

A History of Police Brutality in Omaha

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When a government group consistently uses its physical power to keep one group of people under control, it is called oppression. When regimes around the world use violence to do this, it is seen as a heinous crime against humanity and labelled by the United Nations as criminal. However, when it happens in Omaha, the media, politicians, and many middle- and upper-class white people simply dismiss it as acceptable and necessary.

Police brutality is the excessive and unwarranted use of force by law enforcement. It is an extreme form of police misconduct or violence and is a civil rights violation. It also refers to a situation where police officers exercise undue or excessive force against a person. Within this issue are intersections between police brutality versus reasonable force; criminal activity versus civil protest; transparency versus secrecy; and civility versus oppression. Most obviously though is the intersection between white supremacy versus freedom for people of color. The freedom from government-sanctioned violence, the freedom from police brutality, and ultimately, the freedom to exist.

There are questions here about disproportionality and inequitable responses by police, too. That means that often, the Omaha Police Department has historically responded in more severely violent ways to African Americans and other people of color than to white people. This disproportion is a reflection of white supremacist thinking that positions Black people and other people of color as below white people. The racism, discrimination, and hatred involved in that thinking should not be apparent in a city's police force; yet my research for this article, which included scouring four different newspapers and dozens of books, overwhelmingly returned stories of African Americans and other people suffering police brutality, while white people did not. The stories below reflect this reality.

However, this article is not a complete or exhaustive listing of my research. Instead, it merely serves as *an introduction* to the history. I have included 33 examples here; there are *literally* thousands of stories of police brutality that aren't accounted for in Omaha, both modern and very old. In all of its inadequacies though, my scan showed more than 4/5s of stories in my

sources (explained in the next paragraph) were of Black people experiencing police brutality. Young people under the age of 21 have disproportionately experienced the majority of police brutality in Omaha. Police have attacked Black people at home, in protests, at work, and in many other places throughout the city; it could be said that no place in Omaha is safe from police brutality.

My sources are limited, insufficient, inadequate, biased, and incomplete, given that I'm relying on the *Omaha World-Herald* and the *Omaha Bee*, both of which have reputations for their traditionally white supremacist, anti-Black news coverage; the *Omaha Star* and the *Omaha Guide*, which covered as much as they could with the few resources they had; academic studies, which lack the nuance of human street knowledge; and government reports, which mostly uphold the white supremacist viewpoint throughout the city's history. All of this is skewed and sketchy, and it's the best I can offer.

This article is a history of police brutality in Omaha.

Omaha Police Brutality between 1854 and 1899

THE OMAHA DAILY

WHAT KILLED GEORGIANA?

A Colored Woman's Mysterious Death in a
Cell of the City Jail.

POLICE BRUTALITY SUSPECTED.

How a Colored Cyprian Perished in
the Lock-Up and the Start-
ling Rumors of the
Cause.

A Woman's Strange Death.

This is a headline from the August 10, 1887 edition of the Omaha Daily Bee. The newspaper referred to high-class prostitutes as "Cyprians."

Police brutality was a matter of professional practice among early law enforcement in Omaha. There were countless reports of police officers going off on people for all kinds of reasons, and as the only people legally allowed to kill residents in the Omaha, more than one victim fell early to the violent wrath of police officers. However, finding evidence and investigating circumstances and seeking witnesses was in short order for the first 25-plus years of the Omaha Police Department. Following are some of the stories from the earliest era of the city's history.

Although Omaha was informally founded in 1854, it wasn't incorporated until 1857. That year, the first City marshal was hired. By 1866, the police force had four men, and by 1869 it had 18 patrolmen, a lieutenant, and a captain. In 1871 the force was reduced to 12 men, and by 1882, it was up to 14 officers, a police judge, and a marshal.

It was 1881 when the marshal for the City of Omaha was convicted of collecting money from criminals and sent to the Nebraska Penitentiary. Unfortunately, crimes committed by Omaha police didn't end there.

1. 1887—Georgiana “Georgie” Clark (18??-1887), age unknown

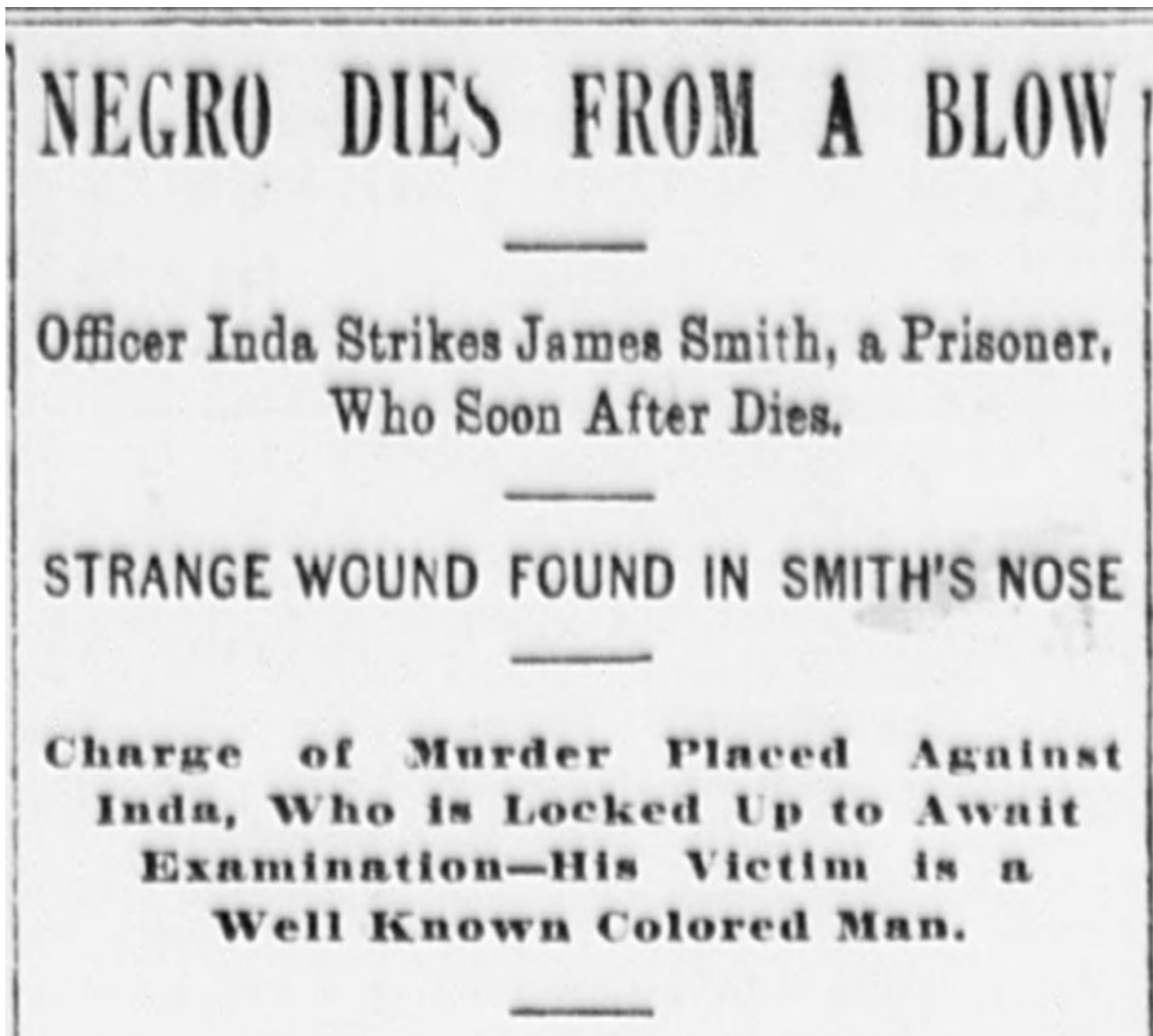
A Black woman named Georgiana “Georgie” Clark was an alleged prostitute who was murdered by Omaha police officers in August 1887. Educated at Omaha High School and regarded as a fine pianist, the *Omaha Bee* remarked she was a “castaway” with a “vivacious disposition” who “took to the town” after her husband died. Leaving a job, Clark was reported to have been going to a brothel when she collapsed in the doorway. Two officers immediately picked her up and dragged her to a patrol wagon, which brought her to the police station.

Thrown into jail with a white prostitute, the policemen egged on a fight between the women and let it happen for a long time. When the yelling of the women “became unbearable,” two other police officers moved Clark into another cell. One of the officers began “brutally striking her, not once but several times.” According to the *Omaha Bee*, “After being violently thrown into the new cell she never spoke.” An reporter for the *Omaha Bee* interviewed several people surrounding the story, almost all of whom were Black and almost all of whom corroborated the story. The original article on the story ends, “The excited colored friends of the dead woman announce their determination to prosecute an investigation.”

The trial began the next day. Officers told a story of an alcoholic prostitute who admitted to taking morphine and who got into a fight with a white woman in the jail. They said the white woman was a prostitute too, and that during the fight she had jumped on Georgiana’s chest. An account said of the officers, “They jointly swore that they had used no taunts to provoke the women to fight and that in separating them the gentlest measures were employed.” According to their accounts, the police only found her dead when it was time to go to trial. African American physician Dr. Matthew Ricketts, the first Black doctor in Omaha, conducted the autopsy. Dr. Ricketts testified that he found many bruises and wounds, including boot marks on the chest. He also said that he could find no signs of drugs or alcohol in the body, and that because of the lungs being filled with liquid, the cause of death was likely related to the book marks on Georgiana’s chest. More than one person testified they saw a police officer viciously kick the woman as he threw her into the second cell.

The judge’s verdict in the case was, “Deceased came to her death from the effects of alcoholic stimulants and morphine and injuries received externally, inflicted by whom or what means the jury knows not.” Georgiana Clark was buried at the Laurel Hill Cemetery. The day after the trial ended, the second woman in the case was found dead in the city’s jail. The newspaper wrote of her, “For fluency of billingsgate and acknowledged pugilistic prowess, Rose is without an equal among the females of the city.”

