

events that transpired in the early morning of Thursday, Nov. 12, 1970, would bring the local police and Panthers to a near deadly confrontation.

According to witness and police accounts, and Daily Egyptian archives, the gun battle began an hour prior to the standoff on Washington Street. An SIU squad car was patrolling an area near Illinois and Grand Avenues. At around 5 a.m., the two officers spotted a Volkswagen van parked near the railroad tracks. The vehicle appeared to be abandoned or stalled. Flashing a spotlight inside the van, the officers saw what appeared to be a person asleep and slumped on the seat. The officers proceeded to back their car up behind the van.

Suddenly, the van pulls away, turning north on Illinois Avenue. The police pursue. The chase ends as the van stops several blocks later. The officers radioed in to report the incident. According to police accounts, a man "jumped out" came to the back of the van and fired two shots with a pistol into the passenger side. In the midst of the melee, the unidentified man reportedly fired three or four more shots, as the officers abandoned their car, hitting one in the hip. Carbondale police were notified, receiving a description of the man, who was later spotted in the north end of town near Marion and Oak Street.

Arriving at the scene, another officer tried to apprehend the suspect. According to police accounts, the man fired off a shotgun round in the face of the officer, causing pellet wounds to the face. No more than a half hour later, the man was traced to the house on 401 N. Washington St., after the officer, wounded from the shotgun blast, radioed for back up. By 5:45 a.m., at least four Panthers had barricaded themselves inside, having sandbagged the upstairs windows. The shootout lasted for nearly two hours.

"It was a nightmare," said Margaret Nesbitt, who was awakened by the shooting while in her home near Marion and Washington Street just down the block from where the standoff occurred.

"It went on and on. The only thing that saved us was daylight, and the embarrassment of the police. That's why they stopped shooting," she said.

Other neighbors came out of their homes, including a 55 year-old man named Jesse Russell, who lived across the street at 402 N. Washington St. Russell was shot in the shoulder after stepping on his front porch. He survived the injury, but the source of the shot was not known. The area was not evacuated by police, according to witness accounts. Nesbitt, who wishes not to reveal her age, is still troubled by events some 30 years later.

"It was an inhumane nightmare that I don't wish to relive. When things happen now, you just shudder to think that someone's going to get shot or killed. I'm thankful to the Lord that no one was killed. We were all just thinking, 'What is this on our block,' " she said.

Police eventually tear-gassed the house, but with little effect. The men would climb onto the front porch roof to try and get air and climb back into the window, according to witness accounts. Neighborhood residents reportedly shouted at police to let someone try and talk the men out. The battle ended soon after Carbondale resident Elbert Simon - Carbondale's first black postmaster general who knew the men in the house - convinced police to allow him into the house to try and get them to surrender. After an hour inside, Simon and three other community members who later entered the house talked the men into surrendering. James K. Holley, also known as Badatuade Dmowali, 20, Michael Johnson, also known as Milton Boyd, 22, and Leonard Thomas, 20, were escorted from the house and arrested for the shootings.

Two other men, Joseph Brown - no relation to SIUC Black American Studies Director Joseph Brown - and Thomas Archie Dotson, 21, reportedly escaped from the house shortly after the shootout began and ran down an alley. Brown suffered a gunshot wound to the thigh and Dotson was shot twice before police apprehended them. In all, the standoff lasted nearly three hours.