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For more information about July '64, visit www.wxxi.org/july64
July '64 Discussion Guide

It was the Long Hot Summer of 1964...

Violence erupted at a street dance on a hot, July night in 1964 when a routine arrest took a turn for the worse — and set the stage for three days of conflict and unrest that ended with the National Guard being called to a northern city for the first time during the civil rights era.

July '64 is a documentary that examines the causes and effects of a watershed event in the history of Rochester, New York; and offers viewers and community groups a springboard to discuss critical issues still facing Americans today.

32. The July '64 production team is made up of a black man and a white woman — one partner is a native Rochesterian and the other is not. How do you think these differences influenced the making of July '64?
27. One of the most thought provoking exchanges comes near the end of the documentary:

Warren Doremus “I think that most people in this nation are now at peace within their own hearts with people of other races and other cultures and that if they cannot welcome them, they at least could live peaceably and respectively with them.”

Dr. Kenneth Reardon “That assertion melts away in a New York minute when the first African American family shows up across the street to look at the house that’s for sale or that I go to the dentist or the doctors office and for the first time in what has been an all white environment, there is a person of color and then all of the unexamined messages of our society that we’ve absorbed over time that have been demonized and continue to demonize communities of color and in some ways justify an action by privileged white men and women, those quickly get put into question.”

Dr. James Turner “There is still the desire to define advantage and social status around race. There is still the residual belief in this society in concepts of white supremacy and black inferiority.” Discuss each speaker’s point of view and how it relates to the other two. Without questioning or doubling the sincerity of Mr. Doremus’ statement, why do you think his point of view differs from Dr. Turner’s — or are they compatible in any way? Discuss why you think it is that two different groups can look at the same situation and come up with different interpretations. How do your observations relate to race relations in America today?

28. Dr. Reardon refers to “privileged white men and women,” and Dr. Turner contends that “there is still the residual belief in this society in concepts of white supremacy and black inferiority.” Discuss your reaction to these two speakers’ comments.

29. Constance Mitchell, in reference to 1964, said that “people came to the realization that if we really were going to survive in America, we had better come to the table and sit down and start dialoguing and begin to try to get some type of understanding of who we are, where we are and where we’re going.” Discuss the relevance of this statement today. Try to answer her questions — Who are we? Where are we? Where are we going?

30. Discuss the merit in re-examining historic events to help interpret the world today. To what extent did July ’64 effect your perceptions about what happened then — and as Constance Mitchell asks, where we are today?

31. The makers of July ’64 chose the end the documentary with the poem Harlem (2) from Montage of a Dream Deferred by Langston Hughes. Read the poem together and discuss the significance of this choice.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?

1. In the beginning of the documentary, viewers learn that Rochester, New York’s African-American population increased by 300% in ten years. To understand the implications of this fact, image that the population of the room that you are in now will increase by 300% over the next ten minutes — but other conditions in the room won’t change. You will have the same number of chairs, access to the same number of restrooms etc. 25% of the new arrivals will be children. How do you think you will start to feel as result of the population increase in your space? Discuss how you think the established residents of the neighborhood that experienced the population influx in Rochester might have felt. Discuss how you think people outside the neighborhood might have reacted.

2. In the technicolor footage of old Rochester, the narrator says “...the community is fully aware of the financial facts of life and the methods of making an economic area prosperous.” Discuss the meaning of this statement and how it may have related to the newcomers.

3. The term “smug” is used by people throughout the documentary, and exemplified in the title of Curt Gerling’s book “Smugtown U.S.A.” Discuss why you think the filmmakers chose to focus on the smugtown theme. In your opinion, does the moniker Smugtown apply only to Rochester — or is Smugtown a name that could be given to other communities? Was there only one Smugtown or many?

4. Constance Mitchell says that prior to the riot, “people had their head in the sand” — and failed to acknowledge that changes were taking place. Discuss why people were reluctant to embrace change. Do you think this situation was unique to Rochester? Discuss other examples of cases where communities were reluctant to embrace change — and had change thrust upon them.

5. Robert McNulty says that “World War Two and the need for mobilization of a labor force caused a huge migration of American Americans out of the south and into the rest of America, and American never quite adjusted in a wise way to that change.” Do you agree with Robert McNulty? Is this statement still relevant today?

6. Frank Lamb and Dr. James Turner offer contrasting views of why African-Americans had a hard time assimilating into the community. Frank Lamb says that it was because they were unskilled and lacked ties that earlier immigrant groups had to people already living in the community. Dr. Turner says that newly arriving blacks were actually more similar to people already living in Rochester than newly arrived immigrant Europeans — and that the problem was a lack of will to welcome them. Discuss these two points of view.