2. 1889—James A. Smith (18??-1899), age unknown



This is a headline from the August 14, 1899 edition of the Omaha Bee, regarding the murder of James Smith in police custody.

An African American performer named J. A. Smith died suspiciously in 1899 after being arrested by Omaha police. A musician, he was arrested for “loud talking” and booked at the downtown police station, then located at N. 9th and Dodge Street. As the police told it, Smith was walking down a hallway when he reportedly tripped and hit his head against a bench, dying instantly. In a court case afterwards though, a prisoner at the jail testified they heard a fight in the hallway, yelling, and the sound of something falling.

A loud voice cried, “Oh, oh,” and the prisoner thought to themselves, “S’pose some poor fellow’s getting his head kicked off.” Another person heard the cries, and saw a police officer jam Smith’s hat down over his ears. During the trial police officer referred to the lawyer for

the opposition with a racial slur, and said it “was merely in a jovial way, with no malice intended.” During the trial of the police officer, Vic Walker, an African American lawyer who also owned the Midway Saloon where Smith had been seen on the night he was killed said, “In my opinion [the police officer] doesn’t like a colored man.” According to Walker, the officer was in the Midway every night, and referred to every Black man with a racial slur. During the course of the trial, it was revealed that the officer was jealous and angry of Smith’s marriage to a white woman, and that the officer held a grudge against him for this. Smith and his wife lived in Council Bluffs, where interracial marriage was legal. It wasn’t legal in Nebraska. A police court found the officer guilty and held him in jail for a court trial.

Soon, members of the Young People’s Progressive Club, a group of African American youth, wrote to the *Omaha World-Herald* and commended it for “giving the true account of the murder of James Smith.” There was a “mass meeting of 200” African Americans held to raise money to pay for lawyers to prosecute the police officer in this case. A committee was formed to canvas the community, and “several hundred dollars” were immediately collected.

This is Tom Lewis, a friend of James Smith who was arrested with him in 1899. Smith was killed by a police officer at the police station after their arrests. Lewis testified at the trial of the officer.

Judge Samuel I. Gordon (1844-1923) was the presiding judge over the case against the Omaha police officer charged with killing James A. Smith, an African American singer.

During the court trial, questions of guilt were immediately raised when coroners who attended the autopsy of James Smith suddenly disagreed on his cause of death. Arguing that he might have been shot before he was sent to jail, defense attorneys made one of the doctors confess that might have been a possibility. The trial veered wildly when the defense called witnesses, all of whom attested to different possibilities than had been laid out to the police court. In addition to the allegation of getting shot ahead of time, there were people saying Smith had bought a gun; that Smith had a fight with another man that resulted in the gunshot; and one man said he’d heard Smith get into an altercation in the alley behind the Midway that might have resulted in the gunshot.

There were also accusations that Smith was cheating on his wife; that Smith tried getting her gun from her and was rejected; that she was involved in killing him, and; that the policeman had once threatened Smith’s life in a social setting. At one point, Vic Walker said all of that was a distraction. Late in the trial local African American attorney Silas Robbins was retained to assist the county attorney and the deputy county attorney for the prosecution, at the request of the friends of James Smith.

The trial came down to a gunshot wound that wasn’t originally seen when Smith was arrested, and the question of the trial was whether the police officer fired the gun, or another figure. The prosecution called witness after witness, attesting to the absence of a gunshot wound, the absence of Smith being drunk, and everything else the defense brought up. In



their verdict, the jury didn't mention a gunshot wound; instead, they referred to the wound as a puncture. One witness suggested the police officer stabbed the man causing the wound; a coroner in the original inquisition said he felt a bullet in the hole. It didn't matter, because the prosecution's approach didn't work. After a week long trial, the jury acquitted the



policeman on the absence of evidence.

Omaha Police Brutality between 1900 and 1949

This is a headline from a 1919 newspaper account of police brutality in Omaha.

This is a 1929 article about police brutality in Omaha.

This is Vic Walker (1864-19??), an African American attorney, policeman, and criminal figure. This was his pose during police court trials in 1898.

OFFICERS MISTREATED PRISONER, SAYS URE

To Put a Stop to Brutality
in the Omaha Police
Department.

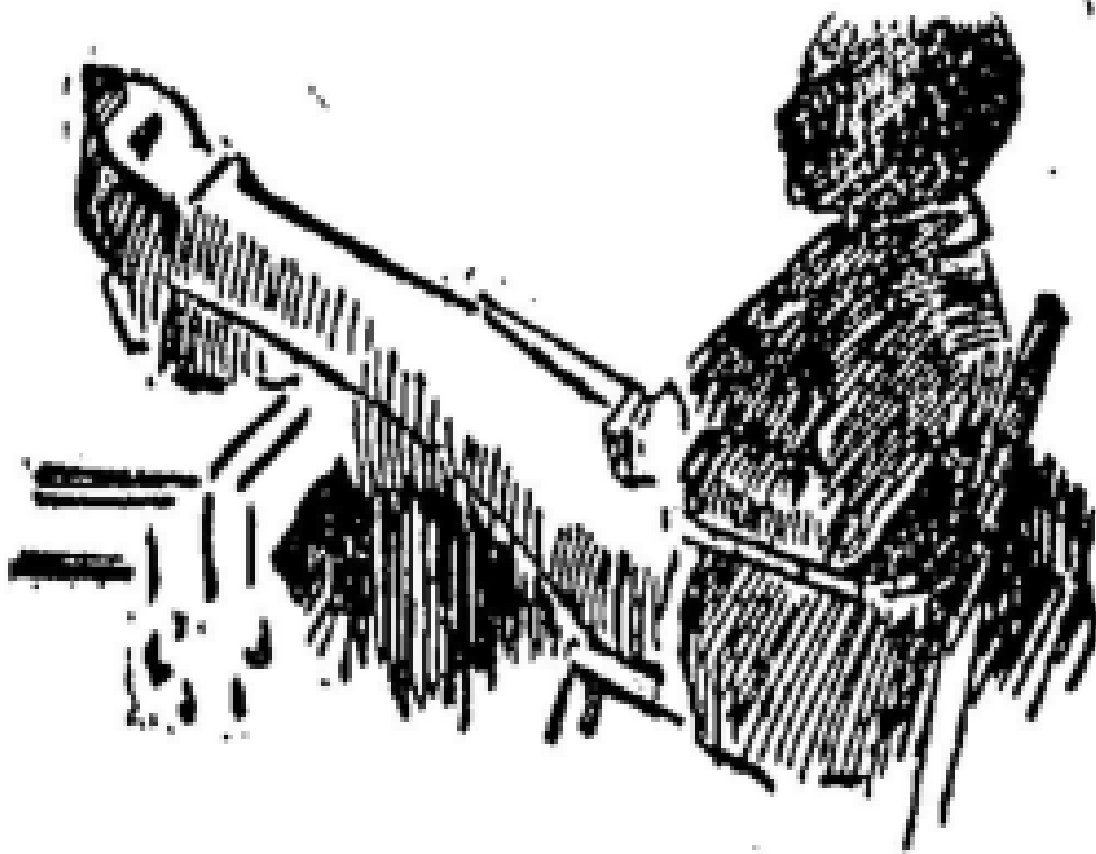
Says Policemen Beat Helpless
Man Without Any Ap-
parent Reasons.

Omaha became a modern city at the turn of the 20th century. Increased industry, growing residential areas, and a growing economy forced the city to look down at its past as a “wide-open town” where crime flourished, and by 1907, the city had 135 police officers. The Omaha police force got hard and mean, and reports of police brutality witness the cruelty of law enforcement in these 50 years. This time period includes two world wars, a political crime boss who controlled the police, a few major riots in the city, and many, many reports of violent policing practices throughout Omaha.

ALLEGED BOY IS VICTIM OF POLICE BRUTALITY

Tom Whalen, Driver of Besse-
lin Truck Which Is Stolen,
Says Was Beaten.

MOTHER MAY FILE CHARGE



ATTORNEY WALKER AT EASE.

3. 1905—Victor B. Walker (1864-e1924), age 41

Victor B. Walker (1864-e1924) was beaten by Omaha police for a criminal vendetta in 1905. Walker had come to own the Midway Saloon in the 1880s, a notorious drinking establishment in the Sporting District downtown. A one-time Buffalo soldier, political activist, lawyer, civil rights activist, and journalist, when he first got to Omaha in the early 1880s, Walker worked as a police officer. Almost 20 years into the business of being a saloon keeper, he got the bad side of Tom Dennison in 1905. Dennison, the city's political crime boss, controlled most of the underworld in the city, including the business owners in the Sporting District. He also by-and-large controlled the Omaha Police Department. When Walker fell to his bad side in 1905, he was thoroughly beaten by two officers from the police department, under the order of Dennison. Eventually fleeing Omaha, Walker left a long shadow on the city for years after.

Early in 1919, the Omaha Police Department was accused of brutality in their quest to “cure prostitutes.” In an editorial, the *Omaha World-Herald* railed again treating prostitutes, “sanely, legally, and humanely,” protesting the that police were not going to “cure”

prostitutes “by turning them over, as dogs and hares and monkeys are used” for instruction. The paper demanded, “Let prostitutes, male and female, be punished as the law provides, but only as the law provides,” and further hammers on the police for “callously depriving them of those shreds of legal rights as human beings that are still left to them.”

