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## Recollections: 1966 Division Street Riot

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# Recollections

## The 1966 Division Street Riots

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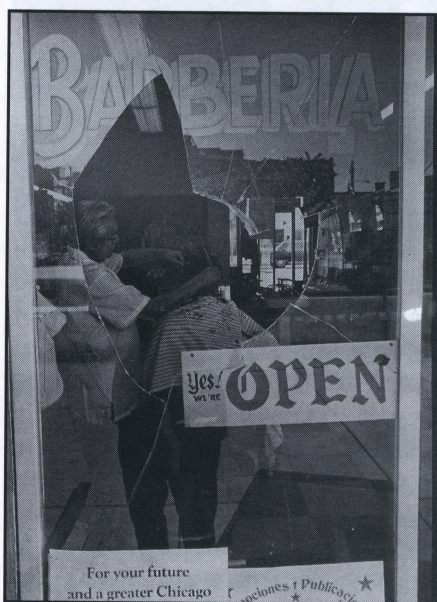
*Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons—not by those who are oppressed, exploited and unrecognized. It is not the unloved who initiate disaffection, but those who cannot love because they love themselves. It is not the helpless, subject to terror, who initiate terror, but the violent, who with their power create the concrete situation which begets the “rejects of life”...*

—Paulo Freire

*Pedogogy of the Oppressed, 1970*

On June 12, 1966 the first riot attributed to Puerto Ricans in United States history occurred along the strip of Chicago's Division Street. During the 1960's a number of similar civil disturbances occurred in communities of color throughout the United States in response to the conditions of poverty, neglect and racism—most notably the Watts Riots of 1965 in Los Angeles and the riots along Chicago's Madison Avenue in 1967. According to an article entitled “16 Injured in Night-Long Street Fighting” which appeared in the June 13, 1966 issue of the now defunct *Chicago American*:

*More than 100 policemen were keeping a tight watch on the near northwest side today after night-long street fighting resulted in at least 16 injuries and 36 arrests.*



Courtesy: Chicago Sun-Times

*Business as usual, after rioting.  
June, 1966*

*Angry crowds burned 3 squad cars, damaged 16 others, and smashed more than 200 windows as they fought police with bricks, rocks, bottles, Molotov cocktails, and sporadic sniper gunfire.*

*The disturbance started before nightfall yesterday and fanned out from Damen Avenue and Division Street. It was not snuffed out until just before daybreak. It was sparked by the shooting of Cruz Arcelis, 20, an ex-convict, of 1265 N. Winchester Ave., by Patrolman Thomas Munyon who was trying to arrest him after breaking up a fight.*

To many in the Puerto Rican community, the 1966 Division Street Riot represents a milestone in the history of Puerto Ricans in Chicago. While initially the riot resulted in the

destruction of property and the mistreatment of community residents by the Chicago Police, this event also led to the formation of groups and organizations to address the concerns of the community in areas such as health, education, housing and employment.

To commemorate the 31st anniversary of this important event in the history of Chicago's Puerto Rican and Latino community, *Diálogo* set out to interview members of the Puerto Rican community who were eyewitnesses to the events of those days and who also were active in the community before and after the riots. The community members we interviewed include Mirta Ramírez, who at the time of the riots was a housewife active in the issue of bilingual education and whose accomplishments include establishing *Aspira* in Chicago; Obed López, a Mexican immigrant who has worked in the Puerto Rican community for over thirty years; Fr. Donald Headly a non-Latino priest who headed the Cardinal's Committee for the Spanish Speaking; Professor José Acevedo, who in 1966 was a seminarian and who has for the past twenty-five years headed *El Centro Para Recursos Educativos* at Northeastern Illinois University; and Roberto Medina who was in his teens at the time and later was among the first Latinos to become active in Chicago's labor movement.

The story of the 1966 riots may be told in many ways, by many individuals, each bringing their perspective and understanding of the community into the discussion.

