

Refr 1992 five

The burning and rekindling of the American Dream



Photo by Fred Stocker

An embittered merchant vents frustration and anger over the destruction of her swap meet in South Central L.A.

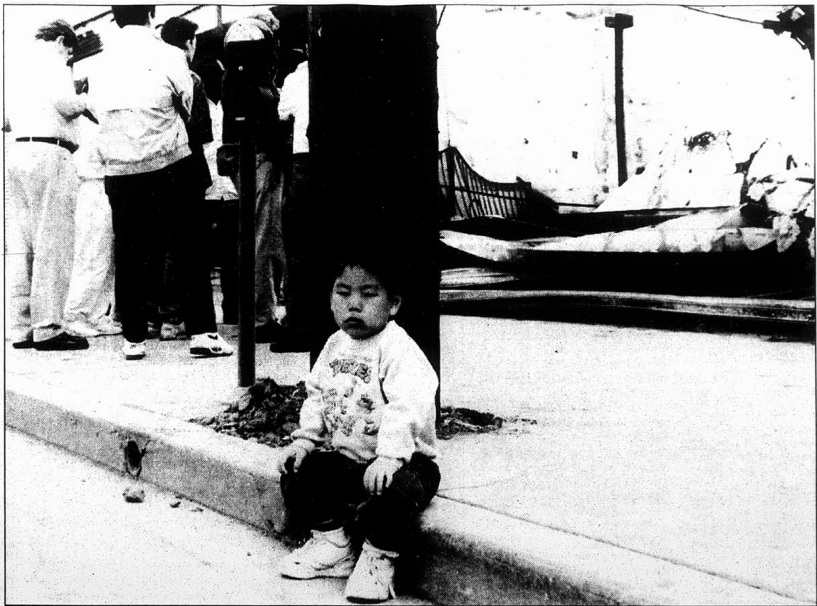


Photo by Fred Stocker

A bewildered Korean American child sits on the curb outside the remains of a swap meet in South Central L.A.



KT Photo

In the largest demonstration by Asian Americans in U.S. history, 30,000 KAs protest police and politicians' neglect and unfair media coverage.



KT Photo

Former Diamond Bar Mayor Jay C. Kim and supporters celebrate upon his congressional election victory. Kim became the first Korean American to win a seat in the nation's highest elected body.



KT Photo

Hundreds of demonstrators demand compensation for the losses that Korean Americans sustained in the nation's costliest civil disturbance.



KT Photo

Volunteers at Oriental Mission Church prepare riot relief supplies for victims. Three relief groups were formed after peace was restored.

By **Sophia Kyung Kim**
Korea Times

Not guilty. These two simple words were uttered in a Simi Valley courtroom last year when four Los Angeles police officers were acquitted of beating motorist Rodney King.

The verdict, however, unleashed emotional havoc on the economic heart of the Korean American community.

Nearly 2,000 Korean-owned businesses were damaged or destroyed by looters on April 29 while Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates dined at a Beverly Hills fund-raiser. Officers who were supposed to protect its citizens ran for cover, and Mayor Tom Bradley was not on speaking terms with Gates.

Armed with only a desire to protect his community, Edward Song Lee, 18, became our young martyr when he was mistaken for a looter by some KA security guards protecting stores at a Koreatown mall.

For Korean Americans, the image of the American Dream would never be the same. They scars inflicted by the riot flames may never completely heal and will be forever etched in our history.

What was clearly a travesty of American justice was immediately twisted by the mainstream media to look like a Korean-Black conflict.

Were we surprised? Hardly. Did we get angry? Hell, yes.

Suddenly Koreans were being blamed for helping set Los Angeles on fire just because all KA merchants were supposedly rude. We were shamelessly pitted against African Americans.

What further bewildered Korean Americans was sitting helplessly in front of the TV screen watching mainstream African American leaders attack the KA community on Ted Koppel's "Nightline" program.

No Korean American was present to refute the charges during the initial coverage. If we couldn't trust the tough but fair-minded Koppel, who could we trust? We felt so alone.

