yo, get in the bus!

Student: We're coming!

Host: I took my students from the Jessye Norman School of the Arts on a field trip to the neighborhood. No one lives here anymore. Most of the houses have been torn down. It's kind of like looking at a grassland. Ten-year-old Gabbie Stallings says it's familiar.

Gabbie: I've actually been here before. When I was little, I rode past here cause I remember, like, seeing this tree a lot. That one over there and like flowers — like those red flowers that are over there. This is how, one of the ways how our mom would take us home from school.

Aijalon: Are there any fishes in this? If so, they're dead. But there are a lot of plastic and fish can, can't fish choke on plastic?

Host: The neighborhood got its start in the mid-1940s. The city was smaller then, and Hyde Park sat just outside of its limits. Basically, the owner of a horse race track sold it to a housing developer. That developer built some streets, but not much else.

Sea, with students: This right here, guys, this is where the neighborhood started. So the first houses in the neighborhood were directly across the street. And then behind us, that was a junkyard.

Host: It wasn't the most desirable property, but it was affordable for people like Deborah Dean's grandparents. They had been living on scraps sharecropping in a neighboring county. So her grandparents scrimped until they could buy a plot of land. Then they built their home — hammer in hand — on the weekends. A generation later, her own parents would move into a house down the street. One of my students, Aijalon Henderson, asked Dean about growing up there.

Aijalon: How was it living in Hyde Park?

Dean: Hyde Park was wonderful for me. I guess one of my best memories was just being able to go outside, go out the back door of my grandparents house. And I was able to go pick strawberries. I was able to pick blackberries. I was able to pick tomatoes. And my grandfather had — oh, my goodness, I think it's about 10 or 12 pecan trees.

Host: Dean's grandparents moved to get ahead. They wanted to pass something down to their children. But this was back when America's banks wouldn't lend to Black Americans. So families put their resources in property and found ways to save. Most people had gardens and chickens. Some even had cows. Some opened neighborhood businesses and started churches.

Dean: So because, you know, back in the '70s, '60s, you know, it was a lot of strife for African-Americans. We had to fight for our civil rights. But I didn't see that struggle — don't get me wrong, I understood there was a struggle, and I understood that struggle. But that struggle kind of happened outside of Hyde Park — because inside of Hyde Park, we were all equal.

Inside, we were all one. It's the way I felt. I didn't see the difference until you left "The Park."

Host: Dean believes in focusing on the haves and not the have nots. And the neighborhood had a wealth of fellowship and collaboration. They could create their own 4-H classes, for instance. But they couldn't build their own sewer lines. And Hyde Park had no sewer lines.

It had no paved streets, no running water and no streetlights — and this was in 1970. People were still carting their own water and using outhouses. And here's the kicker: the whole neighborhood was in an undesignated floodplain.

Dean: The land that my grandparents were able to purchase along with the other families was kind of in a bowl, OK. It was kind of — it used to be a swamp, as a matter of fact. And think of it like a bowl of cereal, per se. Got a bowl of cereal, and the cereal and milk is where the community is. So if you were having rains that are coming from the sides, it's going to end up flowing into the bowl.

Host: Hyde Park had been plopped in the middle of industry. On one side there was a telephone pole factory. There was also a brick yard, a junkyard, a power substation. And then on either side of the neighborhood itself were railroad tracks. So every time it flooded, this bowl basically filled up with industrial run-off. And that meant their houses and their gardens were filled with this industrial poison. Even today, my students picked up on that during our tour of the neighborhood.

Aijalon: It don't smell too good out here.

Gabbie: It smells like onions.

Host: Hyde Park was not unique, even in Augusta. Most African-Americans didn't earn enough to own their own homes. Many lived in dilapidated and roach infested rentals and housing projects. The city didn't enforce rental property codes, despite many complaints from community members. If there was a water leak, a roach infestation, a broken step, landlords weren't compelled to deal with it.

