

Los Angeles is still in reovery

Continued from page 1A

that late afternoon of April 29, 1992.

When it ended three days later, 55 people were dead and more than 2,300 injured. Some 1,100 buildings had been damaged or destroyed by fire, with property damage estimated at \$1 billion.

And, perhaps worst of all, the racial gulf dividing Los Angeles and America as a whole — was wider than ever.

Cutting across the city's racial and ethnic mix, Vermont Avenue became a key corridor for rioters. From impoverished South Central, they spread north for 80 blocks to within a stone's throw of the fashionable Hancock Park and Los Feliz neighborhoods on the edge of Hollywood.

Five years later, empty lots and fire-damaged buildings along that 80-block stretch are reminders of the violence and outrage vented on the city.

Less obvious, but no less real, is the impact it had on the lives of those who live and work there.

Anger rages

Since the riots, property manager Jewell Anderson has had little trouble renting commercial space in her building at Vermont and 83rd Street. It was

one of the few on the block left standing after the riots.

The building was spared largely because of its primary tenant, the Vermont Knolls Retirement Center, where Anderson and the elderly residents stood alone against vandals and looters.

Their ordeal began soon after the verdicts, when an angry crowd smashed the glass doors of a pet store housed in the same building.

Mimi Adams, now 68, feared looters would torch the store, and the retirement center along with it. Running into the shop, she climbed atop a counter.

"I said, 'Please don't set us on fire,'" she recalls. "We've got old folks in there, we've got blind folks in there." One of them said to me, 'Lady, we're not going to set you on fire.'"

The rioters kept their word, but the problems weren't over.

Other looters burst into the retirement center lobby, looking for a place to stash stolen merchandise while they went back for more. But residents pitched the loot into the street. Then, they stationed themselves at entrances to keep the mobs out. And with a combination of pleading and defiance, they prevailed.

Though she does not approve, Anderson at least can grasp why things got so out of control.

"There is a need in the commu-

nity for jobs," she says. "I didn't appreciate what was going on, but I understand the frustration that was felt. The verdicts, it was just the straw that breaks the camel's back."

Now, she notes, the economic conditions that fueled the violence are just as bad as before.

Up from the rubble

Some 30 blocks to the north near Vernon Avenue, in a district known as Vermont Square, Helen Johnson is turning empty lots into blooming gardens.

During the riots, Johnson, 66, watched with horror as her neighborhood disintegrated. Her local market was looted and set ablaze. A furniture store down the street was torched. People were going crazy.

"It was like a nightmare, you know, how you're seeing things but you don't want to believe what you see? There was nothing you could do," she says.

Since then, Johnson, a retired school custodian, decided there was, after all, something she could do.

Partly in response to the riots, she got involved in a city improvements program, leading a successful campaign to establish a series of parks and gardens on vacant lots.

And commerce, along with her plants, is beginning to blossom.

A local merchants' association has been formed. Where the furniture store once stood, a new building houses a bank and shops.

"I'm trying to bring life back into the area. It's slow, but I guess we've made a lot of progress," she says, as she waters some roses. "I'm doing this for my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren."

Still heading north — just past the 10-lane concrete swath known as the Santa Monica Freeway, the nation's busiest — neighborhoods change from mostly black to Hispanic.

Latin music blares from open storefronts and mothers hurry from shop to shop, their children in tow.

Cuban immigrant Mike Aramas sits in Botanica La Luz, a small, spare store redolent of herbs and scented candles. The botanica was spared while other shops were looted.

"God protects," says Aramas, smiling toward a shelf full of religious articles.

Aramas, 62, who is black, says he's never personally experienced discrimination, but he understands the rioters' anger.

"The monster in the United States was asleep," he says. "It woke up."

DNA can't place inmate

Continued from page 1A

The murders occurred within 12 miles of each other in western York County in and about Clover. All three victims were strangled and sexually assaulted.

Spann was already in jail on charges in the Neill murder when the third murder occurred on Nov. 16, 1981.

The first victim, Mary Ring, was found in her bathtub on July 18, 1981, two months before Neill was found on Sept. 14.

Hays will decide if Spann's attorneys have gathered enough new evidence to warrant another trial. Among the evidence is the videotaped confession by William Johnny Hullitt, who is serving a life sentence for the third murder, Bessie Alexander, 69.

Hullitt and his brother-in-law had a produce sales route in the area of the deaths.

Hullitt refused to answer questions about the Neill killing from either the defense or state's attorney during testimony at the November hearing. He refused to acknowl-

edge confessing to the Neill murder.

Spann, then 19, was sentenced to die for the slaying of Neill and has been on death row for 15 years.

Blume said some blood of the same type as Spann had been found in the garage of Neill's home, but it was a common blood type.

"So we used the DNA test to see if any of the blood was his. None of it is his blood," Blume said.

He said both the prosecution and defense conducted independent tests.

Hays, who held a hearing on Spann's new trial request in November, had planned to rule in January, but delayed a decision pending the outcome of the DNA testing.

If Hays orders a new trial, it would be up to York County prosecutor Tommy Pope to decide whether to retry the case or drop charges against Spann.

"It is all pending in front of (Hays)," Blume said.

He said the case is not moving slow, despite the delays.

"In the scheme of things it is

not moving particularly slow. I expect a ruling sometime soon. The judge only had the whole thing about two weeks. He said he wasn't going to rule until he got the tests."

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