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# The “Chicago Way”: Inner-City Street Gangs and the Battle for Civil Rights in the Windy City, 1966- 1970

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The Civil Rights Movement unfolded uniquely in Chicago; in the North Lawndale and Woodlawn neighborhoods two street gangs, the Conservative Vice Lords (CVL) and the Almighty Black P Stone Nation (BPSN<sup>1</sup>) assumed the role of community organizations. They used their neighborhood connections and street savvy to alleviate racial pressures oppressing Chicago’s urban African American youths: high dropout rates, poor job opportunities, and the stress of dealing with increasingly unstable and declining communities. While the gangs’ established hierarchies led to rapid formation of community organizations, their efforts fell apart over a brief four-year period due to an inability to divest themselves fully of their criminal core. With the years of experience the gangs had working as singular units and the social capital they possessed on the streets, in 1966 both gangs quickly reorganized from street level groups to incorporated institutions. Promising to leave their criminal roots behind them, they received grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), and others. With their local powerbases secured, they made alliances and enemies. The mid to late 60s saw a clash between the gangs and the state and federal governments. This conflict, not just of differing personalities, but also of different motivations, pitted the hopes of an African American led community against the “mafia-esque” tactics the gangs used to assert control over their membership and territories. In doing so, these inner city youths proved how marginalized populations could effect change within their communities. This paper examines the metamorphosis of the CVL and BPSN from street gangs to political powerhouses as well as their successes and failures during the time period 1966 through 1970. This examination starts with their formation, continuing through their initiation into the Civil-Rights Movement, ending with the decade’s close and the end of the gang’s positive agency.

The CVL took a long path to civil awareness, partially due to being the oldest African American street gang in Chicago. Formed in 1958 by Edward “Peppilow” Perry (and six associates from the North Lawndale area) while housed in the St. Charles Reformatory, CVL members hung out together.<sup>2</sup> The monotony of doing nothing was interspersed with youthful outbreaks of violence and criminal activity. As the years passed, both took a more adult turn:

[In] October 1961, when Glenn [Miles], some other Vice Lords and a Vice Lady were down in the basement on Millard after a big haul which split eighteen hundred dollars among four chiefs.<sup>3</sup> While they were down there, somebody knocked and Glenn opened the door. When he did, his heart was blown out. He was dead. Some people believe the syndicate hit Glenn, but more likely they were after Pep [Edward Perry.] (Dawley, 29)

As the CVL’s core grew older, in the early 1960s, firebombs and shotguns took the place of fists and knives. Younger members committed greater acts of atrocity to earn their place in the gang. “All we got to do, man, if you want to move these guys, is take a broad and shoot her, man. We shoot her and then we get her friends and shoot them and we call that initiation” (Dawley, 98). By 1964, however, the founder was spending less time with the gang. Peppilow had begun to distance himself from the gang; undergoing a phenomenon criminologists call “aging out.”<sup>4</sup> Nominally involved in gang activities, he stepped aside as president, as two other founding members took over. Under the leadership of Alfonso Alford and Bobby Gore, the CVL began to foster ideas of community organization (Kendall).

Jeff Fort founded the BPSN in 1959 on Chicago’s South Side; his first enemy, Eugene “Bull” Hairston, became one of his greatest allies (Moore and Williams, 23). In their mid-teens, the boys clashed as the heads of two Woodlawn community youth gangs, the BPSN and Harper Boys respectively. Fort’s family came from Aberdeen, Mississippi, and Hairston’s hailed from Columbus, Ohio (Moore and Williams, 21). Eventually the two transplants figured out they could accomplish more together than they could separately and joined forces. With Hairston providing the brawn and Fort the brains, their gang swiftly grew, eventually encompassing twenty-one other street gangs. “To impose order over the labyrinth of members and organizational franchises, [Fort and Hairston] formed a ruling body called the Main 21, which governed the [BPSN]. Although the Main 21 was the name, it was not necessarily a fixed group of twenty-one individuals” (Moore and Williams, 35). Another gang was developing in Woodlawn at the same time, the Gangster Disciples, and this led to warfare between the two emerging groups. This bloody rivalry would continue even as the BPSN were participating in the Civil Rights Movement. Ideology was one of the primary differences between the Gangster Disciples and the BPSN. The BPSN adopted many elements of Black Nationalism. “For instance, the [BPSN] adopted the Pan-African colors of red, black, and green as their organizational colors. They adopted the pyramid as their organizational symbol” (Moore and Williams, 35). It is easy to understand how Fort, thrust as he was into the maelstrom of the inner city at a young age, would find himself enthralled with the sense of belonging and identity that the Black Nationalist movement provided.