Complaints to city hall went unheard. In fact, a few days before the riot, several people from another neighborhood just a couple miles northwest of Hyde Park came to a city council meeting to reiterate their concerns. Here's a dramatic reading of those meeting minutes.

Mrs. Conley, played by actor: I'm Mrs. Conley from the Turpin Hill neighborhood area and you have met me before. I've been to see you about water and sewage in our area. We have signed petitions and sent. We wrote to Atlanta. We wrote to Washington. And we still haven't been able to get the federal government to match the funds. We're here tonight to ask the council — will they please send some kind of telegram or something that will hurry this up for us so that we can get the necessary water and sewage? This is badly needed in our area. We have open ditches, cesspools pouring down our streets, and we can't stand the pollution.

Host: The mayor, Millard Beckum, reminded Mrs. Conely that she'd been to see him two weeks ago.

Beckum, played by actor: Well, I think I told you then — and I'll tell you now — the city of Augusta has its money. It's ready and willing and able to do its part of the job. But we cannot move without the federal funds. I've been to Washington twice and I've been to Atlanta three times on your project.

Mrs. Conley, played by actor: Well, I think after 20 years, we could have some water and sewage in our area.

Host: The mayor corrected her. It had only been 17 years. But in that time, new water lines and sewer lines had encircled Turpin Hill. So why not in Turpin Hill?

Beckum, played by actor: The money is not available. As soon as it was available, it would be allocated. And I've been to Atlanta I know four times about this very project.

Host: That wasn't good enough for one resident. The council minutes only call him Mr. Padgett.

Mr. Padgett, played by actor: Mr. Mayor, maybe if you've not been in Atlanta all that many times; maybe if you just take all these city councilman up there with you and carried them to Washington. Now, these waters and sewages and things in them street out there stink worse than dogs. And they say Black people stink. Well, no wonder we stink — because we ain't got no water to take a bath with.

Host: The audience applauded. Councilman Grady Abrams remembers that day. He had encouraged those residents to come to the meeting.

Abrams: Mayor Beckum walked out of the meeting. He just walked out and close the door. And we went in his office, and he still refused to talk.

Host: Let's switch gears now to talk about the city's politics. You probably remember Abram's from episode one. He was the city councilor who told Black Augusta about Charles Oatman's body. Abrams got into politics because of Augusta's white leaders. They took note of his sales performance at the white-owned Metropolitan Life Insurance. He had written over a million dollars worth of insurance in a single year.

Abrams: The first year, I wrote more insurance than anybody in the office.

Host: Abrams success was actually even more notable. He could have earned those sales for the rival Black-owned Pilgrim Health and Life Insurance Company. But

he didn't. All of this prompted a businessman named John Murray to take an interest in Abram's.

Abrams: John Murray, who owned Murray Biscuit Company at the time. Big, big cookie producing company. He was a political kingpin in Augusta.

Host: Murray is the one who helped get Abram's elected. And he needed that support because Augusta's city councilors had changed how officials were elected. The new system diluted the Black vote. Black activists didn't stand a chance. Professor Mallory Millender of Paine College says that's where the Murray Machine came into play.

Millender: John Murray would tell the Black voters leagues which candidates to put on their slates. And those slates were passed out into the Black community on Election Day. So Black people saw Black people telling them who to vote for and they voted for them — but the real control was coming from John Murray, and white people, and the heads of the voters leagues. Sometimes they'd get $10,000 or so for their organization, that kind of thing.

Host: Grady Abrams wasn't even thinking of politics until Murray took notice of him.

Abrams: He wanted to see Blacks more involved in the community and that he thought it was about time that we had another Black in the second ward, rather than a white. That he would pay all of my campaign expenses and that he would put all his support behind me, which he did — and I was elected. Also, when I went in there, being naive about politics, I had thought that the people who served were there to serve the needs of people.

Host: Instead, he learned he was expected to stay quiet. That wasn't in Abrams' nature. To his mind, that was in the nature of the Negro — not the Black man. He explained the difference to a reporter with CBS News.

