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Busing battles spurred flight

Court-ordered remedy tried in Detroit, Pontiac

By Gordon Trowbridge / The Detroit News

The bombers sliced through the chain-link fence surrounding the lot on North Saginaw, moving under cover of darkness to the 50 yellow buses inside.

Moments later, a ball of flames destroyed 10 Pontiac school buses -- and rocketed the bitter debate over school segregation in Metro Detroit onto the national stage.

The 1971 Pontiac bombing, by Ku Klux Klan members just days before a court-ordered school desegregation plan took effect, showed just how far extremists would go to keep blacks and whites apart.

Two federal judges in Detroit courtrooms -- one black, one white -- helped make this area one of the nation's school busing battlegrounds. Those battles help explain why Metro Detroit schools -- and suburbs -- remain highly segregated.

After Oakland County NAACP members showed that Pontiac deliberately kept blacks and whites apart, Judge Damon A. Keith ordered the Pontiac busing plan in 1969 that preceded the bombing.

A similar suit in Detroit, where white flight and a growing black population led to racial tension, went to U.S. District Judge Stephan J. Roth.

As it became clear Detroit was headed for mandated integration, a group of white parents consulted with lawyer Alexander Ritchie.

"They asked, 'What do we do?' " Ritchie said. His answer: Ask the judge to order busing of students throughout the metro area. Only then would there be enough white students so that blacks would not dominate every school.

On June 14, 1972, Roth issued his ruling: 53 area school districts would be grouped in 15 clusters. Within clusters, white students would be bused to the city blacks to the suburbs



Ritchie

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be bused to the city, blacks to the suburbs.

"It was a forced experiment in social engineering," said Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson, who represented anti-busing forces in Pontiac. "This was as incendiary as you can get."

On July 25, 1974, in a 5-4 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed Roth. The ruling put an end nationally to attempts to integrate urban schools with suburban children.

The court did order Detroit's schools desegregated -- an order Ritchie and many others believe was the final push that sent the city's remaining whites to the suburbs.

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