**I**n keeping with our commitment to present our readers with diverse forms of expression, we have included on page 28 a transcript of the lyrics to a song written by Simón Gómez inspired by the riot entitled "Los Motines de Chicago". Like the Mexican *corrido* and African American blues, Puerto Rican *jíbaro* music often is an expression of real life stories and historical events. Simón Gómez's composition not only serves to document this event but also to express the sentiments of the Puerto Rican community. Further, since Gómez lived in Puerto Rico at the time of the riot, this song provides evidence that the repercussions of the riots were also felt in Puerto Rico. Unfortunately, as a result of the Cold War mentality of the times, the FBI banned the song and purged it from record stores and radio stations that dared to stock it. Thanks to our good friends, Omar and Obed López who had reprinted the lyrics to the song in a 1971 issue of the LADO newspaper, we now can exercise our first amendment right to freedom of speech and include it as part our telling of this historical event.

Unfortunately, our pages are too few to include more stories. It is our hope that the following will provide our readers with a better understanding of this historical event and stimulate discussions among our readers about the history of Chicago's Puerto Rican community and how the events of June 1966 shaped this community.

**Mervin:** What do you feel contributed to the riot on Division street in 1966?

**Mirta Ramírez:** ...Our community had too many problems at that time, however the catalyst of the riot was the way the cops behaved during the parade downtown...and during the Puerto Rican Parade celebration...

They chased two people up an alley and shot at them. That is what started the riot on Damen and Division, where police cars were turned over and burned. The police used excessive force and people pushed back. Even worse, in the days that followed, it was not just excessive force but treating people like dirt, like we were not human beings, with total disrespect. The police didn't know anything about the Puerto Rican community. At that time there were only about, eight or ten Puerto Rican officers in the entire force.

**Obed López:** In retrospect, I believe that the main cause of the riot was the invisibility of the Puerto Rican community within the city of Chicago. That is to say, the political power structure at the city level and then at the most local level totally ignored the presence of the Puerto Rican community and their urgent needs, and to me this was the main cause. There was no interest on the part of the local alderman as was documented by, of all persons, Mike Royko. Mike Royko was able to, in some of his articles that he wrote after the riots, show how the aldermen of the area would not even attend some of the most important activities of the Puerto Rican community at that time. I believe that was the main problem. The Puerto Rican community was not being recognized at all by the local power structure. In my opinion, this was what created

the conditions for people in the Puerto Rican community to feel that there was no other way to vent their frustrations than by doing what they did.

**Donald Headly:** ...One very visible thing was police abuse, and a lack of Latinos on the police force. The Cardinal's Committee for the Spanish Speaking had several programs to get people ready for police exams. Latinos were just beginning to come on to the force. Since there were no Latinos there, the abuse on the streets was awful. If you were a Latino you would get stopped and searched. Some people had weird looking cars because they just didn't have the money to buy something that is much more decent, but I know that people around here still get stopped just because they drive a boat.

**José Acevedo:** Police brutality. There had been two instances before that, in the late 1950s—one on the south side around 1956 or '57 and another near Chicago and Noble around 1958 or '59. The other factor would have been the high prices that Puerto Ricans were paying merchants in the area. They were being charged double for goods and maybe even more.

**Roberto Medina:** The riots happened because of some incident that happened between the police and

**“...the main cause of the riot was the invisibility of the Puerto Rican community within the city of Chicago.”**

**- Obed López**

some individuals around the Humboldt Park area, but they were a reflection of the frustrations of the community in general. Housing discrimination and police brutality were rampant at that time.

If the police saw you in a car (I have my own personal experiences about this) they would pull you out and ask if you were a “wet back” because at that time everybody was a “wet back”... They would just pull you out of your cars, totally violate your civil rights, search your car, hit you with their sticks, and just harass you. They would break into our social clubs and stop our activities for no reason whatsoever. It was an ongoing situation with the police—we were not welcome in the city.