The 1964 Economic Opportunities Act was supposed to alleviate some of the problems faced in Chicago’s inner city. It required “that local programs be developed, conducted, and administered with the maximum feasible participation of the groups served” (“Cities: Poor No More”). “In

Chicago [African Americans represented] twenty three percent of the population and [accounted] for forty three percent of its unemployment" (Janson, 22). Longtime Chicago Mayor Richard J Daley maintained control of the federal funds provided via the Economic Opportunities Act through his Committee on Urban Opportunity (of which Daly was the Chairman).<sup>5</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were quick to accept the invitation by Chicago's Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO) to expand their civil rights activities to Chicago.<sup>6</sup> King had been looking to expand the movement into the North, and Chicago was the logical choice. When King came to Chicago in 1966, he lived in one of the city's low-income areas to understand the conditions African Americans faced in the inner city. King chose an apartment in the North Lawndale area two blocks from CVL headquarters (Dawley, 108). While ostensibly on the same side, Daley countered the arrival of King and the SCLC by forming his own coalition of religious leaders ("Daley And Dr. King at 3 1/2 Hour Parley," 37). Led by Most Reverend John Patrick Cody, Archbishop of Chicago's Roman Catholic Archdiocese,<sup>7</sup> the political shrewdness of Mayor Daley would force Dr. King to reach out for what some would consider strange allies, the CVL and BPSN (Dawley, 110).

Housing became the primary crux of King's Chicago movement, due not only to the poor conditions of the slums, but also to discriminatory practices by realtors. In 1966, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed the first motion with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Herbers, 41); the motion developed from the case of two African Americans that claimed Chicago realtors only showed them homes in African American communities<sup>8</sup>. On 10 July 1966, King held an event in Chicago's Soldier Field. Speeches and musical acts defined the day. Musical acts such as Peter, Paul, and Mary, Stevie Wonder, and Mahalia Jackson performed for the crowd. At some point during the event, the BPSN "suddenly marched into the uppermost deck of the stadium. They completely surrounded the venue, carrying a huge banner with a picture of a .50-caliber machine gun" (Moore and Williams, 40). As rumbles of unease ran through the stadium, the CVL members in attendance overheard a conversation between SCLC members." One of King's men say he didn't feel that he needed all these gangfighters because they weren't going to do nothin' but disrupt the rally. Another of King's men, Reverend [Al] Sampson, told him it wasn't his place to decide on who you needed and how to get things done" (Dawley, 110). Upset by the perceived disrespect, the gangs left the rally. Knowing he would need their help, King met with the CVL and BPSN and convinced them to join him in his "Open Housing" marches (Moore and Williams, 41).

The pressures exerted by the marches brought the King and Daley camps together to sign an agreement. Not all activists were satisfied with the results and some continued to hold protest marches despite King's absence; the coming years and months would show that their exposure to Dr. King heavily influenced both the CVL and BPSN.<sup>9</sup>

The experience gained in working with the SCLC during the summer of 1966 proved beneficial for both the CVL and the BPSN. Not only did it give them a first person accounting of how a civil rights group conducted itself on a day-to-day basis, but it also provided an opportunity to form tentative relationships with men who could help them achieve their goals of change in their own neighborhoods. For the CVL the following three men would be the most important "George Simms, the black commander of the Fillmore Police District; George Collins, the black Alderman of the Twenty-Fourth Ward, and [most importantly] David Dawley, in Chicago for the summer to do

research [for the TransCentury Corporation] on the attitudes of youth towards federally funded programs” (Dawley, 111).<sup>10</sup>

Those three men had a profound impact on the CVL. Commander Simms and Alderman Collins acted as intermediaries in forming Operation Bootstrap; Collins would also help the CVL open an ice cream shop once they fulfilled their promise to keep the North Lawndale community riot-free in the summer of 1967. Dawley joined the gang and not only helped it incorporate, but also became the force behind a series of grants that funded the gang’s activities (Kendall). Operation Bootstrap was a coalition between Chicago businesses, such as Sears Roebuck, Ryerson Steel, Illinois Bell Telephone, amongst others, and the CVL. It would not be long before the YMCA and Youth Action joined the coalition (Dawley, 112).