Archival Abrams: In Augusta, we have a special labels for our race. Negroes really, are primarily the, the, the ones who have been answering the power structure — answering to the power structure. They have gone and told these people that "We are living OK. Everything is fine in the neighborhood. Don't worry, we have no problems."

They have refused to listen to the Black man in the neighborhood. And this is the man who needs to be listened to. He may not express himself in the language that

we as officials want to hear — but we, we must hear him and stop listening to the Negro.

Host: Abrams was in a precarious position. To many Black Augustans, he looked a whole lot like a yes man. His position had been bought and sold by John Murray. Abrams tried to overcome that by working in the public's eye. People like Murray and the city's mayor, they didn't like that. They preferred that he operate more like a — quote unquote — Negro. The same way that B.L. Dent did.

Dent worked behind the scenes. That's according to local historian James E. Carter the third. He asked and he appreciated whatever white counselors would offer.

Carter: He got some streets paved around in Black community. He got street lights put on the main streets. You know, things like that. But as long as it didn't infringe upon anything going on the white community.

Host: So that leads us to employment.

City Councilor Dent also tried to improve hiring, but white business owners were typically satisfied with tokenism. And white city leadership stood on the sidelines, often claiming that private business owners could do as they wish. Sears Roebuck built a big-box store in Augusta in the late 1950s. They hired local construction companies for the $1 million job. And they announced they'd hire 100 new workers.

Carter: Somebody came here from the office in Chicago, the headquarters. And in his remarks, he publicly said that "We don't plan to hire any Negro" — that was their term, Negro — "workers for this store." And the whites just stood up and applauded. Black got up and left, who were in the audience.

Host: Sears only hired Black workers as maids and janitors. The same was true in Augusta's new factories, like Continental Canning and in Augusta's City Services. That white owned businesses frequently discriminated against brown and Black workers is well-known.

Job discrimination got in the way of climbing out of poverty. If you were Black and born into poverty between 1955 and 1970, you had a 25% chance of moving up the economic ladder. If you were white, you had a 60% chance. It's an untenable situation. So much so that some people might start praying for miracles, like a football scholarship or a voice of a generation. A voice like James Brown's.

James Brown Song, I'm Black and I'm Proud: Say it loud. I'm Black and I'm proud. Say it loud. I'm Black and I'm proud.

Host: This is Brown's "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud."

James Brown Song, I'm Black and I'm Proud: But I say we won't quit moving until we get what we deserve.

James Brown, archival: I don't have to tell you, but since you're sitting out there and we're together, I want you to know that I'm still a soul brother.

Host: Brown was an Augusta native.

James Brown, archival: In Augusta, Georgia, where I used to shine shoes in, in front of a radio station called WRDW.

Host: This is Brown talking to an audience in Boston in 1968, the night after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's assassination.

James Brown, archival: I used to shine shoes in front of that station. I think we start off, get three cents, then up to five cents and I finally got to six cents — but now, I own that station. You know what that is? That's Black power. I work each and every day to make you proud of me, because my fight is to make a Black man see that he can be first class and think first class.

Host: The chances of repeating Brown's fortune — minuscule. He's the exception to the exception of the rule. Most Black entrepreneurs faced a life more like Rev. Claude Harris' father. Harris' dad ran an auto repair shop. One day, the younger Harris and a white friend of his father's were at the garage alone. A white man parked directly in front of the business' driveway and Claude Harris told him...

Harris: Sir, you can't park — you blocking the driveway and our customers can't get in. He looked at me like I was trash. He's a white guy and started walking away. So I hollered again: "Sir, you can't park here, you're" — I'm trying to be nice?

Host: The white friend was a private investigator named English.

Harris: English got out from under — and he had a gun — and he said, "Hey." And so the guy turned around and said, "What you want?" And he said, "Didn't this young man tell you to move this car." He looked at him and said: "Don't mean nothing." He said, "But didn't he tell you to a move it?" He said, "You mean to tell me you going to take the side [bleep]."