It was impossible for any Hispanic or Puerto Rican at that time, even with a college degree, to find a good job. You could always find a job in a factory sweeping floors and working in an assembly line. But when it came to getting mainstream jobs, you were not welcome, even if you were qualified. You got to remember that the Civil Rights Act did not come into effect until 1964. So a lot of the laws that came under the act were not enforced at that time. Employers were free to discriminate...

**Mervin:** How did you participate on the days of the riot?

**Mirta Ramírez:** We were at the park (Humboldt Park) where we had set up little *quioscos* to make money for our organizations. While we were there, selling our *bacalaitos* and stuff, one of the parade organizers came in and told us to shut down because there was a riot. Apparently things cooled for a bit and then he said, “OK, we’ll close at nine.” But then he came back, that must have been about seven, he came back about eight and said, “No we have to

Courtesy: Edmund Jareck/Chicago Sun-Times



*Priest appeals to mob to disperse and go home. June 14, 1966*

close now.” And so everyone packed up and left.

We closed down and I went home. On our way home we heard what was happening en *El Programa del Argentino Boricua*. Carlos Agrelot, was his real name. My friend Lilia and I went home and kept on listening to the radio to see what was happening.

The next day I had to go downtown for something and when I took the bus that day I saw all the damage that had been done to the stores along Division Street. On my way back my husband Teddy went to pick me up at the station on Division and Ashland, and we stopped at the Boys Club, where a lot of people had begun to gather. I remember somebody said, “Why doesn’t someone go and get coffee?” So Teddy and I went to get coffee. When we came back there were a lot of people that weren’t there when we first went in. Then we found out the rioting broke out again.

We went to take the kids home and on my way I said, “Teddy we have to go back.” And he said, “What for?” I did not have any idea what for, but there were Puerto Ricans there and that’s where we belong. So we came back and we went to the Boys

Club, scared to death because we didn’t know what was going to happen. And so that had been about three o’clock in the morning, and all of the priests and the *reverendos* from the other churches were there trying to think of what to do for the next day so that there wouldn’t be a repetition.

The priests and *reverendos* wanted to group on the street with their collars on, hoping they could calm people down. Unfortunately, that night around five or six o’clock, the riot started again. My friend Noel was trying to direct traffic. The religious leaders had asked the police to stay away, instead they [the police] wore riot gear while they patrolled the park. Noel continued trying to direct traffic and finally stopped when the police closed off Division Street.

Who was going to get through the mass of people? I mean, there were wall to wall people, you just couldn’t get through. You had to go through Western or somewhere else to avoid that area. It was really closed down. Officially the police I guess closed it down but it had been closed down from before. It was a real chaotic situation. It was hard keep a clear head.

**Obed López:** Well, I came to the area by late afternoon because I had been with a friend and my brother Omar at a cultural activity downtown. On the way back, we were bringing her to her place of residence which was on Hoyne and Division. As it turned out, we could not get closer to Division and Hoyne because the riot already was in its beginning stages and the area had been curtained off by the police. Somehow after going through all this, I was able to get to the very center of the riot which at that point was right on the 2000 block of Division, between Hoyne and Damen, where the crowd was accommodating and was growing by the hour. I understood that I was witnessing a social phenomenon.

By listening to people, I already sensed the anger against the police. By listening to people I also heard people expressing their grievances. And I felt that what I could do at that particular point somehow was to find a way in which objective observers could cut into the area to witness what was taking place. I felt that was about the only thing that I could do at that particular moment. It was because of that, through some friends I had in the civil rights movement and in the labor movement, I approached the SCLC, the Southern Christian Leadership Coalition headed by Dr. Martin Luther King, to come and send observers so that at least it could be documented what was taking place—there and then. And it was because of this that I met very soon with Rev. James Bevell, he was on the staff of Dr. Martin Luther King. With his help, a number of observers came from SCLC. That was on the first day of the riots.