Policy makers in Washington, DC had begun looking for ways to improve the lot of inner city youths. “The TransCentury Corporation, ‘From the Street,’ report recommended more involvement of youth in summer programs” (Dawley, 115). Under Dawley’s direction (Dawley was a Dartmouth graduate who spent two years in Honduras with the Peace Corps) the CVL “Applied for, and received, a 15,000 dollar grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, which . . . matched with an equal amount from the corporate members of Operation Bootstrap. This . . . followed by 25,000 [dollars] from the Field Foundation, 130,000 [dollars] from the Ford Foundation, 36,000 [dollars] from the Department of Labor, and 60,000 [dollars] from philanthropist W. Clement Stone” (Kendall). As 1967 ended, the CVL transformed into a legitimate civil rights organization. In 1968, with the funds secured through Operation Bootstrap and private grants, the gang began opening businesses in their community (Dawley, 128).<sup>11</sup> While the CVL worked with city officials to aid them in their outreach programs, the BPSN turned to a different source.

Two other men played an important role in the transition from street gang to community activists for the BPSN in 1966. First Presbyterian Church of Woodlawn minister John Fry sought out Fort after hearing the BPSN’s name chanted by youths. The Church reached out to Fort in an attempt to curb the violence between the BPSN and the Disciples that tore through the community.<sup>12</sup> The church’s outreach effort provided the gang a haven where they could hang out and have parties, while the BPSN provided labor for the church, painting classrooms and participating in Easter and Christmas programs. “Fry had hopes for the [BPSN] to become ‘more like a community organization than a fucking street gang’” (Moore and Williams, 51). It was through Fry that the BPSN made its connection with Bishop Arthur Brazier of the Apostolic Church of God. In addition to his spiritual duties, Bishop Brazier was the president of The Woodlawn Organization (TWO).<sup>13</sup> Violence between the BPSN and the Disciples was so endemic that Brazier related, “Parents at one of the local elementary schools called the playground Little Vietnam. I was being bombarded by parents asking me to call the mayor and encourage the mayor to call out the National Guard” (“Jeff Fort and the Blackstone Rangers”). In the spring of 1967, TWO applied for and received a federal grant from the OEO for the sum of 972,000 dollars. The money was to provide job training for the BPSN and the Disciples. TWO hired gang members to act as teachers, amongst them Jeff Fort. The Disciples wanted in on the federal funds and pursued peace with the BPSN. Both gangs met with Chicago’s Police Superintendent O. W. Wilson; however, on the very day the meeting took place five gang shootings occurred on the South Side. Still the money was coming in and the BPSN had the community’s support.

The fact that these federal (and in the case of the CVL, private) funds flowed into Chicago's urban areas without his "input of blessing" greatly upset Mayor Daley (Moore and Williams, 59). Not only were the community organizations funding potential enemies of his Democratic political machine, the Chicago Police Department reported a then all-time high of 150 gang-related killings. Under Daley's orders, a new department was created in the city's Criminal Investigation Division. The new department, the Gang Intelligence Unit (GIU), was composed of fifteen detectives and led by Lieutenant Ed Buckney. This new department would aggressively investigate activities of the BPSN and CVL.

The GIU did not have to wait long before getting into action. On 9 January, 1968, Joseph Evans,

a 17-year-old trainee in [TWO's] program was shot and seriously injured . . . police said Evans was a leader of the Falcons, a street gang involved in clashes with BPSN . . . an 18-year-old youth surrendered to the police . . . and handed over the shotgun he said was responsible for the wounding. He called the shooting an accident. ("Poverty Trainee Shot in Chicago," 25) <sup>14</sup>

While TWO and the BPSN dealt with the increased police scrutiny and public backlash of the continued violence around their programs, they, as well as the CVL, were caught up in events transpiring outside of Chicago.