4. 1919—John Aytch, (unknown-unknown) age unknown

Omaha City Commissioner William Ure witnessed police brutality directly on January 31st of 1919. Driving home near North 18th and Webster Streets, Ure witnessed “two burly policemen” punch and kick an African American man in their custody. Appalled by this action, Ure said to the *Omaha World-Herald*, “We will take this incident up to finish, and if the [policemen] are guilty, we will make an example of them that will stop such brutality in the future. That was a mean trick, to slug that man as the officer did. His fellow officer was holding the man’s other arm and he was helpless... Policemen have no right to treat a man that way.” Following that, a letter to the editor signed “Democracy” said, “From frequent reports it is a common occurrence for police brutality against prisoners,” and called for them “to stop this barbarity and not allow officers to disclose their prejudicial feelings as Captain Vanous did with the retort, ‘He’s only a negro, and you can’t hurt a negro.’”

The victim’s name was John Aytch. In the ensuing trial, one officer said “I will not hold a piece of sugar in my hand, coaxing prisoners to come to jail. I’ve tried that stunt too many times. I’ve never struck a man with my fist unless he came at me first.” The officers accused Aytch of kicking one of them in the stomach. The officers were suspended for five days without pay. Soon after [the Omaha NAACP chapter](#) formed a committee to investigate the event. [Amos Scruggs](#), [Mrs. James Jewell](#), [Jessie Hale Moss](#), and other African American leaders were involved in going to the police station and conducting their investigation.

In March 1919, Aytch sued the perpetrating policemen for \$5,000 in damages. He said he was unable to work after the attack. The newspapers soon reported that City of Omaha lawyers defended the men against the protests of Mayor Edward Smith, who said they should get their own representation. However, the trail of this case disappeared from the media after this. However, the officers’ names continued to appear on the police department roster for years afterward, and in a decade both were in leadership positions.

In June 1919, the *Omaha Bee* accused the Omaha Police Department of white-washing the problems it was facing, including “policy brutality, crookedness [and] connivancy in law-breaking.” The owner and editor of the paper, Edward Rosewater, was an avowed enemy of Tom Dennison and his criminal enterprise that ran the City government, including the mayor, the police commissioner, and others. In July, the *Omaha Bee* shared the opinion, “Third degree police methods may be tolerable for desperate criminals, but they are wholly inexcusable for forcing victims of police brutality to help exculpate the offenders.”

5. 1919—Eugene Scott (unknown-1919), age unknown

In early September 1919, police raided a downtown hotel for illegal activities. During the ensuing melee, police officers shot and killed an African American bellman named Eugene Scott. The *Omaha Bee* called the shooting as reckless and indiscriminate, noting it as the “crowning achievement” of a “disgraceful and incompetent” Omaha Police Department.

6. 1919—Will Brown (1879-1919), 40

The height of Tom Dennison’s evils in Omaha was the mob violence in late September 1919 that culminated in the lynching and dismemberment of African American worker Will Brown. While many officers were initially involved in trying to prevent the lynching, this horrific event was partly facilitated by officers of the Omaha Police Department; nobody was ever convicted in the 20,000-member mob that committed this heinous act.

Throughout the 1920s, accusations of police brutality occurred regularly. The name of one of the officers in the 1919 John Aytch case continuously shows up throughout the decade as a perpetrator; however, it appears that these accusations against him never stuck, and often the cases just disappeared from the newspapers, just like Aytch a decade before.

7. 1922—Robert H. Johnson (unknown-unknown), age unknown

When Robert H. Johnson was arrested by the Omaha Police Department in 1922, Harrison Pinkett represented him as a victim of police brutality. Johnson was a supporter of an unpopular candidate for Omaha Police commissioner, and Pinkett claimed in court that police arrested him and beat him in retaliation.

By 1925, the Omaha Police Department had grown to 271 officers.

After hearing a case against the Omaha Police Department regarding police brutality in 1933, a police judge was paraphrased by the *Omaha World-Herald* saying, “Omaha had a reputation for police brutality, and that he intended to see reform. He said many men were walking the street cripples because of police mishandling.” Between 1930 and 1937, my research showed eight different instances of police being reported for beating up people in downtown Omaha for *not paying parking tickets*. The newspaper editorialized about these kinds of police brutality in 1934, writing, “The parking regulations are just and reasonable and should be enforced. The inability of police judges to forget that every parking law violator has a vote has made it necessary to a harsh and disagreeable method of enforcement.” These punishments went on for years afterward, and even included a police judge asking a policeman “Why didn’t you beat him up?” in reference to a \$5 parking ticket.

Almost 55 years after it happened, an Omaha resident named Victoria France Lipovsky reported that in 1938, “as a youngster” she “watched two burly detectives place a young

Charge Police Abuse Youths

New Hearing Ordered in Assault Case

fellow, who appeared to be about 18, in the back seat of their car and proceed to pummel him unmercifully. The year was 1938.” Lipovsky was writing to say that police brutality was nothing new in Omaha.

YOUTH ASSERTS BEATEN BY COP; FAKED 'HOLDUPS'

**Repudiates Story of Four
Robberies Given Follow-
ing Arrest.**

**HAS NO EXPLANATION
FOR GUN WAS CARRYING**

8. 1941—Herman Lewis (1903-1972), age 38

In 1941, three vice officers from the Omaha Police Department went to the home of an African American fireman in the Near North Side. Knocking at the front door of his house, fireman Herman Lewis answered and invited the men inside. The officers asked for a woman who was suspected of being a prostitute, and Lewis said she lived there. They asked why, and he answered that she was his housekeeper since his wife was in long term care at a hospital. The housekeeper came out and the officers asked her whether she'd be will to go with them for a medical exam, and she said yes. According to the officers' report, when they started to leave Lewis objected and asked why they were taking her. Stating they had no warrant, he apparently hit one of the officers, and the group of vice officers responded by beating Lewis mercilessly. The City of Omaha Prosecutor's office filed four charges of assault and battery against Lewis, along with a vagrancy charge and a charge of disturbing the peace. Eventually, the last two charges were dropped. After he was indicted, the Omaha City Council found Herman Lewis guilty of conduct unbecoming a fireman, including interfering with police officers, resisting arrest, and unfitness to remain in the city service because of these charges.

9. 1942—Ruby Eldridge (1909-1978), age 33



1942 APR 10 10 30 AM '42

This is Ruby Eldridge, who in 1942 was repeatedly and ruthlessly attacked by a sergeant in the Omaha Police Department. Notice the bruise beneath her eye and her swollen cheek in this pic from a historic copy of the Omaha Star.

In March 1942, a sergeant with the Omaha Police Department attacked an African American woman in her home and at the police station. The woman, Ruby Eldridge (1909-1978), lived at 2530 Maple Street when police were sent to her house after she got into an argument with their renters. Complaining about an argument with their landlords, the renters called the police. Upon arriving at the Eldridge home, two police attacked Mrs. Eldridge. In the course of apprehending Mrs. Eldridge and her husband William Eldridge (1881-1967), a police sergeant twisted her arm and continued to do so after she screamed. Throwing her to the ground, she bit the officer's arm and he punched her. After losing consciousness, she and her husband were taken to the police station.

While walking into the jail cell, the sergeant hit Mr. Eldridge in the head, unprovoked. The sergeant then grabbed Mrs. Eldridge through the jail bars and punched her in the eye a second time, knocking her to the floor. The sergeant then put both of her feet in the air and held them as high as he could, kicking Mrs. Eldridge ruthlessly the whole time. Accosting Mrs. Eldridge further, as he lifted her the police sergeant caused her clothes to fall around her head and exposed her to a dozen or more officers looking on the event. Eventually she was let go of, struggled to get onto her feet, and soon lost consciousness again for several hours. Along with a cut on the wrist, a sprained thumb and hand, Mrs. Eldridge also had bruises on her left eye, left leg, left side of her chest, her left thigh, and the right side of her abdomen. Mrs. Eldridge was charged with six offenses following the harrowing attack, and her husband was charged with four focused on his defense of the attack against his wife in their home. According to the *Omaha World-Herald*, both were charged with drunkenness, disturbing the peace, and resisting arrest. Mrs. Eldridge was also charged with resisting arrest, assault and battery. She was later additionally charged with causing mayhem, and her husband was later charged with interfering with a police officer performing his duty.

Within a week the *Omaha Star* ran a front page editorial demanding justice for Mrs. Eldridge and her husband, highlighting an event two years earlier when the same police sergeant had been charged with conduct unbecoming a police officer after beating two Creighton University students. The newspaper called for the immediate dismissal of the police sergeant, and that he never be hired for public employment again. The Omaha NAACP loudly advocated for justice for the Eldridges and immediately filed charges against the arresting officers. Community leaders including Arthur McCaw, State Senator John Adams Jr., Rev. J.C. Williams, S. Edward Gilbert, and C.C. Galloway were all members of the NAACP committee that brought charges against the officer. The committee demanded the officer immediately be stripped of his badge pending an investigation. Holding a large rally at Zion Baptist Church, more than 1,500 African Americans showed up to adopt NAACP resolutions in support of the Eldridges and against the Omaha Police Department, the sergeant specifically, and police brutality in general. The sergeant was suspended afterward. In response, *the Omaha Guide* called out the local NAACP chapter by printing, "You are doing the right thing in the Eldridge case... we cannot have unity either in our community or country where race hate and police brutality are tolerated in official circles." At the end of the trial in late March, the judge found Mrs. Eldridge guilty of disturbing the peace and resisting

arrest, and give a suspended five day sentence on each count. Charges against her husband were dismissed. The mayhem charge against Mrs. Eldridge was carried over to a different trial. Because of the trial, the police commissioner reinstated the sergeant to full duty and gave him back pay.

Continuing their advocacy, the Omaha Star railed against the officer's reinstatement. "...since she was in the custody of [the officer] from the time of arrest until several minutes after having been placed in the bull pen, the justifiable question is how could the chief of police reach the conclusion that evidence brought out in police court were sufficient for him to restore [the police officer] to duty? We cannot in no way compromise in this case. Police brutality is in evidence. WE MUST DEMAND AN UNCONDITIONAL DISMISSAL OF [the officer] NOW!" Filing new charges against the officer with the Omaha City Council in April, the NAACP brought both John Adams, Jr. and Harrison Pinkett on the case. A hearing happened with the council in May. In June 1942 the Omaha City Council declared that the police sergeant was guilty of conduct unbecoming an officer, and that he used more force than was necessary when arresting the Eldridges. The council found, "that there are extenuation circumstances with the entire transaction brought about by the belligerent and hostile attitude of the sergeant. The officer was ordered to be reprimanded, and there was no further reporting in the newspapers about the event or its outcomes.

