

PANTHERS' PROGRESS



Black Panther leader Aaron Dixon, left, with his sister, Joanna, right.

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 Wall," reads the painted lettering, and the message nearby is optimistic: "Love, Unite, Respect, Build." But dominating the wall are portraits of 1960s-era black militants Malcolm X and Angela Davis, and in the background, silhouetted figures raise rifles aloft in a gesture of defiance.

Malcolm and Davis never visited the house at 20th Avenue and Spruce Street in Seattle's Central Area, but there were rifles aplenty and militants to carry them. There was an occasion, too, when the occupants waited tensely for a raid some saw as their certain death — a raid city leaders called off to avert a bloody battle.

The house was headquarters, during the late '60s and early '70s, for the Seattle chapter of the Black Panther Party, the militant black organization founded 20 years ago

Bobby Seale 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.

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

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

There were demonstrations, arrests and shootouts with police, although a gentler, lesser-known side of the Panthers also evolved — one of free medical clinics, food banks and free breakfasts for needy chil-

"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 did hasten needed social changes, fighting for values "that were the heart and soul of this country," Smith says.

The Dixon brothers do not look or live like revolutionaries today. Both now work for the city of Seattle, whose police they say harassed them unceasingly during the Panthers' heyday.

Elmer, 36, tall and fit-looking with close-cropped 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 oldest, 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 Dixons' memories of a more radical era. The memories at times bring a



Elmer Dixon, left and Aaron Dixon, right, visit their former headquarters at 20th Avenue and Spruce Street.



Elmer Dixon, left, Art Palmer, center, and E.J. Briskar in 1968.

hard edge to softspoken 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 agree with anything he said. He used the word 'honky' 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, jobs, 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

Where have the leaders of the Panthers gone?

by Kit Boss
Times staff reporter

Twenty years ago they grabbed a nation 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 Germantown section of Philadelphia and was last reported to be working for a group that improves housing for poor and low-income Philadelphians. He recently wrote a cookbook called "Barbecuing with Bobby."

■ Huey Newton, the Panthers' other cofounder, was last said to be living in Oakland. Newton was charged this year with embezzling state funds from a publicly funded community school there. In June, Newton was found innocent on two counts of possessing firearms illegally.

■ Eldridge Cleaver, former Black Panther minister of information, this year mounted a campaign in California as a Republican contender 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 lecturing, trimming trees and crafting flower pots.

Please see PANTHER on E 6

Gun-toting militants also made sure poor children had breakfast

PANTHER

continued from E 1

day. They won their point, as they had in a one-day boycott at Garfield.

The Franklin incident became the first of Elmer's many run-ins with police. On April 4, 1968, the day civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, Elmer found himself sitting in the juvenile detention center, charged with inciting others to riot.

Soon released, he traveled to Oakland with Aaron and other Seattle activists to attend a Black Student Union conference.

They arrived shortly after Black Panther Bobby Hutton's death in a shooting battle with police; Hutton's fellow Panthers turned the funeral into a major event. The Seattle youths heard a fiery speech by Bobby Seale and saw legions of Black Panthers lining the street in their leather jackets and berets.

"It was an awsome sight," says Elmer.

With Seale's approval, he and the other Seattleites started the first Black Panther chapter outside of California. Soon, he says, chapters sprang up all across the country. First Aaron, and then Elmer, served as Seattle chairman.

The next few years for the Dixons were ones of demonstrations, marches, speeches, arrests, anti-Panther death threats and testimony before a Congressional committee.

But they and other Panthers also started one of the Seattle's earliest food banks and a free medical clinic, still in existence as the Carolyn Downs Family Health Care Center. The Panthers' free breakfast program in Seattle ran for the better part of a decade, serving some 2,000 children daily at five different sites during its height, says Elmer. Some Panther volunteers cooked and served food for years, and Elmer himself worked in the program into the '80s.

The Panthers' early, gun-toting years were the most militant, and reactions from segments of the public reflected it.