Subsequently, on the other days, I decided that I wanted to continue observing what was taking place, and I simply became an active observer, yet I was able to attach myself to the press and to the minis-

ters and went through the contained section of the area and I was able to hear people talk about the actions of police on that particular night such as going after young people..., and breaking into the houses of people. And that was basically what I did, become an observer, because I felt that something would have to be done subsequently.

**Donald Heady:** I'm not even sure what day it was but I remember what happened. The first place I landed was on top of a police car, I think it was on Division. I was standing on it and people were ready to burn it. And I was just pointing out to them the fact that I knew this was a plot. "There is something going on here because the two guys that are telling you to burn this car are cops." I knew them from the Monroe Street district, I had been at St. Patrick's for five years and I knew that they were policemen. I really think that stuff in the community contributed to the riots, but I also think that there was an ulterior motive on the part of Mayor Daley. What I saw over the time of the riots... I was on top of the car and when they finally decided to burn it, I got off it. I was trying to point out to them: "There is something going on here that we don't understand, just be careful and know what you are doing. If you want to burn, fine, let's find out what's going on." When I got off the car, by that time, out of the gangways, police

poured out. They were everywhere, they had dogs, they had helmets and they were beating the hell out of everybody on the street. I happened to see one guy, supposedly a cop, fall on top of an old man that was walking on the street, hitting him and noticed this guy had a cross on his helmet, he was some kind of chaplain. When I talked to him I knew he was a Southerner. And I pulled him off this old man, and he's telling me, "What are you doing?" I told him, "Well get off him, you are wearing a cross and you are beating someone up!"

Everybody was doing things to express themselves in a time, I think, that they felt they had really been offended. And they had been offended. This was a terrible offense to the Puerto Rican community. What happened after that is that we went through three days of this stuff. I had all of Los Hermanos de la Familia de Dios with me on the streets, some of them were in jail...and I was meeting with people, everybody was meeting with different groups, at different times.

There was a meeting between the mayor and the people he considered the ones he could control in the Puerto Rican community. Juan Díaz, (who became the director of the Spanish Action Committee) was not included in this meeting. ...The voices were still going to come from the side streets and the alleys.

**"We didn't know how many of us were here and all of a sudden, as a result of the riot, we find out we're a good number."**

**- Mirta Ramírez**

...They were the people that eventually in different parts of the country, became the organizers for the Latino community. They were very good people. They weren't good because they were always...good in the conformist sense of always keeping the laws that other people put on top of them, they were good in the sense that they understood where they were going and how they were going to get there. It was important at that time to have that.

**José Acevedo:** On Sunday I walked back and forth with one of the priests in my parish, St. Bonafice. On Monday I walked with Los Caballeros de San Juan and Los Hermanos de la Familia de Dios in the middle of the street to try to calm down the police. There were six or eight cops across on Division Street. We walked towards them to try to stop them from provoking bystanders with their guns and clubs.

They continued on all the way to Division and California... The police were pushing to have the people leave the park because of curfew. They were about to club some outspoken Puerto Rican and we stopped them, told them that they would be making things worse, that we would talk to this man, and his friends, and his group. The police held back. At the time I was a seminarian and I was wearing my Roman collar and they showed some respect for the fact that there were some clergy there. Father Don Headly, who was then the director of the Cardinal's Committee for the Spanish Speaking, was also with a group of Los Hermanos and Los Caballeros. After that cooled down and the police left, we met at a house on Washtenaw. There was Juan Díaz, from the Spanish Action Committee, Mirta Ramírez, myself and some other people, discussing what to do for the

**“There is something going on here because the two guys that are telling you to burn this car are cops”**

**- Donald Headley**

future and to help out people and how to quiet this protest. There were rumors that there were caravans of cars coming from New York and from Indiana of Puerto Ricans coming to the aid of fellow Puerto Ricans. One of the things that was criticized was that the media ran in the news, segments, one after another, saying that there was protesting, rioting, and looting, but it was not an organized thing in any way. It was just the eruption from different people who felt that Puerto Ricans were pushed around and discriminated and taken advantage of for a long time.