In 1947, the National NAACP launched a study of police brutality across the country, and included data from Omaha in their study.

10. 1948—William Rose (1934-1971), age 14

The Omaha NAACP announced legal action against the Omaha Police Department for further police brutality in 1948. In this event, a 14-year-old African American young man named William Rose (1933-1971) was beaten by officers in South Omaha. Leaving a wrestling show at the south side carnival grounds, police officers attacked the youth, throwing him down, beating him in the face and upper body, and kicking him in the groin. After being taken to the south side police station, the youth fainted and was sent to the Douglas County Hospital. Claiming the young man resisted arrest, the officers also claimed he was maliciously destroying tents at the event with a knife and had been disturbing the peace. The youth denied those charges. His father considered consulted with the Omaha NAACP chapter about suing the officers for assault and battery with intent to inflict bodily injury, along with civil action against the City of Omaha to force them to discharge the officers involved. Ralph Adams and Charles Davis were leaders from the NAACP who were involved. Protests happened with 80 people attending a rally at the South Omaha CIO Hall. A "Committee for the Defense of Billy Rose" collected donations, and they gathered petitions with the heading, "Stop Discrimination and Police Brutality." Within a month, one of the officers involved was suspended for 15 days for using "undue force" in subduing the young man. During the protests of this event, there was a called "for a group to be formed to watch for abuses of police power."

African American attorney Ralph Davis gave a talk at a monthly Omaha NAACP in 1948 focused on “The Rose Police Brutality Case and Local Civil Rights Problems,” showing the way this event was used to build Omaha’s burgeoning Civil Rights movement.

Omaha Police Brutality between 1950 and 2000



This is a 1954 pic of the storefront of the Omaha DePorres Center at N. 24th and Grant Streets in North Omaha, Nebraska.

When the national Civil Rights movement flared into the public consciousness in the 1950s, police brutality towards African Americans and other people of color was already a well-known reality in the South. However, in the North few stories were shared about the effects of Jim Crow and the savage weaponry white supremacists used to enforce discrimination. Police brutality was one of those weapons.

Led by youth from North Omaha and students from Creighton University, the Omaha Civil Rights movement went into gear in the early 1950s with the start of the DePorres Club. Efforts to fight for Civil Rights and against police brutality in Omaha went back to the 1870s, but this new era took direct action to confront the evils of white supremacy. By the early 1960s, a few strides had been made in employment and access to services, but little leeway had been made with the Omaha Police Department. Another Civil Rights group stepped into the limelight, this time led by African American ministers. Called 4CL, the group campaigned on several platforms, except against police brutality. It was against the backgrounds of the failures of the city's movements that young people and others were involved in rioting throughout North Omaha between 1966 and 1969. While there were four major riots during this time, there were many other events reflecting civil unrest in the community. This led national media and politicians to slam the area, calling Omaha "violence plagued" and referring to Black people in veiled terms to imply they were violent, angry, or otherwise wholly incapable of co-existing with white people.

Its against this backdrop that police brutality in Omaha after World War II must be understood.

By this point, awareness of police brutality in Omaha was well-known and frequently cited in the media and beyond. In 1950, a letter to the editor of the Omaha Star from Aneita Hayes accused the Omaha Police Department Detective Bureau of continuing "their activities of the shaking down of citizen patrons of the Northside taverns without proper authority." Saying the officers – including African American detectives – shook down African Americans, the writer suggested "Police brutality and their overbearing methods must not be accepted but fought by citizens." Less than a month later, another letter called for an end to police brutality saying, "The other night I witnessed a rookie policeman unnecessarily and viciously assault a harmless young man whose only crime was being slightly drunk... When the patrol arrived to take away the bleeding drunk the cop proceeded to snatch two helpless old men from the crowd, beat and arrested them because they were standing too close for his approval." The letter was signed by "DISGUSTED TAXPAYER."

11. 1953—Unnamed men

It was 1953 when the DePorres Club heard two cases of police brutality from separate African American men arrested by the Omaha Police Department. The men where in an area of town where white women reported being attacked, and after showing the club bloodied clothing

they owned and telling their separate stories to members of the club, the young people decided to investigate. No further news was reported on these cases.

12. 1954—James C. Lee (unknown-unknown), age unknown

“They beat me for about three minutes, then dragged me out of the cell and beat me outside. They beat me all the way down the elevator and into the ambulance. . . . He beat me about the face, head, and stomach with a blackjack all the way out to the hospital.”

—James C. Lee, *Omaha World-Herald*, September 29, 1954

However, when James C. Lee, an African American man, reported police brutality against himself by Omaha Police Department officers in September 1954, the Civil Rights movement flexed its muscles again. While in custody on a charge of public drunkenness, Lee said he was taken from his cell and beaten so badly by police that he had to be hospitalized. The *Omaha Star* acknowledged the creation of a police academy and “instituting a thorough training period, including a course in human relations,” might help redress the issue of police brutality. “It might make incidents like the Lee beating a thing of the past.” According to the newspaper, “Lee suffered broken ribs, a punctured kidney, eye injuries, severe head cuts, and multiple body bruises.” In an article printed on the front page of the *Omaha Star*, Denny Holland of the DePorres Club called on the police department to take more severe action right away. A month after the beating, an investigative team for the Omaha NAACP led by Ralph Adams concluded that the officers’ actions were “unwarranted, unjust, brutal, cruel, and inhuman.” Recommending prosecution of the officers, the NAACP suggested immediate dismissal. After a mere 10-day suspension was given to one officer and 5-day suspensions were given to two other officers, the NAACP protested the police department, calling for more severe punishments. Their indictment in the *Omaha Star* specifically called out that the point of their concern wasn’t just the race of the prisoner, but the actions of the police which were evil no matter “whatever race of color” was targeted for “such assault and battery.” The Omaha Metropolitan Community Council along with the Four C (Centralized Civic Commonwealth Club) Club joined the protest soon after, and along with the NAACP and the DePorres Club, rallied to action. The groups soon offered a human relations training to the public, and held a meeting to highlight Civil Rights actions underway in the city.

Later that year, in 1956, the police chief asked the police commissioner and mayor to appoint a “citizen’s police committee” to “study all phases of police-community relations.” The plan included representation of minority groups on a body which would promote clear relations between the police division and the public. However, reports of the committee ended there; apparently it was either never appointed, or it never did anything.

There were 374 members of the Omaha Police Department in 1959.

13. 1953-1963—Unnamed people

Between the 1950s and 1960s, the newspapers had several reports of police beatings that happened in the central police station jails. However, an interesting pattern I found was that the articles were usually short on details and never listed names. Instead, the mentioned lawyers and the police judge and summarized the outcomes. This happened in 1953, 1957, 1961, 1962 and 1963.

In 1964, the police department created a new board to hear allegations of police abuse and police brutality, and it was reported as being immediately busy. The group was made entirely of police officers. However, after a few months in 1964, there were no other articles that shared the board's name, its members, or its findings.



Lawrence McVoy (1922-1986) led the Omaha NAACP from 1959 to 1977.

In 1965, the leader of the Omaha NAACP, James McVoy, accused the Omaha Police Department of police brutality and said the city's Human Relations Board was covering it up. "This shouldn't be hush-hush. A public airing exposes a raw sore so it doesn't happen to somebody else." At the same meeting, the police chief declared, "There is no pattern of police brutality in Omaha," and said every officer who used force was required to submit a report. The paper went on to say, "Although he gets two or three reports a week," the chief said, "I certainly don't classify this as brutality." Later that year the board decided to form a "citizen's review board" to "look into charges of police brutality" in Omaha. However, the citizen's review board never materialized.

The Omaha Police Department created a new position and the City Council appointed it in March 1966. The position was called “police-community relations coordinator” and among other duties, it was meant to address the many issues between the African American community and the police, including police brutality.

“Omaha officials have backed not only a discrimination to correct police misconduct, but rather an affirmative tendency to condone and endorse it.”

—Ernie Chambers, *Omaha Star*, January 17, 1980

This year was the first year I found in my research that letters to the editor started complaining about people “overusing” the phrase “police department.” In the decades since, several letters have used the same argument to invalidate, defuse, or otherwise deny the validity of accusations of police brutality in Omaha.

The Omaha Police Department opened a branch office at 2215 North 24th Street in July 1967 to provide direct communication between the police and the African American community. In 1972, police lieutenant Pitmon Fox II reported the office had shifted away from processing residents’ complaints towards “reaching school children,” and added that a community relations training was then mandatory for police recruits. The office was permanently closed in 1978. It re-opened in 1980. [A 1982 report](#) said Omaha’s first Black city council member Fred Conley said the office “is the only thing the police division was willing to give the community.” He called it “window dressing” and a “placebo.”

In March 1968, 1,000 students walked out of Horace Mann Junior High School to protest against police brutality.

14. 1966—Eugene Nesbitt (1947-1966), age 19

A 19-year-old African American man was shot by a white, off-duty policeman after a burglary and high speed chase. Eugene Nesbitt (1947-1966) was killed in July 1966.

16. 1967—Richard S. Henry, age 17 (e1950-1967)

In 1967, Richard Henry was arrested by the Omaha Police Department for vagrancy. On probation, he was taken to Juvenile Court. Then he was taken to the Douglas County Jail, and within 12 hours, he was found hanging by his own belt in his cell. According to an inquiry of the Police-Community Relations Subcommittee of the City of Omaha Human Relations Board, there were glaring problems with the arrest: First, by police accounts, the youth was not advised of his rights until nearly the middle of his interrogation. Second, he was not taken to the youth jail until three hours after his arrest, even though the officers knew he was under 18, they said it was their discretion to hold him in the adult jail for that amount of time. Third, he was not processed into jail clothes in the 12 hours he was in the county jail.