"It was a very regular occurrence for me to get (threatening) calls," says Elmer. Soon, all Pan-

arrested some 50 times on charges of disturbing the peace, inciting to riot and the like.

The attention was not surprising, given the image the Black Panthers created for themselves. Panthers sometimes made threatening appearances marching down the street in their leather jackets and berets, rifles slung over their shoulders. They led a boycott of a local supermarket, forcing the store to contribute to the children's breakfast program.

Once, guns in hand, they marched into the principal's office at Rainier Beach High School demanding a halt to verbal and physical attacks against black students by other pupils. They even carried guns to the state capital for a meeting with legislators.

On Saturdays, Elmer led Panther training sessions on rifle use (although he says he invoked the Fifth Amendment at a Congressional hearing partly to avoid saying so).

"We weren't trying to intimidate people," Elmer insists, although a listener's skeptical look makes him laugh a little. "The party was born out of love of community, not out of hate."

They carried guns, he says, to make a statement: "We (blacks) were no longer going to be hosed by police, bitten by police dogs, bombed in our churches. . ."

"We were a symbol. The impression we wanted to give was that we were not cowards. We were men. It was our duty to stand up for our God-given rights. We were not going to beg for our rights, the rights to a decent education, health care, jobs — basic human rights. . . We were trying to forge change by whatever means we could."

"I don't think we were really a threat," says Aaron. "We didn't have a large-scale army. We did have quite a few members and we had guns, but we weren't attacking anyone."

But the government apparently did perceive a threat. Bloody raids late in 1969 left two Black Panthers dead and four wounded in Chicago, and several wounded in Los Angeles.

In January of 1970, the Seattle Panthers were warned (by a local TV newsmen, Elmer believes) of an imminent raid on their headquarters by the Treasury Department's Alcohol, Tobacco and Fire-

About 10 Panthers were living in the house and a few others were present, Aaron recalls, and they did not intend to comply with any police order to come out. "What would we have come out for? We had done nothing wrong."

But the raid never came. Then-mayor West Uhlman refused to permit it.

"(The federal investigators) said they would like to have the police support for the raid," recalls Uhlman, now in private legal practice. "I instructed the police department not to comply. I did not want to be responsible for somebody going in and murdering young men. That's literally what they did in Chicago — shot people in their beds."

"They did have some guns," Uhlman says of the Seattle Panthers, "but they did not pose a threat to anyone in our city."

By this time, the Panthers already were trying to change their image, leaving their leather jackets and guns at home. Emphasis now leaned to community projects like the breakfasts.

The efforts of the Panthers and other militant groups helped bring vital social change, including renewed pride among blacks, former members argue.

"A lot of the freedoms that black people have today came from things that happened then," says Aaron Dixon. "Today, a black person who knows how to think positively can be as successful as he wants to be. He may have to work harder (than whites), but he can do it."

Still, millions are "trapped in welfare and poverty" and know no way out, he says.

Both brothers think public edu-

cation has deteriorated for blacks and whites, and Elmer dreams of starting a private school system

that poor people could afford.

Meanwhile, the intense, early years of the Panthers are the stuff

of heady memories. Says Aaron "I feel lucky I was able to experience it."

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A76

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 ask; 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.



A. P. wirephoto

PANTHERS WITH CONTROVERSIAL RIFLE

Aug. 21, 1968

City police officials said provincial regulations governing firearms state that anyone over 18 may carry an unloaded rifle or a shotgun on the streets.

ASKED BY A MAN in the audience what would happen should the black man rule the white, Harding said: "I can't share in your little fantasies. I'll worry about being on top when I am on top."

of revolution," he said. "Twos and threes are the most effective method of knocking off the gestapo."

"Youth Week," which began Sunday night, features discussions by controversial spokesmen and figures.

"The reality is that right now I am on the bottom, and I've been on the bottom for 400 years."

Asked if he thrived on violence, Harding said, "We thrive on the bitterness of 25 million people."

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

"Right now we are telling people strategic me

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