

black neighborhoods, observing police conduct and protecting residents from acts of police brutality. Originally named the Black Panther Party For Self-Defense, the organization started in Oakland, Calif. Party founders Bobby Seale and the late Huey P. Newton eventually turned the group into a quasi-militant political organization, calling for blacks to take up arms in the draft, which was seen as a key element in ending the Vietnam War in 1966.

"They considered themselves armed revolutionaries," said John Holmes, SIUC lecturer in Black American Studies, who helped the Panthers - as they called themselves - establish a free breakfast program at the Olivet Free Methodist Church. It was one of many community-based programs started by the National Black Panther Party. Holmes also helped organize the Black Studies Program in 1968.

At their core, the Panthers fought against police brutality - sometimes at the risk of their lives. Donning black leather jackets, dark sunglasses and black berets, the Panthers had a formidable, and some say threatening, appearance. Panther membership exceeded 2,000 with party chapters in several major cities. The group attracted mostly young black men and women.

There was no official chapter in Carbondale. But some SIUC students from Chicago and St. Louis started their own organization in town that was heavily influenced by the party. The National Committee to Combat Fascism (NCCF) began around 1969. Group members included 20-year-old Chicagoan Donald Jackson and St. Louis. The group loosely affiliated themselves with the national party.

"Some of them were students of mine," Holmes said. "They were taking Black Studies classes when it was housed in the Old Baptist building. I had all sorts of literature and magazines; Mohammed Speaks - the National Black Panther Newspaper and the Chicago Defender. The guys were in discussion groups."

The NCCF, whose membership was sporadic, had an office on the corner of North Washington and Oak Street. Some members of the group lived upstairs in a house at 401 N. Washington St. near Green Street. The group did not organize on campus, instead focusing on the surrounding community. In addition to creating community programs, the group sold copies of the Black Panther Newspaper and other propaganda. No formal marches or demonstrations were organized. The group encouraged members to arm themselves, which often fell on deaf ears, according to Holmes.

"They were teaching these young people how to use weapons and were preaching things like people need to arm themselves. I took some of the guys to the homes of people I knew who hunted and had weapons. I wasn't for attacking the police, or to defend themselves from the police. I was just showing them shotguns and rifles in their houses. So the propaganda of people needing to arm themselves was not really for the benefit of people in this community," he said.

That fact did not stop the Panthers from agitating the community against the police. Echoing the national party's doctrine, they often referred to the police as "pigs" and accused them of using streetlights to maintain surveillance on the "oppressed population," in Carbondale, despite the fact that residents were earlier petitioned to have streetlights put in. Members of the NCCF were also accused of harassing black residents. streetlights to the disapproval of many black residents.

Whether NCCF members Jackson, Dotson or others were involved in streetlight shootings is uncertain. Still, these acts would undoubtedly have drawn the attention of local police. Police would then deny giving any extra surveillance of the group, or of having any knowledge that the group was harassing or overtly tensing the community.

harassment or overt tension