Fourth, the youth wasn't taken down and given emergency treatment by a physician; instead, a jailer conducted "tests" and determined the youth was dead. Fifth, a physician didn't certify his death or examine the corpse after the apparent suicide. One member of the subcommittee said the youth's civil rights were violated by the police before his arrest, but nobody would second that proposition. There was a great deal of tension at the funeral several days later, where 1,100 people gathered at St. John's AME Church. Suspicion of a conspiracy and coverup of police brutality are still held by many community leaders to this day.

16. 1968—Howard L. Stevenson (e1952-1968), age 16

Also in March of that year, an African-American youth was shot and killed by a police officer. Howard L. Stevenson broke into the Crosstown Loan Pawn Shop on North 24th Street when police caught him. Refusing to cooperate, police shot him.

17. 1968—Unnamed protesters

When presidential candidate George Wallace spoke at the Civic Auditorium in 1968, riots that broke out afterward were a hallmark among the civil unrest of that era. However, what was left out was the police brutality that happened at the Civic, when police attacked the African Americans who were protesting against Wallace. A self-attested "white non-partisan" observer shared the following to the *Omaha World-Herald*: "I personally observed several officers who were chasing the demonstrators out and while the demonstrators were running out they were being beaten by the officers with their clubs. I saw officers kick, slap and hit demonstrators with their clubs while they were running. I saw one officer hit a demonstrator while they were being held and hit by a Wallace supporter." The person continued, "From personal observation, I can attest to the fact that there was excessive use of force on the part of a few police officers."

18. 1968—Percy P. Hare (1950-1968), age 18

Percy P. Hare (1950-1968) was a Black youth who stole a car when he was caught by police. Attempting to run, the officer shot and killed him.



Walking with officers McClarty and Foxall and Community Action worker Charles Jones (1), Chambers heads for school where trouble has been reported. About his rights involvement, he says, "If my kids were adults and could judge me, what would be their verdict? That's why I'm concerned about schools, about everything."

This pic is from the April 1968 edition of Ebony magazine. It shows (?) McClarty, officer Pitmon Foxall, Ernie Chambers, and Charles Jones walking towards Horace Mann Junior High School to head off apparent issues there.

That same year, African American community organizer Eddie Bolden and others had enough of the rioting, ongoing police brutality and the diminished capacity of the Black community in Omaha. They founded the Omaha chapter of the Black Panthers in 1968.

Age sometimes factored into public perceptions about police brutality. For instance, in early 1969 a Black-led organization conducted a community-wide survey of African Americans in Omaha, surveying 641 Near North Side neighborhood residents. Older people comprised 361 respondents, and 331 respondents were younger people under age 19. 3/4 of young respondents said police weren't courteous, and over 60% said they believed police used excessive and unjustified force. Almost 50% thought the 1968 riots were justified, and just

over 50% thought police-community relations had improved. Over 60% of older people thought police weren't courteous, and 80% of older people knew of specific incidents of police brutality, with 60% believing police sometimes used excessive and unjustified force.

19. 1969—Vivian Strong (e1955-1969), age 14

In 1969, officer James Loder of the Omaha Police Department shot and killed a 14-year-old African American girl named Vivian Strong. The child was playing in an empty apartment at the Logan Fontenelle Officer Loder was arrested, charged with manslaughter, and acquitted. Immediately after the shooting, riots erupted in the Near North Side and throughout North Omaha. While Black people were accused by white people of trashing their own community, its clear that without the extreme police brutality of the day those riots wouldn't have started. The officer was returned to work. Vivian was the sixth Black person to be killed in three years by the Omaha Police Department.

After the murder of Vivian Strong, organized protests led by the Omaha Black Panthers brought the group to the forefront of politics in the city, and for a brief time they were the vanguard of the civil rights movement in the city. During the coming era, the Omaha Black Panthers stockpiled weapons and talked tough, and moved from talk to action. Within a short time though, the Omaha chapter of the Panthers was closed and a new organization called the National Committee to Combat Fascism (NCCF) emerged. When a bomb exploded and killed an Omaha Police Department officer in August 1970, Edward Poindexter and David Rice, the leaders of the NCCF were indicted, with Rice dying in prison and Poindexter still incarcerated. A *cause célèbre*, the case against the men has been castigated by actor Danny Glover, author Angela Davis, and former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark among others, all of whom have called for freeing the Rice and Poindexter.

In a 1969 article, the *Omaha World-Herald* said police officers who shot four Black young men in the previous three years were technically within their rights. Omaha law enforcement could shoot under three circumstances: 1. Purposes of self-defense by the officer; 2. Protecting the life of another; 3. Stopping a fleeing felony suspect after he has refused to heed a warning to stop, and; 4. When dealing with a perpetrator accused of a misdemeanor.

Ernie Chambers blamed this violence, as well as several riots in North Omaha from 1966 to 1969, on police brutality and white supremacy in the city.

Fourth Black Killed By Police

The fatal shooting of Miss Strong Tuesday night was the fourth killing of a Black youth at the hands of policemen in the past three years.

A shotgun blast fatally wounded 19-year old Eugene Nesbitt in July, 1966.

Sixteen-year old Howard Stevenson was killed by a shot fired by an off-duty policeman in March, 1968.

A shot from a policeman killed Percy P. Hare, 17, Memorial Day, 1968.

No felony charges or police disciplinary actions were taken in any of the cases.

This is a June 26, 1969 article from the Omaha Star

A Black unity forum was held in 1970. During the event, police brutality was talked about openly. The headline article of the *Omaha World-Herald* explored the controversy and included a statement by the organizers. "Sponsors of Friday's Forum, during which statements of police community relations matters were made by local citizens, express their deep regret and sympathy at the tragic loss of life connected with Monday night's bombing. As in the death of Vivian Strong, one year ago, we deplore such waste of human life." The article also covered excessive use of force by police and other issues covered at the forum.

20. 1970—Unnamed youth (e1953-1970), age 17

A 17-year-old African American youth was chased and beaten by Omaha police in 1970. The youth was the son of a former assistant city attorney. The police officers received suspensions ranging from 30 to 45 days for excessive use of force and making false reports.

21. 1970—Unnamed youth, ages unknown

Later in 1970, officers responded to a call of public disturbance at the Roller Bowl on Leavenworth Street. Breaking into the facility with force, the police found Beverly Blackburn (1937-1973) with a group of young people she was chaperoning having a skating party. According to a report in the *Omaha Star*, several white police officers viciously attacked the African American children and youth under Blackburn's supervision. The young people, who

attended the JFK Community Center at North 24th and Ames Avenue, were taken into police custody. Mrs. Blackburn was quoted saying, “I had to stand and look at children being beaten with night sticks, dragged on muddy streets, listen to my children and the youth scream and cry. This night I will never forget.” Within several months, Blackburn reported white officers continuously telling her they would “get her” for complaining about police brutality during the incident to the Omaha City Council and the mayor.

The air of violence by police was rife with observation and agitation during the 1970s and 1980s. It was January 22, 1970, when a front page editorial in the *Omaha Star* said, “How long, oh, how long is the Black community going to continually and mildly be the ‘open game’ and prey of mistreatment, malpractice and abuse from the police department without the benefit of some relief or overt correction.” In a letter to the editor from a 1981 edition of the *Omaha World-Herald* a white writer said, “We have lived in all the principle cities in the US and have never witnessed more police brutality than in Omaha.” The author continued, suggesting “All responsible adults, as well as parents of the youth of Omaha, should rise up in protest against brutality by Omaha police.”

The new police headquarters at 505 South 15th Street was dedicated in 1970.

“All responsible adults, as well as parents of the youth of Omaha, should rise up in protest against brutality by Omaha police... We have lived in all the principle cities in the US and have never witnessed more police brutality than in Omaha.”

—Lou Weston, *Letter to the Editor, Omaha World-Herald, July 13, 1971*

A shootout between police and a Black gunman led in the death of an officer and the gunman in 1974. Many people in Omaha’s African American community were upset, with Black ministers urging the media that “policemen are going to have to stop thinking of themselves as little tin gods and the community will have to stop looking upon policemen as being their arch enemy.” According to one report, at that time an African American minister suggested that race relations in Omaha had become worse than those in the South.

In 1975, the Mayor’s Task Force on Police-Community Relations, Community Concerns Subcommittee reported that “There is a mutual lack of respect between the Omaha Police Division and significant numbers of the young, minority, poor and in some cases, elderly Omahans. This lack of respect makes positive police-community relations a sham.”

In the next several years, Senator Chambers collected numerous reports about the excessive use of force by the police department. He said that there were a few officers who were highly prejudiced and blamed the mayor and police chief for failing to control these men. His concerns were echoed by a group of four veteran African American police officers, as well as local Black ministers. One clergy said, “We have youngsters beaten, we have mothers propositioned by white officers. We’ve pointed this out to your city officials and they still refuse to believe us.”

22. 1979—Unnamed family

A Black family was attacked by Omaha police officers in 1979. Responding to a report of a man carrying a gun at North 40th and Bedford Avenue, police showed up and hit, shoved, and verbally abused the people in the family. Four were arrested for disorderly conduct, resisting arrest, and obstruction of justice. Later reports said the officers choked one man in the fight, and later dragged one man unconscious into a cell at the police station.