**Roberto Medina:** I participated in terms of trying to keep the peace—talking with people, expressing my opinion. But I was very conscious of the abuses that were going on. I was only about 18 years old at the time, but mind you, I was an activist since the age of 13. I was secretary treasurer of the Puerto Rican Congress—the youngest officer they had. I became an officer when I was about 14 or 15 years old. So I was active within the scope of everything that was happening around me. But I was also very vocal... Some people thought that it was a bunch of yahoos within the community, criminals that started the whole thing. That wasn't true. It had to do with everything that I have just articulated to you—the frustrations that we as a community were experiencing. So, I participated by trying to articulate the

needs of our community and keeping the peace so that people would not get hurt.

**Mervin:** Was the community changed as a result of the riot?

**Mirta Ramírez:** We didn't know how many of us were here and all of a sudden, as a result of the riot, we find out we're a good number. There weren't three or four people, there were a whole lot of people. And as a community, I think, that was a call. At that point we became a community not just a collection of individuals.

We organized a march to City Hall, and as I understand, the mayor exclaimed that he didn't know there were so many of us. And so we went to City Hall and talked to the mayor and raised our concerns and as a result of that, the city established one of the “War on Poverty” offices, as it was called at the time, on Division St. and its first director, I recall, was Dr. Samuel Betances.

Oh well, after that people got divided according to issues and interests. We formed committees of different kinds. I decided my thing was education and that's where I struggled. It took us about a year before we got all of this together.

**Obed López:** Oh, definitely. I believe that the riots were what gave birth to the political movement in this community. Most politicians, especially

our own politicians hardly ever mention that. I think it's two things, first of all they themselves are somewhat ignorant of that particular period in their community's history. Number two, they find it more convenient to pretend that it was they that gave drive to the political movement within this community.

Well, I think the total community saw, number one, the injustices or rather the whole community saw the outbursts against these injustices and all the people in the community became activated. I'm talking about just the regular people that became involved in the marches, the young people that were part of organizations, everybody became involved in activism and that was something that would have never happened if the riots hadn't taken place, if the riots hadn't highlighted things that people felt and experienced but couldn't quite articulate. I think that the riots were the first expression of the

*Capt. William Coesfeld of the Wood Street police district, who braved the mob to talk to it's leaders is identified by one of the leaders as, "Our friend".  
June 14, 1966*

unhappiness of people, of the way in which they were being treated in Chicago.

Puerto Ricans became aware that there were things that were wrong in the city, as it related to the Puerto Rican community especially. And the riots gave them a first sense of being able to do something about it, if it was only throwing a stone, or breaking a window, or yelling at the police, those were political acts.

**Donald Headly:** There were small groups being organized. You had the Young Lords at the time, you had *pandillas* [gangs] doing some very significant organizing work, you had the Knights of St. John [Los Caballeros de San Juan] at that time who had community organizations throughout the city. And then you had the Hermanos en la Familia de Dios who were constantly being trained to adopt views toward[s] [the] Gospel, which is basically,

"Hey, don't you know that you all live the life of the risen Christ?" That's the basis of Christian life, then why the hell aren't we living it. So when the riots occurred, they exploded.

You take the Young Lords, Juan Díaz...they were not part of what I was doing, but they were people who had a voice and they were trying to express that voice. There was harassment and persecution and constant infiltrations, and police spying through the red squads. Well, who can organize people in the community when you have other people telling lies about you? It was done from within the community, precisely to create that kind of situation. People trying to unify the community just had no real opportunity to do that.