But "Nightline" and others soon learned that—contrary to the image of passive Asians—Koreans know how to roar when pushed to the edge. After demonstrations, phone calls and a letter-writing campaign, we were finally heard.

The show eventually gave attorney Angela Oh airtime to speak on behalf of Korean American merchants. Even the unflappable Koppel was visibly impressed by the hard-hitting Oh.

When the embers turned to ashes, the immigrant community also showed that it could come together for a brilliant display of peace and plea for racial harmony.

On May 2, a sea of 30,000 Korean Americans of all ages—armed with brooms and placards—converged on the streets of Koreatown for a peace march. Through their show of force, KAs seemed to be asking the question long before Rodney King did: Can't we get along?

But this image of a united front soon shattered as different riot victims organizations formed. Its leaders fought over how money raised by local groups and the South Korean government should be distributed to the riot victims. It tore the community apart. We shook our heads in embarrassment.

Applying for federal assistance would be like feeling one's way through a maze on a foggy day for most KA merchants, many of whom were uninsured or insured with unreliable companies. New acronyms would become household words for merchants who were still struggling with basic English: FEMA, SBA, GA, AFDC.

One by one, the politicians came, observed the ruins, posed for cameras and left after making empty promises: President George Bush, then-candidate Bill Clinton, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Gov. Pete Wilson, Mayor Tom Bradley and more.

Many merchants have not been able to reopen their business. Others are afraid to go back. Almost all are saddled with more immediate concerns like how to pay for their children's college tuition, mortgage and car insurances and put enough food on the table.

“The riots was our economic holocaust. Our Manzanar. It shook the foundation of our political consciousness.”



KT Photo

Leading the peace march of more than 30,000 KAs was the father and friend of Edward Song Lee, 18, who was shot and killed accidentally during the riots.

After months of bureaucratic delays, liquor store owners wishing to rebuild would have to endure lengthy public hearings in which they would be treated more like criminals than victims.

The riots was our economic holocaust. Our Manzanar. It shook the foundation of our political consciousness. Who at City Hall can forget the noisy rallies staged by KA merchants on a daily basis? It irked some city workers so much that they threw ink and pins outside the window at the protesters who were exercising American democracy.

The riots jolted us into realizing once again that we could no longer freely hand over money to politicians in exchange for glossy snapshots with them. Didn't they turn their backs on us when we needed them the most?

We finally got it! The political power that we thought we had at City Hall was an illusion. We lacked political power. We didn't count. We had to get involved in politics more aggressively.

Then on Nov. 4, Jay C. Kim, former mayor of Diamond Bar, made history by becoming the first KA elected to Congress, providing a much-needed glimpse of hope.

Other KA's victories also dotted the national landscape: Ho Young Chung to the Garden Grove City Council; the re-election of Jackie Young to the state House of Representatives in Hawaii and Paull Shin and Mimi McAndrews to the Washington State and Florida House of Representatives, respectively.

But as KAs made historical gains in American politics, the hearts of recent Korean immigrants were still in Korea, as they closely followed the presidential elections in their homeland. Local community leaders even fund-raised for their favorite candidates, though they could not vote for them.

In the end, the voters in South Korea voted for stability shaped in the familiar face of Kim Young-sam. But in America, KAs learned that President-elect Clinton's slogan also applied to their community—it was time for change.

Maybe under a new American presidency, some of the underlying urban ills that helped ignite the riots—unemployment, crime, drugs, racism—will be tackled. These are problems that belong not only to those who must live and work in such depressed areas.

Our community ended 1992 with a sense of abandonment. Thus, we enter 1993 with caution and a prayer for renewal. Rebuilding Los Angeles will continue to be an agonizingly slow process. Race relations in Los Angeles is more fragile and complicated than ever. Even the respected Black-Korean Alliance was put in a coffin.

As the L.A. 4—the four Black men who attacked White trucker Reginald Denny—go on trial, KA merchants can't help but ask: Will the fires start again? Will we get caught in the middle? Never again.