Watch Video At:

<https://youtu.be/O64LkkKo988>

“Details on the Rudy White case,” [Starting at 4:04] KETV 7 Omaha Update With Marcia Ladendorff (9-20-1979)



22. 1979—Rudy White (e1952-1979), age 27

Rudy White, a 27-year-old African American man, was shot by an Omaha police officer in 1979. Pulled over because his car fit the description of a vehicle he was looking for, the officer was ruled by the Douglas County District Attorney’s office to have killed White in self-defense during a scuffle. Afterward, the Omaha mayor and the police chief failed to share any internal reports with the public and publicly stated they wouldn’t do that, causing perceptions of a cover-up by the City government. After the NAACP and Senator Chambers pressed the issue, a report was issued by the City, which found found the officer “committed no unlawful act that would give rise to any official charge by this office.” On page 16 of a Saturday edition of the *Omaha World-Herald*, the newspaper reported that Chambers raised the issue of the paper’s coverage of the shooting, which he said was “a clearly inaccurate and misleading accounting of the shooting.” He continued, “I am unable to say whether these false, misleading statements are the result of police officials lying to the World-Herald reported, or carelessness by the reporter in culling information from police reports, or both.”

In 1980, the US Department of Justice launched an investigation into complaints of police brutality in Omaha. Community relations officials from the agency spoke to ministers in North Omaha and said they came in response to letters from Senator Chambers and others. Chambers said he took the matter to the US Attorney General instead of the city because, “Omaha officials have backed not only a discrimination to correct police misconduct, but rather an affirmative tendency to condone and endorse it.”

During the same time frame as that investigation, the *Omaha World-Herald* posted a letter to the editor from a man who said, “Chambers’ constant carping about police brutality, the death penalty, etc. is a disservice to his people.” This type of white fragility was regularly on display in the newspaper in the previous 50 years; however, this was the first time it was so pointedly targeted at Senator Chambers’ commitment to confront police brutality.



Robert Paskach/World-Herald

Witnesses to Monday night events at Hilltop Homes . . . From left, Mrs. Kirk, Mrs. Green and Mrs. Perry.

This is from the September 29, 1981 Omaha World-Herald story about police brutality in the Hilltop projects.

In 1981, the Nebraska Urban League opened the Public Interest Law Center of Omaha (PILCO) on North 24th Street. Focused on helping people who felt they’d been mistreated or abused by Nebraska law enforcement, they dealt with complaints from people who felt like they’d been verbally harassed or abused, suffered excessive use of force, or were arrested or detained illegally. Consultants and attorneys were available through the center. The

president of the Omaha police union accused organizers of the PILCO of “hindering” law enforcement efforts in Omaha, and of trying “to exaggerate the problems between police and citizens.” They said the center would “badger police officers” and that there were “already enough places to register complaints against the police.” Suggesting problems between police and African Americans were because of economics and policing practices, the person suggested the money funding the PILCO would be better spent on job placement. The following week, a letter to the editor of the Omaha World-Herald by J.P. McGlynn offered the retort that, “Policemen who obey the law have nothing to fear from any effective, alert police watchdog agency — only those officers who have no respect for the law will pay a penalty. Reward the good, punish the guilty.”

That same year, a community-wide coalition of 125 organizations adopted a resolution drafted by PILCO that charged the Omaha Police Department of police abuse, illegal detentions, questioning juveniles without parents’ knowledge, and the “discriminatory practice of arresting only persons of color” during interracial incidents. After adjusting and becoming a referral agency, the organization was apparently closed within two years.

24. 1981—Unnamed family

In September 1981, the Omaha Police Department paid a settlement after victims contended “police used ‘unreasonably deadly force’” because they shot through an apartment in the Hilltop Homes public housing projects while looking for some wanted men. Eight people were forcibly taken from the apartment, forced to lie on the ground, and some were taken to police headquarters for questioning. Officers had shot recklessly through their apartment, breaking two windows and accidentally shooting another policeman. No punishments were given to the officers.

25. 1986—Richard Kellin (unknown-1986), age unknown

Richard Kellin died at the Omaha Police Department in May 1986. After he struggled during his arrest for disorderly conduct, he was jailed at the police station. Four days later, he died of a skull fracture. While a police investigation found no wrongdoing, the Omaha Police Watchdog Committee learned otherwise. Led by Omaha City Councilman Fred Conley and Rev. Helen Saunders, the committee collected more than 13,000 signatures to have a grand jury investigate the event. This was the first-ever grand jury in Omaha called because of citizen signatures. The grand jury determined there was no criminal wrongdoing but recommended several changes in police procedures. According to the *Omaha World-Herald*, the Kellin case also “led to passage of a state law requiring grand jury investigations any time someone dies while in police custody.”

The Omaha NAACP continued speaking out against police brutality again in 1995. More than 400 people showed up to a December meeting that year about the subject. That year, the organization planned to take 150 allegations of police brutality to the Justice Department in Kansas City, and reported they were compiling a paper illustrating the history of police brutality in Omaha.

26. 1997—Marvin Ammons (1964-1997), age 33

In 1997, an officer of the Omaha Police Department murdered a man for having a cell phone in his hand. A 33-year-old African American Gulf War veteran named Marvin Ammons was shot and killed when his car broke down on a street in North Omaha. Two officers confronted him, and when Ammons pulled out an object from his belt, the officers fired. A cell phone was found on the ground after the fact. A grand jury later indicted one officer on charges of manslaughter; however, the case was thrown out because of juror misconduct. A second grand jury cleared the officer of charges, but criticized the department for mishandling the case after the killing. The officer later left the department claiming post traumatic stress disorder from the event. Ammons' family sued the department but later dropped the case.

North 30th and Taylor Streets became home to a new precinct building in 1997.

Omaha Police Brutality After 2000

“The whole personification of the Omaha Police Department is just empty gestures and huge fallacies and huge facades... They like to make it seem like they're one of the best in the [country] and then ten days later they murder a Black man?”

– *Bear Alexander, an organizer with ProBlac*

The Omaha Police Department's ongoing brutality towards African Americans and other people of color is a persistent blight on the city. According to [a 2015 article in the UNO Gateway](#), “It seems Omaha police are comfortable bringing extreme force to bear over trivial or nonexistent issues.” Similar to the prior 150 years, the last two decades support the newspaper's summary.

27. 2000—George Bibbins (e1954-2000), age 46

In July 2000, police pursued a stolen jeep at high speeds. A police officer shot the driver, 46-year-old George Bibbins, an African American man. The officer claimed Bibbins had reached down after the vehicle was forced to stop; he was found with a screwdriver in his hand. The officer later left the department with a disability pension.

28. 2007—Unnamed youth (e1990-), age 17

An American Indian youth was beaten by police in 2007. Their parents, Cal and Diana Pekas, filed a citizen's complaint with the Omaha Police Department after calling the police to their home because their child was threatening to hurt himself and others. The police were "very aggressive" toward the teen and their family during their arrest, restraining and handcuffing the youth, and using pepper spray on other members of the family including a 13-year-old child who broke their hand during the event.

In 2008, during a debate in the Nebraska State Legislature, an FBI leader revealed an astounding fact. Senator Ernie Chambers was grilling him about police brutality in the city when the FBI leader said, "...I would contest your assertion that the FBI does not investigate police brutality in Omaha. The FBI, Omaha Division, with the majority of our civil rights investigations being conducted within Omaha, run anywhere between 80 and 100 civil rights investigations yearly." That means that Omaha has at least 40-50 police brutality allegations every year.

An activist with Nebraskans for Peace reported in 2011 that that organization had collected stories from people in North Omaha about how the police will stop young Black men in their cars, and after getting those men out of their car, would take their car keys from them. Then, the officers would put their keys on the driver seat and then lock the doors, shut them, and tell them to have a nice day and tell they to leave." This type of police harassment was reportedly a regular occurrence.

29. 2012—Unnamed youth (e2000-), age 12

In 2012, a 12-year-old Hispanic boy was beaten by police officers during a random search. The young man was stopped by police and didn't move his hands quickly enough, and the officers beat him. The boy told the media that officers "pushed him to the ground" and "punched his face three times"; a witness said they saw police "beating him, hitting him, kicking him... I knew he was hurt because they hit him so many times." Responding to this event, Senator Chambers said he planned to contact the FBI and the Justice Department about police brutality in Omaha because he does not trust the City of Omaha to investigate the allegations properly. However, he also said also he did not trust the FBI to fully investigate the allegations.

30. 2013—Octavius, Juaquez and Demetrius Johnson (unknown-unknown), ages unknown

In 2013, three brothers, Octavius, Juaquez and Demetrius Johnson, were pulled over for a parking violation. In a video recorded by a bystander, the brothers were beaten while being arrested by the Omaha Police Department. Officers violently threw Octavius to the ground, punched him repeatedly, and held him down in a stranglehold. After an officer struck him in the face, he asked Octavius if he wanted to die. After the officers were charged with excessive

force and seizing property without a warrant, the City of Omaha was taken to court and six officers were fired by the police chief. While two officers were reinstated, the City of Omaha went to mediation with the family involved. While in mediation, they bullied and intimidated the family into accepting a \$30,000 settlement and \$60,000 in legal costs. Later, a judge refused the family's request to dismiss the mediation on the grounds that it was final and binding. Garnering international attention, this particular incident positioned Omaha on the international police brutality stage for modern times.

31. 2014—Jazmyne McMiller, age unknown (unknown-)

An African American woman was forcefully arrested and assaulted by a police officer at a downtown Omaha hotel in November 2014. Yanking Jazmyne McMiller from the hotel's elevator, the officer forced her to the hotel's registration desk and demanded to see her room key and proof she was registered. Charging her with assaulting an officer for screaming at the officer and spitting on him, she was arrested. After spending a night in jail, all charges against her were dropped the following day. She said that after attending a sporting event she was returning to her hotel room when two officers accosted her in the hotel elevator, with one officer forcefully arresting her and choking her while she was in handcuffs. Video secured by a local television station backed up the accusations. Three years later, the Omaha City Council unanimously approved a \$40,000 settlement with McMiller.