The division allowed for a community that could partially be controlled by that white power structure. There were a million cameras any time anybody had some kind of support for a group. You had Jorge Prieto going to jail, he's one of the finest doctors in our community. There were priests in prison. Why? Precisely because we [the society] want to create division in this community, we don't want actual leaders that can bring these people together, because that will give them the strength that the white community can't control. Whether it is in the church [which] is very Irish, you know it doesn't consider itself for what it actually is, multicultural. You have a government which considers itself to be very much in the hands of those who actually don't live in the city. They live somewhere else. So, it's all a matter of who controls whom. Unless people can get an excellent good voice and are constantly challenged to be inclusive rather than exclusive, not to make walls, it's not going to happen. It [the riots] partially worked. They got people to be much more conscious of what was going on, but some people



Courtesy: Chicago Sun-Times

**“Some people thought that it was a bunch of yahoos within the community—criminals that started the whole thing. That wasn’t true. It had to do with... the frustrations that we were experiencing as a community.**

**- Roberto Medina**

became frustrated. Like some of the young people that I knew at that time are all in jail. They are suffering 80 years of prison and they will never live to get out of there because of their association with the independence movement of Puerto Rico.

The Puerto Rican people here in Chicago have a right to a voice, to a political and social life that makes sense, for their own culture and help it grow and deepen. They have a right to their poetry, their own kind of theology, their own way of looking at things and to create this situation you need voices, people to talk and be heard and the power structures of the city will listen to them. This should be happening. After the riots, I think there was an opportunity to have this happen a little better, but I don’t know whether we were able to take advantage of all that.

**José Acevedo:** One of the things that came out of the riot is that our presence was felt in the City of Chicago. The city called some community leaders together, including members of Los Hermanos and Los Caballeros de San Juan, father Don Headly, Claudio Flores who [edited] the Puerto Rican newspaper, *El Puertorriqueño* and some other individuals to get together and do something to ameliorate things on Division Street.

We became more aware of ourselves as a people and wanting to come together as a community. It

also brought an awareness that we needed to find ways to deal with the system and the administration. The city began to try to open the doors to Puerto Ricans who wanted to become policemen. Then there was the commission appointed by Mayor Daley that included Claudio Flores, Wilfredo Velez, the Puerto Rican Congress and some of the Caballeros de San Juan... After that, an urban progress center was set up on Division Street that a man by the name of Manuel Toledo ran for a while. The first person assigned to it was Samuel Betances who was there for about six months—this is before he became a professor at Northeastern Illinois University.

The riot was an initial solidarity experience for Puerto Ricans in Chicago. When you have unity you can do community organization. ‘Cause when you organize, you do so from a position of strength and being united as one. And then... if you follow the principles of Sal Alinsky [community organizing], first you come together, then you identify the enemy and you always stay together, and then you begin to make your plans for what your group wants. So it was kind of an eruption that led to some community organizing and solidarity within the Puerto Rican community. Because any Puerto Rican who saw the news, or heard the radio was hurt or felt united to his/her fellow Puerto Ricans. There is now a Puerto Rican identity in Chicago as a result of our claiming the Humboldt Park area.

**Roberto Medina:** There were changes as a result of the riots. Through the committee that was organized by the mayor in response to the riots, there were some issues that were brought to the table that were negotiated. One of the biggest issues was that in order to become a police officer, you had to be six feet tall, have blond hair and blue eyes and an Irish name... Of course, other areas that they touched on were employment in government. There were also concerns about the situation with police brutality and there was some dialogue open on that. The result of that committee was that we started to name Hispanics to higher management offices within the police department.

The local media did a lot of write-ups in terms of the frustration that we were going through. So, politicians being politicians see to it that they try to satisfy the community in terms of what they need. Did we get everything that we deserved? No, but we made some strides. It was a gradual progression of benefits for the community...

I think we let the general population of the city of Chicago know that we were here and were going to stay. That we we’re a significant group that they had to reckon with. That we were going to be outspoken about our needs and issues that were of concern to us. I think that we were very helpful not just to ourselves but to other minority communities, ‘cause we were the ones that were in the forefront of the leadership, both politically and socially from within the community of the City of Chicago. ■