Host: English pulled his gun and stuck it under the guy's chin. And the man moved his car. To many, it seemed white Augustan's wanted Blacks to suffer in big and small ways. Some resented having to spend their money at white owned filling stations, pharmacies, grocery stores and laundromats. Most of the businesses in the Black business district were white and Chinese American owned. James E. Carter the third says Black people were also suspicious of the Asian business owners.

Carter: Blacks always figured Chinese sold them out and cheated them in their grocery stores and everything else. For instance, they sold them bad meat. And they'd hike up the prices compared to Black grocery stores. And they never associated with Blacks. Never had anything to do with Black people. And most of them lived in their store — either above it or behind it.

Host: Some people I spoke with echoed this sentiment, but by no means all. Ellen Dong is Chinese American. She was born and raised in Augusta. She and her family lived above their grocery store and she says they kept busy.

Dong: I don't think it was deliberate and I don't, I think, I just think that's — I think that's just the way it was, because we went to school. After school, we had, we went to Chinese school. And then by that time, it's time to get your homework done and start the next day all over again.

Host: Dong says that she remembers having friendly relationships with her Black neighbors. But she was aware of the tension, too. For instance, she could attend white schools and visit white libraries. Black students could not.

Dong: Someone said they resented Chinese coming into their communities to open a business. If Blacks had wanted to go into their community and open a business, they could have. If they had, had the, been able to get a little building and open a little business. But if they did not, what's wrong with anybody coming into anywhere and opening up a business if you can make money and make a living out of it?

Host: The answer to that question is neither singular nor simple. The problem wasn't that Black people didn't want to open businesses in their neighborhoods. It was that many couldn't. The system at that time — the limited access to quality education and an oppressive economic system — made that very, very challenging. Which brings us to our next collective frustration for African-Americans in Augusta: schools. That's ahead as "Shots in the Back" continues. This is "Shots in the Back." I'm Sea Stachura. We're talking about the circumstances that led to the 1970 Augusta Riot.

In 1970, Augusta's School District was still segregated. This was 15 years after the Supreme Court had ruled segregated schools unconstitutional. But Georgia was still fighting it. Professor Robert Pratt says that actually wasn't uncommon. He's a history professor at the University of Georgia. At the same time, white residents were also opening private schools.

Pratt: If you look at the, the origination date of many of these private schools that sprang up in the South, you will see a good many of them — we call them segregationist academies — sprang up in the years immediately following the Brown decision.

Host: Augusta had a county-wide population of about 150,000. And during this same era, six private schools opened. Governor Maddox encouraged it.

Maddox, archival: Private schools. We've got thousands of Sunday school buildings across this nation used an hour or two week, already made to order to operate private schools, if need be, to save our children.

Host: Maddox and other governors couched their refusal as an issue of local control.

Maddox, archival: Anything that will work to help us to preserve local control of education — and to help to improve education for Georgia children — I will be in favor of it. We may have to develop tuition grants.

Host: Professor Pratt explains that these grants came out of the state's coffers.

Pratt: And so rather than fund public schools, they were giving tuition grants to white parents. And so here you have state legislatures using tax dollars from Black people to fund tuition grants to give to white parents to send their children to private school.

Host: There is still an echo of these today. Say a Georgia resident gives money to a private school scholarship account. They can then get a state tax refund for the full amount they donated. So state money is still steered to private schools.

Over the course of my years of reporting, I came to understand that some whites were adamant integration would never really happen. That was made clear to me with a story: I interviewed a white person who had attended Augusta's Academy of Richmond County. This was in the late 1950s. And the school was considered to be one of the city's best. Students still climb its long marble staircase to the front

doors. One day, this student's teacher walked into class and made an announcement. Here's an actor performing the story.

Actor preforming teacher: Class, I want to let you know something. I've just learned that four Blacks enrolled in the elementary across the street this morning. Now settle down.

Host: The students were incredulous. How could this happen?

Actor preforming teacher: Oh, it was easy enough. They live in the county. All Mr. and Mrs. Black had to do was fill out the paperwork.

