

**Black Panther Party
Baltimore, Maryland Branch
1968-1972**

Two assassinations rocked American society in 1968. First was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April, and then senator Robert Kennedy in June of that year. As the urban centers reacted with insurrections following Dr. King's death, while some parts of the American mainstream contemplated senator Kennedy's death, the Black Panther Party spread to the east coast.

During the summer and fall of that year in Baltimore, Maryland, a handful of black men who had heard of Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense based in Oakland, California decided to form a branch of the organization. Warren Hart was the principal leader of that initial organizing effort. He was joined by Zeke Boyd, Charles Butler, Charlie Wyche, Irving "Ochika" Young, Reeve Dinez White, Edward "Tschaka Zulu" Martin, Eddie Conway and other blacks frustrated or disillusioned with existing civil rights organizations and the conditions of black people.

As this fledgling group sold copies of the *Black Panther Community News* in East Baltimore, more blacks tuned in to the message that these panthers were delivering. I bought the November, 1968 edition of the BPP news (with Eldridge Cleaver on the cover declaring that he would not turn himself in after his parole had been revoked following

(2)

the April 6, 1968 fire-fight with Oakland police that killed little Bobby Hutton) from Zeke Boyd, and was curious enough to attend a meeting for blacks interested in joining the Black Panther Party. At a house on East Eager street near the Maryland State Penitentiary, was the first office of the Baltimore Branch of the Black Panther Party. As Warren Hart was the person with more information about the Black Panther Party, he went to Berkeley National Headquarters of the BPP for formal orientation, and to have the Baltimore Branch sanctioned as part of the national organization. By the end of 1968, the Black Panther Party had begun to purge its membership, expelling those who had violated party rules and other party guidelines. Warren Hart returned to Baltimore as Defense Captain of the branch, while the BPP began a moratorium on opening new chapters and branches. We were one of the last branches recognized by the BPP at the end of that year.

Zeke Boyd and Charles Butler were appointed as field lieutenants. Reeva White was the branch communications secretary. There was no other official chain of command staff at that point. Members drifted in and out of the office, lounged around, or attended weekly political education classes and rallies. Those P.E. classes were mostly led by Hart, sometimes Zeke Boyd or Butler. We studied from Chairman Mao-Tse-Tung's *Little Red Book of Quotations*, *Black Panther News*, *Ho Chi Minh*, *Malcolm X*, *Kwame Nkrumah*, *Franz Fanon*

(3)

and other voices of liberation fighters from across the third world. I was learning an entirely new history of world dynamics and the conditions of black and poor people that had before then, to me, been hidden in academic texts written by western authors. From comrade Tschaka "Edward Martin" Zulu, I began to understand the true history of European colonialism. He was instrumental in developing my political awareness as to the scope of the BPP and the nature of the struggle ahead of black people.

In 1969, the Baltimore Branch began its first community survival program, the free breakfast program at St . Vincent's D. Poore's church in East Baltimore at Valley and Eager Street. The summer continuation, the Free Lunch Program and Liberation School was to follow. As these basic meeting of needs creatively, was successful at other locations of the BPP, so they were in Baltimore. It was those programs that sustained us through early 1969, as they were the only viable proof of community activity and interaction that our branch could then claim.

Comrades like Tschaka Zulu and Eddie didn't feel that the branch was moving as other branches and chapters were . We were supposed to be in the community, raising the awareness of people as to the contradictions that existed between those who ruled and those who suffered. As I was brand new to most of the political dynamics within our office

(4)

and the larger social-political arenas of BPP, I focused on studying required party materials, selling papers and spreading the word about the Baltimore BPP. Evidently, word reached national headquarters and leadership in New York that Baltimore needed a visit to appraise how we functioned. The morning of July 4, 1969, shook the Baltimore branch up-side down, inside and out.

Field Marshal, Don Cox (D.C.) arrived with Henry Mitchell from New York and New York attorney and panther supporter Arthur Turco. After talking with me, all Baltimore panthers, supporters or whatever were called and told to get their asses to the office. During that afternoon, panthers were directed to organize old papers which had collected, paint the outside of the office in panther blue and black; in a nutshell, clean this shit up

That evening at a general meeting, Warren Hart was busted to panther, and all others who couldn't adhere to party rules and guidelines were told to "get to steppin". When the meetings and half-hearted excuses were finished, the Baltimore branch was left with about a dozen full time panthers and community workers. Mahonne Kebe was appointed as acting defense captain until someone else was sent to take charge of the branch. Kebe was also appointed lieutenant of finance, Reeva White as communications secretary, Larry Wallace as O.D. (officer of the day), and me, Steve McCutchen as lieutenant of information. That was the formal chain of command.

(5)

John Clark arrived from the Southern California chapter in mid-July to assume the duties of our new defense captain.

After talking with comrades and appraising what programs and activities were viable, he reported to New York and National Headquarters that the Baltimore branch was worth keeping open. That was a welcome relief to those of us who had stayed. We began building on our free lunch program, adding a liberation school component, increased our paper sales and began doing viable door-to-door work to collect information for news articles. Basically, began to dig roots in the East Baltimore neighborhoods.

Kebe was eventually expelled for tampering with party funds, and John Clark moved me into second in command of the branch. Eventually Reeva White left, but we were slowly bringing in community workers to fill voids. There were issues out there in Baltimore, and as we grew into a better understanding of operating as a branch, we soon addressed some of the communities needs and desires.

Our weekly community political education classes soon began to attract the curious and the interested, and to draw needed financial support in the form of donations and speaking engagements. Our core cadre became close knit and we spread out into East Baltimore to address issues that were brought to our attention. We picketed Roth's Market in the summer of 1969 for our breakfast and lunch program.

(6)

Members supported and joined with the Baltimore NAACP, and encouraged the efforts of fledgling high school Black Student unions, and probed into issues of police abuse, health care, and housing discrimination. By the end of 1969 we had survived F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover's threat, "to wipe out the Black Panther Party".

In April, 1970, the Baltimore P.D. in conjunction with other agencies arrested Marshall "Eddie" Conway, Jackie Powell, and Jack Johnson in connection with an alleged police homicide and shooting. On April 30th, those same law enforcement agencies targeted our breakfast program, one of our living quarters, and the houses of former panthers.

Twenty (20) former and current panthers were being included in a sweeping case that would come to be called "The bag of bones case". Panthers not arrested that day were forced underground until either vindication, forced submission, or until the case eventually fell apart in 1971. Through that calamitous confrontation with the agents of American anti-dissention, the Baltimore branch continued to reach deep into our community and built solid foundations and relations. Comrades Paul Coates, Connie (Gamble) Felder, Patsy Madden, Pat Bird (Nzinga Conway), Anita Stroud and others stepped in to fill the vacuum and refurbish our ranks. Even as other chapters and branches of the BPP were targeted by local police and federal government agencies, Baltimore survived the storms of internal and exter-

(7)

nal contradictions, and continued to serve the community body and soul under the banner of Huey P. Newton and the central committee of the BPP. In March, 1972, we closed our office doors, left some programs and members like Henry and India Lee, Will Joiner and others operating, and brought a skeleton of our membership to Oakland, as another phase of the BPP was about to continue.

Back to Back /Heart-to-Heart

All Power to the People

Steve McCutchen/ aka Lil' Masai

Baltimore Branch BPP