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on 4 April 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee set off a powder keg of frustration in urban areas. Chicago African Americans reacted toward Chicago whites. "Mrs. Bernadine Laskow, mother of three children, was pulled from her car by [African American] youths and beaten. Some white pedestrians who were in the [African American] slum suffered the same treatment" (Janson, 1). As urban youths took to the streets, fires and looting followed in their wake. The CVL walked through the crowds of North Lawndale, protecting black residents and their property. While black rioters targeted white establishments, the CVL watched black-owned businesses. <sup>15</sup> "When the riot ended, the fires had been worse than the great Chicago fires in 1871, and most of the white stores were no longer in the neighborhood" (Dawley, 120).

In contrast, in Woodlawn things remained relatively quiet. Leaders of the two major South Side [African American] gangs [BPSN and the Disciples] were . . . on the streets to prevent a recurrence of the burning, looting, sniping and window-breaking vandalism that plagued Chicago over the weekend . . . 'We did it out of respect for Martin Luther King' said 21-year-old Jeff Fort. (Janson, 36)

Despite the fact that the South Side had not seen anywhere near the devastation as the West Side, allegations of extortion were levied against the BPSN. Southside businesspersons claimed that "they were approached by members of the BPSN and asked to pay 100 [dollars] for placards that read 'DO NOT TOUCH—BPSN—Jeff.' The signs had two eyes indicating the BPSN were watching" (Moore and Williams, 82). By this point Fort had assumed full control of the BPSN: his co-leader, Bull Harrison, was in jail on murder charges (Janson, 36).

While the illusion of a cease-fire between the BPSN and the Disciples shattered with the shooting of Joseph Evans, the act of violence would have further repercussions for the BPSN. With allegations of murder-for-hire schemes and aggressive recruitment tactics, Senator John McClellan (Democrat, Arkansas) initiated an investigation into charges that the BPSN had misappropriated portions of its OEO loan. Throughout the summer of 1968, he called witnesses before the Senate's Permanent Investigations Subcommittee. One former Main 21 member, George "Watusi" Rose, testified that BPSN leaders in a Philadelphia, Pennsylvania meeting with members of Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) in April of 1967 had learned of a plot to assassinate Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, and other high ranking members of the SCLC and NAACP. He further testified, "RAM had given the BPSN guns, money, and marijuana . . . [and a] large box of hand grenades to be placed in the BPSN arsenal under the First Presbyterian Church" ("Ex-Leader of Gang Testifies on a Plan for Negro Uprising," 17). Reverend John Fry denied the charges, saying "guns . . . had been stored under an arrangement with the Chicago Police and the United States treasury to 'disarm' the BPSN. The police, he said, broke the arrangement and raided the church" ("Minister Replies to Ex-Gang Chief," 24). Accusations and denials flew back and forth; when finally called to testify, Jeff Fort answered the Senator's first question, his name, and then left the Senate chamber. "[Fort] claims he would not respond unless he was allowed to cross-examine witnesses who testified earlier" ("Gang Leader Faces Contempt Charges," 37). The BPSN leader was cited for contempt of the Senate for his ("Youth Gang Leader Cited for Contempt of Senate," 23). Faced with the public backlash from the Senatorial hearings and the open belligerence of Jeff Fort, the OEO declared the one-year experiment a failure and declined to renew the program (Loftus, 26).

While Fort's power within the BPSN was unchanged, the gang lost the economic fluidity that allowed it to gather momentum as a civil rights group. Heading into the August Democratic National Convention (DNC), the FBI and city officials feared that the BPSN was conspiring with black nationalists to detonate explosives, perhaps as an act of retaliation for BPSN losing its OEO grant. The source of the allegations "was an unnamed prisoner in the county jail. Authorities said today [20 Aug 1968] no substance has been found for the report" (Janson, 32). To the surprise of many, the African Americans ignored the convention almost entirely. Still violence broke out when police brutally attacked anti-war protestors. Fort and the BPSN watched bemused as whites fought whites; they "did want to make one point clear. 'We have a job to do,' they [said], 'and we [the BPSN] will do it. But we will choose the time'" (Caldwell, 34). That job turned out to be a massive do not vote rally.

Fort realized that Mayor Daley and his machine counted on getting a certain number of African American votes. They also knew that part of Daley's power came from the influence he was able to wield on the national scene due to Chicago's strong Democratic core. Fort turned out in the ghettos in the 1968 presidential election, costing Hubert Humphrey an estimated 30,000 votes and giving the state of Illinois electorates to Richard Nixon; Fort even received an invitation to Nixon's inauguration for his efforts ("Jeff Fort and the Blackstone Rangers"), an invitation Fort declined.