32. 2017—Zachary Bear Heels (1987-2017), age 29

Zachary Bear Heels had a mental health crisis in Omaha in 2017. A native from Oklahoma, Heels didn't know the city while he was riding through Omaha on a Greyhound bus. His mother called the Omaha Police Department, and upon arriving, four officers beat Heels. While sitting handcuffed against a police car, he was punched in the head and tased 12 times by police. He died on the scene. While the police department fired the officers afterwards, three were reinstated afterwards. The fourth was later acquitted of second-degree assault and use of a weapon. The City of Omaha later settled with Heels' mother.

In 2017, the Omaha Police Department created the Professional Oversight Bureau to "provide better oversight of the Internal Affairs review process and accountability for officers."

After the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020, protests against police brutality were organized throughout Omaha, particularly in the Old Market and at 72nd and Dodge Streets, as well as other sites. Immediately faced with police brutality in response, protesters reported getting beaten, tased, tear-gassed, and otherwise facing indiscriminate violence from the Omaha Police Department. Media are warned by police for their presence, and some are later targeted by police. That year, a lawsuit was filed by the ACLU against the Omaha Police Department for excessive use of force. According to the AP, "As part of the

settlement, city officials agreed to drop all charges against the protesters and revise city ordinances to provide more protection for protests. The police department also agreed to ensure its officers are trained on when using chemical agents, such as pepper spray, is allowed. Police will also produce annual reports on its efforts to comply with the settlement.”

These events led to the murder of James Scurlock, a 22-year-old unarmed Black man. While participating in an anti-police brutality protest, he was shot and killed by a known white supremacist. Systematic racism in Omaha showed when the District Attorney said that because the white man “feared for his own life or serious bodily injury” the DA’s office wouldn’t press charges against him. However, a grand jury disagreed and indicted the white man on four felony charges, including manslaughter. He died by suicide a week later.

33. 2020—Kenneth Jones (e1985-2020), age 35

In November 2020, Kenneth Jones, a 35-year-old African American man, was shot four times in the back by the Omaha Police Department after being pulled over near his South Omaha apartment complex. After breaking his window during a traffic stop, an officer shot Jones four times in the back as he laid on the ground. Later, a loaded .45 Springfield handgun was found on the ground near the scene; Jones never fired on the officers. The family was frustrated by a lack of communication and accountability by the department for five months after the shooting. Every witness in the grand jury was from the Omaha Police Department except one. No charges were brought against the officers involved. After the killing of Jones, protests against police brutality were organized. Ironically, after police attacked protesters in downtown Omaha, the protesters accused police of police brutality. That same year, the Nebraska ACLU publicly released emails from Omaha Police Department in which they discuss their covert surveillance of Black activists and allies.

34. 2022—Makayla Townsell (unknown-), age unknown

Earlier in March 2022, the City of Omaha settled a federal civil rights lawsuit challenging a charge of police brutality against an officer for the Omaha Police Department. Makayla Townsell charged the officer with grabbing her, tasing her, and arresting her during her family’s Thanksgiving dinner in 2019. The ACLU assisted Townsell in filing a citizen’s complaint with the police department. This led to the lawsuit, after which the Omaha police chief said the officer would be recommended for discipline. While the agreement didn’t serve as an admission of guilt, it serves as another reminder of the pattern of police brutality in the Omaha Police Department.

Recent Actions to Stop Police Brutality in Omaha

NAACP at North High



Ernie Chambers greets local media during the NAACP meeting at North High School.
Article & Photo by Herb Thompson

This is a November 1995 pic of Ernie Chambers at a NAACP community forum on police misconduct in North Omaha.

Many individuals and organizations have struggled against police brutality over the years. Actions have ranged from protests to pickets, letter writing to public testimony, and much more.

For a period before 2006, the Omaha Police Department had an independent police auditor monitoring citizen complaints. However, the position was ended that year after the person in the job released a report critical of the police department. Eight Omaha families joined a lawsuit against the Omaha Police Department that called for the police chief to step down, to reinstate the auditor's position, and to make auditor reports available online. The City did not respond, and it looks like the lawsuit didn't go anywhere.

Soon after the 2007 beating of the Pekas youth mentioned earlier, approximately 50 protesters at 72nd and Dodge were picketing against police brutality when observers from UNO's ACLU chapter arrived to observe them, and "make sure everyone is safe and everyone is okay." The protests were apparently organized by a group called Omahans for Justice

Alliance in response to the ended position of the police auditor. As written about in the *Omaha Star*, the event was in support of the Pekas family, which suffered the most recent police brutality event, as well as “all the other previous victims of racial profiling, tasing, sexual assault, pet dog shootings, discrimination, physical and mental abuse by the Omaha Police Department. In November of that year, Cal and Diana Pekas along with Native American activists Duane Martin and Frank LaMere spoke with the police chief and a mayor’s staff person. Several community activists attended the meeting as well.

In addition to the protests throughout Omaha during 2020, 14-year-old activist Karley Baker took up the cause. She picketed solo in Carter Lake repeatedly, often standing alone with her sign along Locust Street for several days in a row, up to 5 hours a day.

Legislative approaches to curbing police violence have been attempted throughout Nebraska’s history. During his tenure as a State Senator, Ernie Chambers successfully sponsored a bill that required more training for police officers. He also passed a bill that required the formation of a grand jury anytime a person died in police custody or while in jail. Several times over the decades, he brought police brutality in Omaha to the eyes of the federal government, including filing cases with the US Attorney General and other steps.

Today, activists throughout Omaha including ProBLAC, Nebraskans for Peace, and the ACLU, are continuously concerned with police brutality. Frustrated by regular discrimination by police officers, they highlight how social media has brought police brutality and more to light. Some solutions they’ve proposed include:

- Mandating police-worn cameras;
- Giving the public authority to use personal cameras to record police; Revoking police authority to use excessive force, and;
- Revoking police officers’ abilities to control with orders to the public.

Protesters also demand more transparency by the police department and civilian-led investigations of excessive force by police.

In late 2020, the Omaha Police Officers Association announced the terms of a new five-year agreement with the City of Omaha, including the establishment of new accountability measures. Easier complaint processes and a new 3-member reprimand committee were highlighted at the time.

Since 2020, Copwatch Omaha has facilitated classes and conversations on how to best keep the public eye on the Omaha Police Department through safe recording and communication with victims. Their classes are hosted by other organizations throughout the city, and they are available on all social media platforms under @copwatchomaha. They have cited the Omaha mayor’s increase in police funding, examples of police surveillance of Omaha’s Black Lives Matter movement, and other tensions as continued examples of over-policing and police brutality.

In the state legislature, Senator Terrell McKinley has continued to call for police accountability and transparency. In 2021, he was quoted saying, “I believe any, any situation that involves the public and some type of misconduct has taken place, I believe the public has a right to know what happened and how that situation was handled.”

Willie Barney of the Empowerment Network has also led the organization to address police brutality and issues related to it.

In May 2021, the State of Nebraska passed a law to create a public database of police misconduct. Senator McKinney and Senator Justin Wayne pushed for the bill, which will post the names of officers who have been decertified, have serious misconduct on their record, or were found guilty of a felony or Class I misdemeanor. The database is required to be online by July 2022.

There are other actions against police brutality in Omaha today, too. However, little has been done to recognize the long, damning, and telling history of brutality by the Omaha Police Department. This history shows that not only does extremely excessive force have a history in the city, but that its an operational norm.

More must be done to highlight this history.

Adam’s Note: The only way to get a completely accurate representation of Omaha’s treatment of Black people and people of color by the police department is through personal histories. Unfortunately, these are being lost everyday, and are routinely dismissed as valid by “official” places. Maybe you’ll share something you know below? I want to know the stories of uncles and brothers, employers and employees, mothers and aunties, youth and older people who have been subjected to the horrific injustice of police brutality in Omaha.

Victims of Omaha Police Brutality

These are all African American people who were victims of police brutality at the hands of the Omaha Police Department, as detailed in this article.

1. Georgiana Clark, killed in 1887
2. James A. Smith, killed in 1899
3. Victor Walker, attacked in 1905
4. John Aytch, attacked in 1919
5. Eugene Scott, killed in 1919
6. Will Brown, killed in 1919
7. Robert H. Johnson, attacked in 1922
8. Herman Lewis, attacked in 1941
9. Ruby Eldridge, attacked in 1942
10. William Rose, attacked in 1948

11. Unnamed men, attacked in 1953
12. James C. Lee, attacked in 1954
13. Unnamed people, attacked from 1953-1963
14. Eugene Nesbitt, killed in 1966
15. Richard S. Henry, “suicide” in 1967
16. Howard L. Stevenson, killed in 1968
17. Unnamed protesters, attacked in 1968
18. Percy P. Hare, killed in 1968
19. Vivian Strong, killed in 1969
20. Unnamed youth, attacked in 1970
21. Unnamed youth, attacked in 1970
22. Unnamed family, attacked in 1979
23. Rudy White, killed in 1979
24. Unnamed family, attacked in 1979
25. Richard Kellin, killed in 1986
26. Marvin Ammons, killed in 1997
27. George Bibbins, killed in 2000
28. Unnamed youth, attacked in 2007
29. Unnamed youth, attacked in 2012
30. Octavius, Juaqez, and Demetrius Johnson, attacked in 2013
31. Jazmyne McMiller, attacked in 2014
32. Zachary Bear Heels, killed in 2017
33. Kenneth Jones, killed in 2020
34. Makayla Townsell, attacked in 2019