Host: Then the double meaning hit: Black. A category of person. Black. A surname. The class of white students erupted in laughter, probably in relief. The same way you laugh off danger once you're safe — but safe from what?

Pratt explains that many white Southerners didn't see the Brown decision as a step forward for America. They...

Pratt: Saw it as a declaration of war, because they saw it as an assault upon their values.

Host: It echoed an incident from a few months before. Another town's white residents had attacked and overturned two busses carrying Black children. They had been protesting integration. In Augusta — while white parents were figuring out whether to enroll their kids in private schools — Tyrone Butler says Black teenagers only had one option.

Butler: There were only one high school for Blacks. And that was Laney. And you either went to Laney or didn't go anywhere in, in, in Richmond County.

Host: Butler remembers that some of its friends took a bus more than five miles to get to Lucy Laney High School. The trip took them past half empty schools that belonged to white and Asian-American students. Black students weren't allowed to set foot in them because of what their skin color represented. Everything bad. Butler says he internalized that.

Butler: That's when I knew, I was the cooked, that I was dumb, and I was stupid, and I was black, and I was ugly. And I used to take bleaching glow to try to make myself lighter. And not only me, but a lot of us — nobody wanted to be Black in America.

Host: White Augusta had made it abundantly clear they were unwanted. The county had actually refused to educate Blacks past eighth grade until just before World War Two. In the mid-1960s, the district built a second Black only high school: T.W. Josey. That's where Mallory Millender taught French for several years.

Millender: You might not have any books. You might not have any paper to write on. You might be sharing a desk with somebody else.

Host: Millender began his first school year with 14 French language textbooks — for close to 100 students. He was undeterred.

Millender: But what I did was to mimeograph — those are a copying device — from those books. And I would distribute those pages to the students, until we ran out of paper. Then I started writing it on the blackboard and they'd copy it.

Host: Millender was finishing his master's at the time. And he remembers other teachers at the Black schools being equally well trained.

Millender: The State of Georgia would pay a Black person who wanted to go to the University of Georgia or one of the state schools, they would pay his tuition anywhere in the country that he got accepted — in order for him not to go to a white state school in Georgia.

So many of the Black teachers went to Columbia. They went to the University of Chicago. They went to Harvard. They went to the best schools in the country. And the state of Georgia paid for it.

Host: Then they came back to Georgia to teach in Black schools, where white teachers refused to go. That said, only 20% of Black students earned their high school diploma in 1960. Why go if you had nowhere to sit, no books to read and not enough money at home to eat breakfast? Tyrone Butler's mother pushed her children to finish high school and attend college. On the weekends was when he earned money for himself and the family. He worked as a caddy at the Augusta Country Club.

Butler: Maybe I was 14 years old. And every time we would be spotted walking up there on Walton Way, we would be stopped by police. And they would ask, you know: "What are y'all doing on Walton Way?" You know, "We're going to the country club." "For what?" "To Caddy." "Oh." As long as you were just going up there to work, you were okay. And we would come back and try to take the shortcut across Richmond Academy.

Host: Black students weren't allowed on the property of white schools like the Academy of Richmond County. As he and his friend crossed the parking lot, the police would pull up again.

Butler: And they would stop us. They would say, "Don't you know you are not suppose to walk across Richmond Academy?" And we would say "We're sorry." And he'd say, "Well, you do it again, I'm going to" — so and so. And we go, like, "OK." Of course, we did it again. And we knew that they thought we all looked alike, so they didn't know who they told us before, already — so they never realized that I'm the same guy you told this yesterday to.

Host: Then, as now, police harassment and brutality were problems. Members of the social activist group, the Committee of 10, would visit the people who had been beaten by police. Here's former-City Council Member and Committee of 10 Member Grady Abrams.

Abrams: Another Black man had been beaten up getting on, on the Trailways Bus. The officer said he had a half a pint in his back pocket. And, and they took him off the bus and they said he was resisting. They beat this man up terribly. And I went to the hospital to see him. His head was swollen up — he was just in bad shape.