In May of 1969, Mayor Daley and State's Attorney Edward V. Hanrahan declared a war on gangs. "Shortly after the Mayor announced his war on gangs, Commander Simms was ordered out of Bootstrap" (Dawley, 161). The severing of ties with one of the few friends the CVL had on the police force marked the end of the gang as a civil rights organization. Gang President Alfonso

Alford suffered a stroke, and Bobby Gore was arrested for murder on 14 November of 1969 (Dawley, 172).<sup>16</sup> The infrastructure of the North Lawndale community never fully recovered from the riots of 1968. The businesses that the CVL started up began to fail. Without sympathetic ears in Bootstrap, the backlash due to the OEO BPSN situation, and Bobby Gore's sentence of "25 to 40 years in prison," new grants were not coming in (Dolan, web). The BPSN was also beginning to cave under pressure. Jeff Fort faced charges of embezzling part of the OEO funds and found himself sentenced to six months in state prison for battery in June of 1969 ("Stone to the Bone").<sup>17</sup>

While both gangs survived the intervening decades since their civil rights triumphs, both organizations are now nothing more than the criminals their detractors claimed them to be. Some will point to the lack of education of each gang's leadership, or resistance from outside forces not ready to see urban youth in power. While these are legitimate issues that undoubtedly played a role in the meteoric fall of the CVL and BPSN, the primary factor was that they never had a true buy in from the ground level gangsters that made up their organizations. When it came right down to it, both leadership groups still resorted to violence and intimidation to resolve problems, proving that they themselves never fully made the transition from opportunistic criminals to activists (who were) truly willing to sacrifice in the name of equality.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This gang started life as the Blackstone Rangers; as they grew and absorbed smaller gangs, the name was changed. For ease of use, BPSN is used for the remainder of this paper, despite what the "official" name might have been at the time.

<sup>2</sup> The St. Charles Reformatory is a youth detention center located in St. Charles, Illinois.

<sup>3</sup> Gang leaders.

<sup>4</sup> The theory is that as a person matures, the frequency of their criminal activity declines.

<sup>5</sup> Daley was first elected in 1955.

<sup>6</sup> This was a confederation of several Chicago-area civil rights organizations led by convener Albert Raby.

<sup>7</sup> Most Reverend is a Roman Catholic Title associated with those of Bishop status or higher.

<sup>8</sup> The two New Jersey PhD scientists worked for Bell Laboratories; upon being transferred to Chicago, they alleged that Chicago-area realtors refused to sell them houses located outside of African American communities. In March 1965, the EEOC ruled it did not have jurisdiction in this matter.

<sup>9</sup> King returned to Mississippi for the SCLC national convention. Although he would often talk about returning to Chicago to continue his efforts, he was never able to do so.

<sup>10</sup> The TransCentury Corporation was a nonprofit Washington, DC survey firm.

<sup>11</sup> These included: **Teen Town**, the Ice Cream shop opened with help from Alderman Collins and Sears Roebuck; **The African Lion**, an ethnic clothing store with an in-house business-training program; **Tastee Freez**, a multiple location franchise of frozen treat restaurants; **Simone**, a door-to-door cosmetic company with products made especially for black skin, developed in partnership with Sammy Davis Jr.; **West Side Community Development Corporation**, an economic coalition with four other organizations (the West Side Organization, Student Afro-American Group, and Egyptian Cobras) that formed two businesses, the West Side Paper Stock Company and the First National Bank of Chicago; **Street Academy**, a Management Training Institute for high school dropouts that emphasized the development of identity; **The House of Lords**, a "hang in" for young



people under the age of eighteen (Dawley).

<sup>12</sup> Woodlawn Avenue, which runs through the middle of the Woodlawn Community, is the dividing line between the two gang's territories.

<sup>13</sup> Saul Alinsky formed this organization in the late 1950s with a 150,000-dollar grant from the archdiocese of Chicago to keep the parish afloat. It was feared white flight would cause the local area to fail.

<sup>14</sup> The Falcons are a Disciple affiliated gang.

<sup>15</sup> Walking with them was their sole white member, David Dawley. Dawley later wrote down his impressions of the riot.

<sup>16</sup> The trial was controversial, and many claimed the state's key witness was the actual murderer.

<sup>17</sup> Fort was convicted of embezzling less than \$2000 in 1972.

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