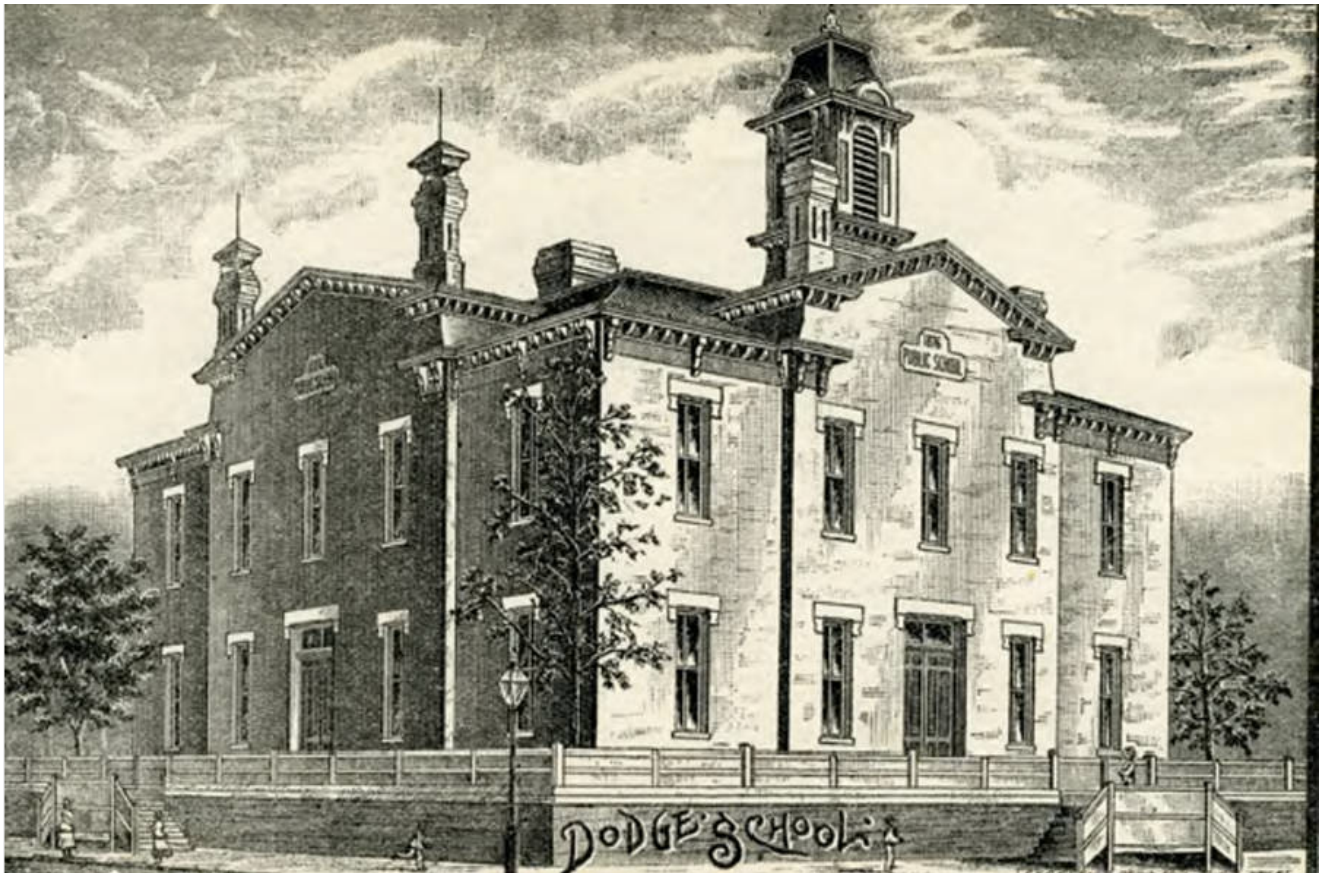
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BONUS

Policemen should be taught first that they are appointed to protect civilians and to gain respect. He doesn't have to make every one fear him.
DISGUSTED TAXPAYER.

This is from a letter to the editor of the Omaha World-Herald on August 4, 1950.



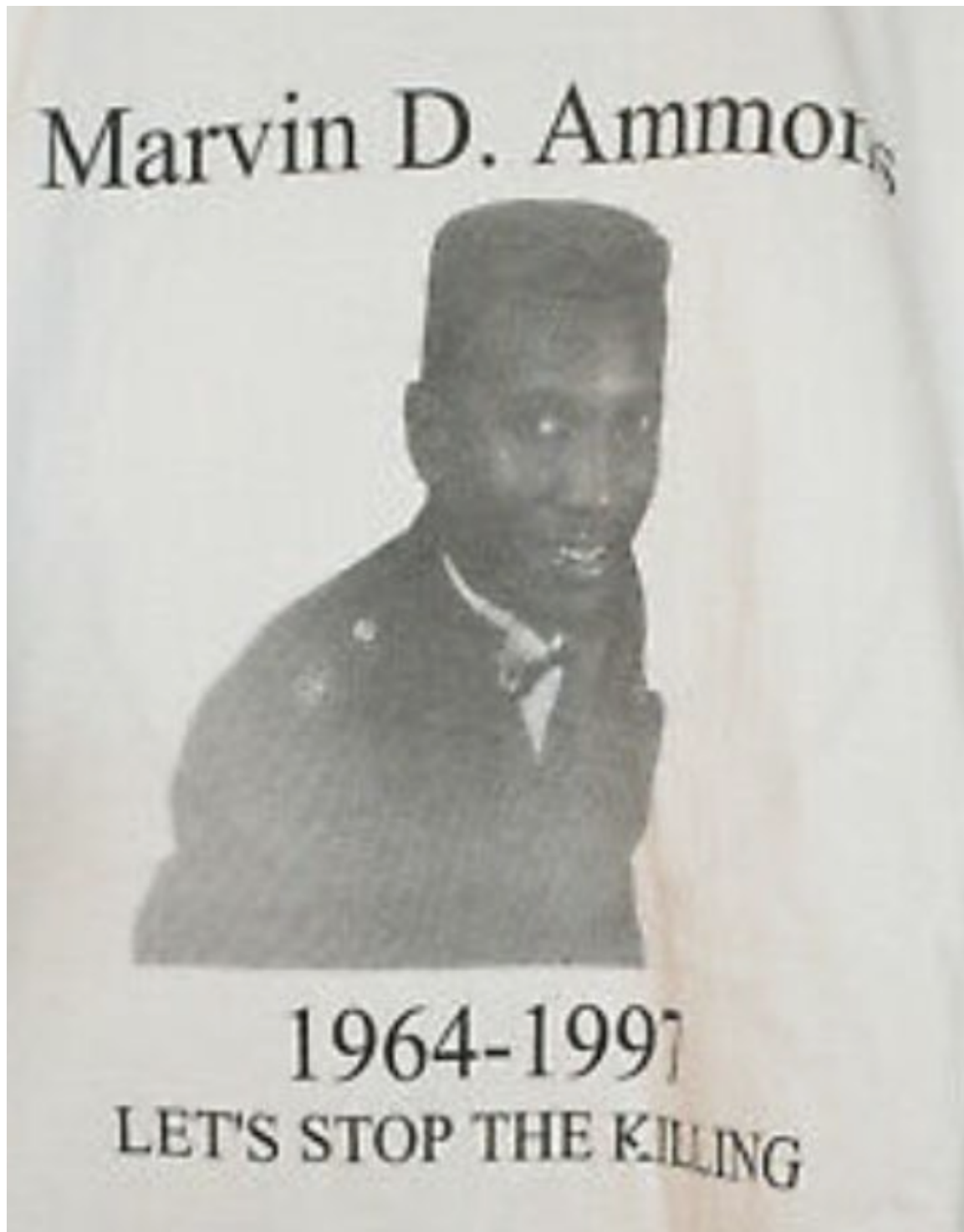
This is the Dodge School, once located at North 11th and Dodge Streets. It became the city's jail in the 1890s and was demolished around the turn of the century.

Charge Police Abuse Youths

New Hearing Ordered
in Assault Case



This is officer James Loder of the Omaha Police Department.



This is a memorial t-shirt for Marvin Ammons (1964-1997), killed by the Omaha Police Department.

VICTIMS OF OMAHA POLICE BRUTALITY (1887-2022)

GEORGIANA CLARK (KILLED 1887); JAMES A. SMITH (KILLED 1899);
VICTOR WALKE (ATTACKED 1905); JOHN AYTCH (ATTACKED 1919);
EUGENE SCOTT (KILLED 1919); WILL BROWN (KILLED 1919); ROBERT
H. JOHNSON (ATTACKED 1922); HERMAN LEWIS (ATTACKED 1941);
RUBY ELDRIDGE (ATTACKED 1942); WILLIAM ROSE (ATTACKED 1948);
UNNAMED MEN (ATTACKED 1953); JAMES C. LEE (ATTACKED 1954);
UNNAMED PEOPLE (ATTACKED 1953-1963); EUGENE NESBITT (KILLED
1966); RICHARD S. HENRY ("SUICIDE" 1967); HOWARD L. STEVENSON
(KILLED 1968); UNNAMED PROTESTERS (ATTACKED 1968); PERCY P.
HARE (KILLED 1968); VIVIAN STRONG (KILLED 1969); UNNAMED
YOUTH (ATTACKED 1970); UNNAMED YOUTH (ATTACKED 1970);
UNNAMED FAMILY (ATTACKED 1979); RUDY WHITE (KILLED 1979);
UNNAMED FAMILY (ATTACKED 1979); RICHARD KELLIN (KILLED IN
1986); MARVIN AMMONS (KILLED 1997); GEORGE BIBBINS (KILLED
2000); UNNAMED YOUTH (ATTACKED 2007); UNNAMED YOUTH
(ATTACKED 2012); OCTAVIUS, JUAQEZ, AND DEMETRIUS JOHNSON
(ATTACKED 2013); JAZMYNE McMILLER (ATTACKED 2014); ZACHARY
BEAR HEELS (KILLED 2017); KENNETH JONES (KILLED 2020);
MAKAYLA TOWNSELL (ATTACKED 2019)

NORTHOMAHAHISTORY.COM

Say Their Names: victims of Omaha police brutality from 1887-2022.