The era of black militancy is over, but the party had a lasting impact

by Judith Blake
Times staff reporter

The house is gone now, replaced by a two-story apartment building. But the concrete wall that stood in front remains, its faded mural a reminder of turbulent times.

The People's War," read the painted mural, and the message nearby is ominous: "Live, Love, Prosper, Build." But containing the wall are portraits of 1960s-era black militants Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and in the background, allusioned figures raise rifles aloft to a gesture of defiance.

Malcolm and Davis never visited the house at 30th Avenue and Spruce Street in Seattle's Central Area, but there were rallies and meetings to carry them. There was an occasion, too, when the copacetic warden greeted them for a raid some saw as their certain death -- a raid city leaders called off to avoid a bloody battle.

The house was headquarters, during the late 1960s and early '70s, for the Seattle chapter of the Black Panthers, the militant group the organization founded 30 years ago.

Bobby Seale is in Oakland, Calif.

The party faded from existence in the early '80s, but some of its survivors from around the country will gather for an anniversary reunion at an Oakland hotel tomorrow evening.

Seattlesite Aaron and Elmer Dixon, funders and once militant chiefs of the Seattle Black Panthers will be among them.

In an era of widespread tactics, the Black Panthers often were at center of the fray. They made headlines research after research as their leaders, clad in black leather jackets and black berets, and sometimes carrying rifles, preached revolution -- armed, if need be -- in the fight against racism and poverty.

There were demonstrations, arrests and show trials with police, although a gentler, teach-down side of the Panthers also surfaced -- one of free medical clinics, food banks and free breakfasts for needy children.

"They were a headache to all levels of government," Seattle city councilman Sam Smith, a black himself, remembers of the Panthers' militancy. "They had given up on the system and had turned to violence to bring about change. They used methods I didn't approve of."

But the Panthers and similar groups do have needed social changes fighting for values that were the heart and soul of this country," Smith says.

The Dixon brothers do not look like revolutionaries today. Both now work for the city of Seattle, where police say they now are out of the way of things during the Panthers' heyday.

Elmer, 36, tall and stocky with close-trimmed facial hair, wears a suit and tie to work in the parks department, where he heads safety training and also is the equal employment opportunity officer. He and his wife, DeeDee, have four children. The older one, 17, is the same age Elmer was when he launched his black-activist career.

Aaron, 37, who holds a degree in psychology and recently returned to Seattle from Oakland, has a temporary position as a youth counselor.

But it's not hard to jog the Dixon's memories of a more radical era. The memories at times bring a hard edge to outspoken Elmer's voice, hinting at the menacing manner of his Afro-haired youth.

At first, Elmer found the radical rhetoric of some black leaders hard to take. He remembers his reaction to a Seattle speech by volatile activist Stokely Carmichael.

"I didn't like any of it, and I didn't agree with anything he said. He used the word 'hunch' a lot. My best friend was white, and that didn't sit well with me."

"But the struggle shifted more from civil rights (voting laws, etc.) to human rights (issues of poverty, education, etc.) and I began to empathize with oppressed people."

At 17, as a senior at Garfield High School, Elmer joined others in a sit-in at Franklin High School, demanding the right to form a Black Student Union and closing down the school for a day.

Please see PANTHER on E 6

Where have the leaders of the Panthers gone?

by Kit Roos
Times staff reporter

Twenty years ago they grabbed a banner by the throat and shook. But what has happened since to some of the Black Panther leaders?

Bobby Seale, cofounder of the Panthers, lives in the hometown area of Philadelphia and was last reported to be working for a group that inspires black empowerment in poor and low-income Philadelphia. He recently wrote a cookbook, "I'm Just Getting Started With Blandy."

Harry Edwards, the Panthers' Olympic protestor, was last said to be living in Frankfurt. Newton was charged this year with embezzling sale funds from the Colombia-funded community college there. In June, Newton was found innocent on two counts of possessing firearms illegally.

Elbridge Cleaver, former Black Panther minister of information, that year launched a campaign in California as an "apartheid" candidate for the U.S. Senate. When Cleaver returned to the United States in 1975 after seven years of self-imposed overseas exile, he denounced the Black Panther Party and announced his conversion to Christianity. Cleaver was recently reported to be earning a living in Berkeley by selling drinking fountains and casting coveralls.
Gun-toting militants also made sure poor children had breakfast

About 1,000 Panthers were living in the house and a few others were present, Adams recalls, and they did not intend to comply with any officer order to 'get out."

"What would we have come out for? We had done nothing wrong."

But the raid never came. "They were not citing us, they were not going to make a statement."

"We tried to force change by whatever means we could,"

"I don't think we were really a threat," Adams says. "We didn't have a large-scale array. We did have a few members, and we did all that, but we weren't attracting anyone."

But the government apparently did perceives the threat. "In January of 1970, the Seattle Panthers were warned to stop their program in the city of Seattle, and several were wounded in Los Angeles."
Black Panthers Describe Tactics

VICTORIA, B.C. - (AP) - A member of the militant Black Panther movement in the United States says, "Nonviolence is dead."

The comment came from Bruce Hayes of Seattle, who Monday told an audience of about 300, during "Youth Week" discussions at the University of Victoria, that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was supposed to be the "greatest nonviolent leader in history."

"BUT I DON'T believe he would have been given one concession if he didn't have all the black people of America behind him with bricks and rocks and guns," Bobby Harding, also of Seattle and who also identified himself as a member of the Black Panthers, said.

"We believe politics comes out of the barrel of a gun."

"We don't talk; we demand," Harding said. "We don't make threats; we just demand. And if the demands aren't met, then a beautiful 50-story building downtown will disappear from the face of the earth."

A third member of the group, Bobby White of Seattle, said: "Armed revolution is necessary to achieve black political power in white racist America."

The three were clad in black leather jackets and black berets, and one carried a semi-automatic rifle.

The reality is that right now I am on the bottom, and I've been on the bottom for 400 years," Harding said. "We thrive on the bitterness of 26 million people.

"We can't lose sight of the fact that we are revolutionaries."

"Right now we are telling people strategic ma