7. Despite the poverty, many of the people in the documentary have fond memories of their Joseph Avenue neighborhood. What are your impressions of Joseph Avenue prior to the riot?

8. The neighborhood section of the documentary features two fathers and two sons. Compare and contrast lives of the Mangione Family and the Jackson Family in the same neighborhood.
9. Many people in the documentary have very vivid recollections of experiences with the police in the years leading up to the riot — yet the policemen in the documentary are disparaging of the idea that police brutality existed. Who do you find more credible?

10. Dr. Walter Cooper says that “in every community across the country, police were viewed as the power to keep blacks in their place and they were used that way.” Discuss this statement as it may have applied in Rochester and in other cities in the nation.

11. Minister Franklin Florence says that there was “a quiet rage” in the community. Does Minister Florence's statement apply exclusively to Rochester or does it have broader implications? Discuss the conditions that you think led to a build up of rage in Rochester and in America. To what extent do you think these conditions still exist?

12. In the old technicolor film — which was made prior to the riot — the narrator says “times change and either you change the city to fit them or they’ll change your city, often unpleasantly or often unprofitably.” Do you think the narrator was referring to social/civil rights issues or something else? Was the narrator intending to predict that a riot was in Rochester’s near future?

13. The riot started at a street dance on the night of July 24, 1964. Why then?

14. A rumor quickly spread that a child was bit by a police dog, although the rumor was never substantiated. Discuss the relevance of this widespread rumor on the first night of the riot.

15. Earlier in the documentary, people describe the neighborhood as a place that they loved. Why do you think people who lived in the neighborhood were driven to destruction?

16. Why do you think Mr. Casentino and others in the neighborhood blamed the action on “outsiders”?

17. Discuss this exchange from the documentary:

Constance Mitchell “We went down with a group of ministers and I think there was about eight of us, went down to the Public Safety Commissioner's Office to ask if we could have, because they had talked about having a curfew, if we could have special passes so that we could go out and talk to the young people, and someone left the intercom on in the inner office and what we heard was, “Let those niggers do what they want to do, but the minute if they step outside of the boundaries of Clarissa Street or Jefferson Avenue and head towards Main Street, shoot to kill”.

Frank Lamb “Well, number one — I never heard such a thing and wouldn’t believe that our police were instructed that that was the last resort and it never got to that, thank God and so I think that was a total fallacy”.

18. The riot on Friday night was touched off by a spontaneous event, but Darryl Porter indicates that Saturday night’s events “were planned for Saturday after curfew.” Contrast and compare the events on Friday with the events on Saturday. Are they important to differentiate in any way that enhances your understanding of the events?

19. A young man in the documentary offers the opinion that “it’s all because of the cops.” To what degree do you think that the historic interaction of the police and the black community had an impact on the riot?

20. Frank Lamb reflects the feeling of many people in the community that it was shocking that Rochester would experience a riot. Discuss why you think people were surprised by the riot, given the obvious and clearly visible deprivation that existed in the neighborhoods where the rioting took place.

21. Although the events of July 24, 25 and 26, 1964 have come to be known as the Rochester “riot,” — several people in the video dispute that term. How would you describe what happened in Rochester?

22. In the Rochester lexicon, this event is also frequently referred to as the “race riot.” Was this a “race riot”?

23. Earlier in the documentary, we heard people speak warmly about their Joseph Avenue neighborhood and its amenities. What do you think life was like on Joseph Avenue after the riot?

24. Early in the documentary, Dr. Cooper and Dr. Whitaker talk about people of color being denied open access to housing opportunities. Discuss how communities of color become stranded in urban areas today. What is the impact of concentrations of poverty and racial separation on cities and their regions?

25. Dr. James Turner refers to the “crisis of the black politician” who “now have political office but they have to administer over much more dramatic social problems than before, with a dramatically decreased revenue base.” Discuss Dr. Turner’s assertion that “as blacks ascend to positions of power, they find it’s a kind of empty victory.”

26. Most of the people interviewed for July ’64 indicated that policing and police/community understanding in Rochester has improved since the riot. Both Mayor Johnson and Chief Duffy indicate in their statements that it takes understanding and effort to break down “attitudes on both sides and create a more harmonious environment in which effective police work can be done” today. Events nationwide demonstrate time and again that police/community relations continue to be a serious problem. Discuss how you think this situation reflects on the state of race relations in America today. Do you think these are isolated events or emblematic of larger, unresolved problems?