Host: Police executed the ordinances and laws of the people in charge. Former Sgt. Louis Dinkins says, at the time, Augusta's ordinances allowed police to make arrests without viewing the crime.

Dinkins: Probably the most powerful person in the city was a cop.

Host: That gave officers a lot of leeway.

Dinkins: He decided who to put in jail and when. You know, I put a lot of people in jail I think I could have done otherwise with.

Host: Dinkins didn't say exactly who or why he didn't really need to arrest. But historically, African-Americans were and are disproportionately arrested. And some like Black police Detective E. Tommy Olds says many white officers and deputies in Augusta were members of the KKK, which was experiencing a resurgence at the time.

Olds: Most of the police officers were, were at one time, had been members of the Ku Klux Klan.

Host: We can't verify that statement. But multiple Georgia law enforcement officers in other communities had come out in media reports saying they had been members. John Holmes says he didn't know of any. He was a patrol officer in Augusta at the time of the riot.

Holmes: That might have been true. I have no idea. But I don't think so. I mean, I certainly wasn't. And the guys that I work with — I never knew of any involvement or anything like that. That's, that's totally ridiculous, I believe. I would of quit my job if I would of know that was true.

Host: Holmes' beat was in the Black business district. He remembers having good relationships with those residents. And he describes his fellow officers as good family men.

Holmes: They were very nice to people. I mean, most of those officers, if they caught somebody driving home at night and they were drunk, they'd call a cab for them. Or call their wife and have them come pick them. Leave their car, park the car, pick them up.

Host: While that may be true, many Black Augustans said that wasn't their experience. They also had plenty of examples that political influence also determined who got arrested. Counselor Grady Abrams was one of them.

In December of 1969, he had a run in with deputies. Abrams's nephew had passed a couple of bad checks. Abrams went to the supermarkets to settle up on his behalf.

Abrams: And I walked in this store, and I saw the owner of the store talking to two white men dressed in jackets and I didn't want to disturb them. And I walked past them to the back of the store and waited.

Host: He waited because — even though he was a city councilor — he was first and foremost a Black man. He still could not politely interrupt a conversation amongst white men without running the risk of an incident. But waiting didn't work out for Abrams either.

Abrams: One of the men approached me and asked me, "was my name Grady Abrams?" And I told him yes. He said, "well, show me some identification, boy." I said, "For what?" He said, "Because I ask you." I said, "I don't have to show you anything because you asked me." He grabbed me by the, by the collar — and I didn't know who he was. He had shown me anything. So I kind of put my hand on him. And he told me then that I was arrested.

Host: Abrams says they held him for several hours looking for a reason to keep him in jail but late that night released him. Getting arrested on trumped up charges, or none at all, happened to former-Black Panther Wilbert Allen regularly.

Police arrested Allen for loitering, obscene language, disorderly conduct, defamation of character and carrying a weapon without a permit. He was frequently put in solitary confinement. The city even wrote an ordinance seemingly aimed at his activities. Anyone who distributed leaflets had to register with the city clerk and provide their material.

Many of those arrests were in connection with civil rights activism. For instance, he was jailed after calling the police chief the, quote, "chief of pigs" end quote. Allen says he was helping his community stand up for itself.

Allen: What we always do, to break down the fear of the people in the community of the police, we will get... they had a chief of police named Bequest. We're cursing him out, talk about him like a dog right there in public. And tell folks you don't have to fear these people. They're human beings just like you.

We did it for a psychological reason. If you have people always fearful of a situation, the first thing you do is go and grab the bully and you slap the bully around. Once you slap the bully around, the folks know they ain't got to be afraid of no more.

Host: His approach to social justice was very different from Grady Abrams' and the Committee of 10. Abrams remembers getting into a disagreement with Allen in February of 1970, three months before the riot. It was over an incident that occurred in the Allen Holmes neighborhood.

Abrams: A cop got killed. And Wilbert was down there trying to whip up some action. And he and I got into a dispute about that. And I told him, "Man, you getting ready to have a massacre down here. This cop has gotten kill. And you up here trying to start Black people taunting these cops and all of this." And so we ended that conversation and I thought it was all over. When we got back to our office — Wilbert had taken over our office.

