

Personal Stories: Indigenous Activism

Black Power

By Sam Watson

The 1960s were the years of the Beatles, flower power and free love. I was in high school and trying desperately to find out the truth about this land. I was not into music or flowers, so I stayed clear of all that bullshit. I did know how to use a library and I read all I could about the great black heroes who were then doing the serious business in the United States. I was black too. I was angry too. I was born of a warrior people too, and deep within myself I knew that there was a nexus between us in this place and the descendants of the slaves, who were fighting for their lives in places like Montgomery and Birmingham. But I found very little information about my own people and the resistance wars that we had fought against the white invasion. My uncles and aunties had told me the stories. But the history texts had been written by white academics and they told me nothing. So I went looking for my truth in the city of Brisbane. I found it in places like Musgrave Park. I found the pathetic survivors of the great colonial massacres, the rape, the murder, the poisoned flour, the smallpox-infected blankets, the black hunts — this was where they now were. This was their final redoubt. A living cemetery within a wasteland of bitumen and concrete.

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The first time that I was arrested was the day that black power exploded like a massive black bomb in the heart of Brisbane city in 1971. An angry mob of blacks had marched on the Native Affairs office and demanded justice. We were ready to fight the whole state government and every copper in blue, if we had to. The Acts were up for review and we had given the government seven days to strike those racist laws from their statute books. Those acts were an affront to freedom-loving people everywhere and the entire reserve system belonged to the previous century. The coppers were waiting for us and they locked down the Native Affairs office. We tried to get in through the front door and then one aunty of mine smashed her purse across the skull of a copper and it was on. Before that first cop had hit the pavement, there were brawls and death battles across the width



Smash the Acts demonstration

Eva Baker collection, courtesy of the Fryer Library, University of Queensland

of the street. Brother Dennis Walker tried to calm things and he jumped on to the bonnet of a squad car, trying to keep things cool. The cop car took off suddenly and Dennis was upended. I was only a kid, barely 17, yet I fought side by side with the two Dons (Don Davidson and Don Brady) and held my own against monster cops. Then one blind-sided me and dropped me cold with a baton to the head. I woke up on the floor of a paddy wagon. I had been unconscious and had almost swallowed my tongue. One aunty already in the van was a qualified nurse and she turned me on my side and saved my life. That clash in George Street ignited the entire black political movement and from that point we never took a backward step to any white man.