He had gone with his group and had gone in our office. And he was sitting in, at the desk with his feet up on the, on the desk and his men standing in front of the office with shotguns.

Allen: We didn't come over and take over the Committee of 10 office. We might of came over and said something to them that needed to be said.

Host: Allen felt the Committee of Ten was too invested in the status quo. They didn't want to rock the boat as hard as he felt it needed to be.

Allen: They way they treat Black folks in Augusta in the 1960s and '70s was just — just like slavery.

Host: Allen says it was, and still is, his belief that violence is necessary in a revolution.

Allen: You have to speak the language that people speak to you. That's the only language that the enemy understands. It's up to you — you speaking in French? I don't know what you're talking about. The same language they be doing to us, we must do to them.

Host: Allen says that the United States of America is built on the idea that people like him are 3/5 of a whole person. A Black person can try to claim their full humanity. But like King and a lot of others, they are violently subdued. According to Allen, violence is the language of white supremacy.

To say that racial tensions were high in 1970 Augusta — it would be an understatement. Black people were living in unhealthy conditions, with low paying jobs and limited access to education. When they complained, they were typically ignored or told to be more patient.

Black Augustans were nearing their breaking point. Then, a Black child got expelled from the city's only integrated elementary school. People had heard a rumor the 12 year old had been accused of rape. They protested outside of the school, demanding answers. Sgt. Louis Dinkins says that he and some other traffic cops were then called to the scene.

Dinkins: This group of Paine College students gathered together some of the young kids, mostly from the housing areas. And they were looking for an excuse — you know, they're looking for a cause. And it had a boy that was unruly. And they didn't mess around like they do now. You know, they expelled him.

Host: Wilbert Allen's militant group participated in the protest. And a few of them had shotguns.

Dinkins: There they were. It was a stand-off. The police weren't strong enough to make them do anything. They were outgunned. But even if they were to call their bluff and arrest them they, they got to worry about it’s a school. You know, and

you start shooting shotguns around a school, God knows what kind of massacre you can cause.

Host: A DJ on WRDW, James Brown's radio station, reassured the protesters that the boy had never been accused of rape. Grady Abrams also showed up and eventually got the boy readmitted.

Days after the event, Abrams said he might resign from city council. He told the Augusta Chronicle the mayor and other council members had no intention of actually improving the lives of Black Augustans. Around the same time, an unsigned leaflet appeared around town. Here's an actor reading from a portion of it.

Actor reading Leaflet: It's important to understand what happened at Houghton Elementary School was much more than just a protest. Brothers and sisters you might begin to realize that an organized people have more strength than the APD, Augusta Pig Department. And when you confront a pig with a pump shotgun, you automatically gain his respect... As Black people in a liberation movement, this is what we must do. TAKE ALL OF YOUR ANGER AND HATE OUT ON THE AUGUSTA PIG DEPARTMENT AND POINT YOUR GUNS TO THE HEAD OF THE PIGS AND NOT AT THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK.

Dinkins: Well, you know, what our reaction is. You know, if that's your attitude, we're gonna be ready for you.

Host: They weren't quite. Two weeks later, Augusta erupted. But the city's white leaders and its police department were caught off guard. The final straw for Black people in Augusta was the death of Charles Oatman — a slight, big-eyed boy whose sweet smile had been permanently wiped away. In its place were fork marks, cigaret burns and gashes. Law enforcement only said he fell off his jail bunk after a card game. The day after Oatman's death, Grady Abrams warned the city's white establishment to expect violence.

Abrams: I was saying, “We can't wait. We can't wait. We need to move now.”

Host: Days before the riot, Abrams told the Augusta Chronicle, quote, "The radicals will use rhetoric for a while, but then they will resort to violence" end quote. They did. On May 11th. That's next time on "Shots in the Back.".

For archival photos and documents from this episode and others, check out our website, GPB.org/shots. That's shots with an S.

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